



# Public Performance, Personal Story: A Study of Playback Theatre

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# **Public Performance, Personal Story:**

## **A study of Playback Theatre**

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## **Statement of Originality**

This work has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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**13 / 04 / 2004**

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*Don't take it too seriously. Hold on tightly, let go lightly.*  
(Peter Brook, 1989).

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## Abstract

In this study I explore the hybrid ritual performance form of Playback Theatre through audience members' experiences. The particular Playback Theatre application under consideration is the one-off community-based event. Selected writing from the Playback Theatre practice field assists in the establishment of the study focus. Literature from performance and ritual theory provides a framework for the inquiry. Theory about stories and storytelling offers a complementary lens that acknowledges the centrality of personal story in Playback Theatre. Contemporary writing about the experience of community is included to illuminate the experience of the public-private convergence in the Playback Theatre event. This study adds the voices of audience members to the writing about Playback Theatre from a practitioner perspective. The research has been undertaken using an ethnographic approach that draws on participant observation, informal group and individual interviews and researcher reflexivity.

Audience members engage in the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance as participants and spectators. The study finds that the ritual framework offered by Playback Theatre is central to creating an environment for participation through the encouragement of flow experiences. Audience members' desire and capacity to participate is influenced by their initial engagement and their on-going negotiation of the tension of participation that is evoked through the repeated invitation implicit in the form. As participants, audience members' focus tends to be predominately on themselves as they resolve numerous responses to the invitation to participate. In order to accomplish this, many audience members engage in reflective distance, a momentary moving away from the liminal pull of the performance with the

intention of re-entering. A resistance to surrendering to the invitation to participate challenges some audience members. The study identifies a number of barriers to participation.

The focus on self that the invitation to participate creates is transformed when a storyteller emerges from the audience, at which point, audience members shift to focus on the teller.

This constitutes a period of deep listening where audience members demonstrate a commitment to hearing the teller and appreciating the performers. While spectating, audience members experience connection to the teller and connection to the ideas presented in their stories. Watching the enactment they may have this experience expanded or heightened through the amalgamation of the multiple perspectives that the actors evoke as they interpret the story in the dramatised enactment. The collective experience of spectating yields multiple moments of *communitas*. This might be impeded if an individual has a persistent story they feel reluctant to tell or if an audience member is featured in a story told by another.

The after-show period is shown to be an intrinsic part of the ritual event facilitating the incorporation of the experience for audience members as they prepare to re-enter the ordinary social world. This occurs through on-going storytelling and reflective discussion. The informal nature of this period is insufficient for some audience members who may require specific debriefing. The one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance is an opportunity for people to gather as a community and to tell and listen to stories. This requires an interactive process of risking and listening and provides audience members with an opportunity to see themselves and to see *The Other*. The study concludes that the application of Playback Theatre in this context is a metaphor for community.

## Information for Readers

### Identifying Material

#### *Informants' Names*

Informants' names have been changed for privacy and for consistency in the text. Initially, some informants elected to be identified. This felt congruent with the philosophy of the Playback Theatre process and the way in which participants are enabled to present themselves and their stories. Due to the contextual nature of the performance data, the decision has been made to change all names to avoid implicating others through identifying material associated with the named person.

#### *Explanation of codes used for quoted material.*

The content of this thesis is based on personal testimony and observation. Throughout the thesis I use excerpts from the interview transcripts, the performance transcripts and the reflective journal. These excerpts are edited to maximise ease of reading. The appendices show samples of unedited transcripts from each data. Quoted materials not included in appendices are stored on CD-ROM and are catalogued in identical fashion to what is shown in the samples. For an explanation of the way in which direct quotes are identified see Chapter 4.

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## My Story

We pass our culture and lore on through talking, through talking and the stories we tell through our bark paintings, and our performance, our song and dance performance. A combination of all three together (Wanyubi Marika, 2003)<sup>1</sup>.

When I first read these words by the great aboriginal elder of the Rirratjingu people of northeast Arnhem Land, I felt both grief and relief. The grief was associated with living what felt like the absence of a culture and lore tradition in my life, like the one embodied and lived by indigenous Australians. My relief came from knowing that in some way my experiences of Playback Theatre have been a medium through which I have come to acknowledge my own culture and lore tradition. Playback Theatre fuses two areas of interest for me: improvised performance and personal story. Previously, I have explored different theories on the place of story in the world. I have been drawn to conceptions of storytelling as liberatory, identity forming and self-making, and as a primary expressive vehicle for individuals and collectives (see earlier work, Dennis, 1999, 2000). Through stories, the tellers can learn about themselves and come to better know who they are. I have come to see that it is in the observing of and listening to others' stories that perhaps offers more to our world (Dennis, 2000, 2002). Stories have provided one way to know myself. Stories have provided a way for me to come to know

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<sup>1</sup> Wanyubi Marika, is the brother of Mawalan I, the highly regarded leader of the Rirratjingu people of north-east Arnhem Land and a contributor to the famous Bark Petitions presented to the Australian federal government in the 1960s. The Marika Aboriginal dynasty is the oldest of the Australian dynasties, straddling two worlds in their bid to keep an ancient culture alive. They are acclaimed for giving Australia the closest thing to a Magna Carta, making the custodianship of land and culture its greatest strength.

others. In this research, I look beyond these experiences to the specific social context evoked in the Playback Theatre event and ask, what is happening?

There have been times when I have made sense of my orientation toward performance and story by lamenting the absence of cultural and familial stories in my childhood. I am first generation Australian on my father's side. My father has been my only experience of Greek culture growing up. Despite this, I identify strongly with my Greek ethnicity. When I was young he chose not to speak Greek to us in his efforts to "fit in" and told too few stories about home. As a teenager, my understanding had been that he had had no contact with his family until his first return trip that year. I have since learned that he had kept in contact and sent money to help out, but this knowledge was not mine at the time. In fact, as a child I did not realise that we were Greek. It was an incident when I was about ten years old that introduced me to the idea of being different. Somewhat out of nowhere a girl at school called me a 'wog lesbian'. To her, the two words were interchangeable; to me they were totally unfamiliar. Guided by her tone of voice, I concluded that 'wog lesbian' was an undesirable thing to be. While the slur smarted like a slap on bare skin it fueled my curiosity about being "a wog" and served to mystify my father to me somewhat. *How come other people knew Dad was a wog and I didn't? Wasn't he just Dad?* It also awakened in me a consciousness about rights and privilege. Fourteen years later, when I visited Greece for the first time - an encounter with my own culture and lore - I came to understand that being Greek is intrinsic to who I am - passionate, energetic, Mediterranean.

It is strange to me that I identify so strongly with my Greek ethnicity, when it seemed largely absent to me growing up. Instead of the likely colourful, intrusive, bossy Greek family life that might have been, it was my mother's large Anglo-Celtic family that surrounded us. Born tenth in a stream of seventeen children, my mother's family populated my childhood and the small rural town in which I lived. A strong memory for me is the tradition of afternoon tea with her

sisters - lots of aunts and cousins and family gossip. Mum has always been a very beautiful woman and popular in her family, yet we were the only multiracial family in the larger Anglo-Australian family-context; Dad, the only European migrant and the only native Greek speaker. He seemed popular, yet I know he encountered racism and judgement within the family and the community. One of only four or five native Greek speakers in our town, his life demanded spontaneity and innovation.

Embedded in these stories about my mother and father is some explanation of who I am and how I come to be researching a story-based performance form. As a performer and teacher of improvisation, spontaneity and innovation saying *yes and* to life is intrinsic to who I am and what I do. It is part of my embedded/embodied culture and lore. These experiences form part of the context for this thesis and guide me as I document the research. Another element of influence comes from the state of the world. The timing of my intensive data collection phase coincided with a 12-month period book-ended by two of the most shocking acts in the contemporary Australian experience. One, the invasion of New York and the fall of the twin towers, and the other, the attack on Bali's tourist district. Both events galvanised the Australian public and elevated our gaze beyond the backyard. It has been a time when more and more Australians have attended to the way in which Australia is placed in relation to other countries in the world – politically, socially, economically, geographically. There have been other incidences during this time that are equally terrible and where Australia is positioned as the aggressor rather than the aggrieved – the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and our refusal to receive refugees and asylum seekers to shore<sup>2</sup>. In a world such as this, I have felt drawn to make sense of and document some of what gives purpose to my life. Much of this is in the goodness, humility and generosity of the people I encounter through the practice and

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<sup>2</sup> This was not a one-off incident. For more about the recent history of the Australian policy on refugee access and entry see Theophanous (2001).

performance of Playback Theatre and the way in which they listen to one another and dare to share themselves with each other.

Performing has been a significant avenue for me to express my unique self and to feel vital and alive. When I perform Playback Theatre the essential aliveness of performance is woven with my essential self in relationship with many others. I am able to hear their stories and in doing so come to discover more about them as individuals and about the cultures that make up the tapestry that is Australian culture. Performing Playback Theatre demands that I continually interrogate my cultural assumptions. I have explored ways of challenging these assumptions through performance and reflection in collaboration with others. Through my explorations of and reflections on my performing practice, I better appreciate the profoundly raw embryonic culture and lore tradition that exists and is building in this nation – Australia. My reflective practice process has enriched me and has given me the impetus to undertake this research. Researching as a *real* participant observer in my own social (practice) world has resulted in a more dynamic interaction between practice and reflection. Hoogland (2003) suggests this increased intensity is due to my practice being "inextricably fused to my scholarship" (p.211). This inextricable fusing has yielded a research experience in which maintaining my practice roles alongside my roles as a researcher has been vital. Reflexivity has required that I interrogate my practice, or perhaps more accurately, it has demanded that I reconsider my practice behaviour, values, and assumptions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

At times, the in-depth scrutiny of my Playback Theatre work has effected my spontaneity and diminished my capacity to appreciate the creative work of others and mine as good enough. I have experienced moments when my sense of play diminished and feelings of disconnection and isolation swamped me as I grappled with the conflicting agendas (and values) of a creative (group) artist and a (solo) scholar. In reading this thesis, you accompany me on my journey



and witness my discoveries as I encounter Playback Theatre through the experiences of audience members in the liminal spaces of the research in my local community.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

We have inherited a civilization in which the things that really matter in human life exist at the margin of our culture. What matters? How birthing takes place matters; how infants are raised matters; having a rich and active dream life matters. Animals matter, and so does ontological security and the magic of interpersonal interactions and healthy and passionate sexual expression. Career and prestige and putting a good face on it and the newest fashion in art or science do not matter. Coming to our senses means sorting this out once and for all. It also means becoming embodied. And the two ultimately amount to the same thing.

Morris Berman (1990, p.341-2).

In this critique of contemporary humanity, Berman (1990) proposes that life-giving experiences have been relegated to the margins of dominant culture. In this thesis I investigate a hybrid artform that sits comfortably on the margins because of what it can illuminate there. The Playback Theatre form offers a contemporary ritual framework from within which individuals can engage with one another at the margins and pursue the magical interactions that Berman claims as life giving. A story-based performance form, Playback Theatre is derivative of the oral tradition merging culturally relevant arts with sacred ritual, personal story and community gatherings. My experiences of performing in and producing Playback Theatre have resulted in some understanding of its potential to build connections between people. I have also come to a growing awareness of the possible gaps and limitations in the method and my practice of it. This study has been derived from this awareness, and seeks to understand Playback Theatre from the experience of participants who dare to engage at the margins though this performance experience.

The study focuses on the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance. This containment of the field of inquiry has facilitated an exploration of this specific public event. Popular for over thirty years, the one-off performance has yet to receive adequate attention in terms of its value and purpose. This study provides some remedy to this situation.

## **1.1 Research Questions**

The overarching question guiding this study is:

- What are audience members' experiences of the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance?

The sub-questions the study seeks to answer are:

- In what ways do the audience members engage and respond during and after the one-off community-based event?
- In what ways does the Playback Theatre form induce these experiences?
- In what ways is Playback Theatre an experience of community for audience members within the specific context?

The purposes of the study are to:

- explore what happens in a Playback Theatre event from the audience members' perspective; and
- attempt ways of describing what Playback Theatre does so that it may be applied with greater integrity.

The research aims to frame the practice of Playback Theatre beyond the often self-referential frames that are a feature of the writing about Playback Theatre. It adds the voices and perceptions of audience members to Playback Theatre scholarship, specifically with relation to the one-off context-based performance. Finally, as an inquiry into audience experience the research process seeks to articulate ways in which people participate in the Playback Theatre ritual; the impact of telling, listening and watching the stories as they unfold; and how the experience equates to an experience of community for participants.

## **1.2 Method**

The study seeks to better understand the process of Playback Theatre through the experience of individuals. An exploratory ethnographic approach has been implemented using informant interviews, observation and researcher reflexivity. Early interviews with practitioners and preliminary observational and reflexive data have served to direct the study toward the experiences of audience members. The context for the study is derived from the specific contexts of the performance work enacted by The Brisbane Playback Theatre Company of which I am a member.

## **1.3 Findings**

The study findings indicate that audience members come to the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performances for different reasons. Motivation to attend is mostly due to audience members' identification with the context within which the performance is placed, for example, mental health week. Participants also attend because of their familiarity with the form. Audience members engage as participants and spectators. During performances, they actively engage in a personal process of deciding whether to participate and in what way. Simultaneously, they are engaged in experiencing the theatre event and in the appreciation of the performances of the storytellers and the performers. For some, participation extends to include their telling of a personal story. There are numerous reasons why people choose to tell a story during the Playback Theatre performance. People also choose not to tell. Whether the participant chooses to tell or decides against telling, their decision is influenced by their personal values. Many factors conspire to influence whether a person will tell a story or not.

The experience of watching the enactments inspired by the personal stories has been shown to be a key point of audience engagement. Audience members claim to have seen something new, to have been influenced by multiple perspectives, and to have been prompted to reconsider their views of the person telling the story, the people represented in the enactment,

or the ideas presented in the story/enactment. In this way, people have a collective experience in which they interact with people they may otherwise never meet, or come to know.

The study finds that audience members engage in a process of moving in and out of the liminal space of the performance. The nontraditional nature of the form and the highly ritualised structure of the performance activate this experience. The individual undertakes a form of critical reflection and engages in the constant comparison of their actual experience of the event with that which they had expected, and the ongoing consideration of the way in which the form intersects with their values. This results in audience members continually renegotiating their relationship to the values and ideas implicit in the form, particularly that of participation, and the mixing of the personal/public selves. The reflective experience extends beyond the formal performance frame.

The research makes recommendations for purposeful and strategic Playback Theatre work. It proposes that Playback Theatre has a place in contemporary community life because it gives form and structure to that marginal space Berman names in the opening quote, a space where people can meet. The findings in this study provide a framework for the production of viable one-off Playback Theatre events. The study also makes recommendations for practitioner formation and development. Recommendations for further research are listed.

#### **1.4 How the Thesis is Organised**

The thesis opens with *My Story*. This is designed to situate the reader and tells some of my story. It is written to shed light on how my family history, my life experiences and my love of improvising converge in my practice of Playback Theatre and have led to this research project.

Chapter One – Here, I introduce the thesis and state my research questions. I provide a summary of the research design, articulate the study findings and present an outline of the way the thesis is organised.

Chapter Two – This chapter presents relevant literature on Playback Theatre. Titled *Presenting Playback Theatre*, it introduces the interactive performance form and recounts the historical development of the Playback Theatre movement. The chapter deconstructs the Playback Theatre method through the framework of context, form and content, and establishes it as a form of ritual performance that has application in community-based contexts. The emergence of research and scholarship in Playback Theatre is interrogated. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the thesis extends the knowledge of the application of Playback Theatre as a one-off community-based ritual event.

Chapter Three – The *Review of Literature* chapter documents the fields from the literature that I determine provide useful framing of the study: performance theory, ritual theory, community theory and theory about story and storytelling. Performance theory is presented as the broad context for this thesis. The notion of performance as a rhythmic or systematic process that contains personal and communal expression in a public forum is explored through ritual and ritual performance theory. Here I propose that the liminal activity of ritual performance and the subsequent experience of flow are useful concepts when speaking about audience engagement and audience experience of Playback Theatre. I extend this to include the act of storytelling as a ritual performance. By way of framing the study's focus on community-based activity, I draw on literature exploring relevant concepts of community. Turner's (1969) conception of *communitas* provides a link back to the previous fields of literature and enables a discussion about experiences of community. Ideas such as diversity, estrangement and The Other are incorporated in the conception of community. The final field in the literature is that of story. While the study does not attempt to interrogate the vast potential of story and

storytelling in Playback Theatre, this theory provides essential framing for the study with respect to story and storytelling due to the central place of personal story in the Playback Theatre form. This chapter ends with discussion of how these literature fields interact to form the conceptual framework of the thesis.

Chapter Four – Dedicated to the *Methodology* this chapter opens with a consideration of what the researching of performance entails. It describes the multi-method approach I have implemented by illustrating how the ethnographic methods of observation and informant interviews have been combined with researcher reflexivity in the research process. The reader is introduced to the reflexive activity of reflective journaling and to my use of discussions with designated reflective partners. How the elements of researcher subjectivity and trustworthiness of data have been managed in the construction of the thesis is also documented. Finally I describe the process undertaken to collect, analyse and report the data.

Chapter Five – In this chapter I establish the way in which the research site has been manifest in this study. I present the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company and their 2002 Performances. The chapter elaborates on the performances from which the data that is featured in the study have been generated. Chapter Five acts as a bridge to the findings chapters. Predominantly descriptive in nature, its purpose is to locate readers as they embark on reading the study findings.

Chapter Six – This is the first of two chapters reporting the study findings in an inter-textual account of what audience members have revealed about their experiences of the Playback Theatre performance. In *Crossing the Threshold*, I chart the journey of audience members as they encounter Playback Theatre during the preliminary stages of the performance. I report on how their preparation for and expectations of the event influence their initial engagement. The chapter then examines the various elements confronting audience members as they weigh up

the prospect of participating. Audience members' experiences of participating are presented. I write about the experience of reflective distance and report on those things that inhibit participation.

Chapter Seven – In the second of the findings chapters, "*Let's Watch!*", I combine data with my subsequent interpretation to present the audience members' experience of spectating at the Playback Theatre performance. I collate a number of examples to illustrate the experience of connection for audience members as they listen to the personal stories and watch the dramatic enactments. The exhilaration of heightened connection, the disappointment of a missed connection, and the confusion of an unexpected connection is also discussed. The way in which individuals may gain a different perspective on themselves and on others is considered. The chapter ends with discussion about audience participants' experiences of the after-show period.

Chapter Eight – In this concluding chapter I summarise the research findings and present my propositions for purposeful and strategic Playback Theatre practice and the application of Playback Theatre as a one-off community-based event. My recommendations for further research are included. The chapter concludes with the proposition that the application of Playback Theatre as a one-off community-based event represents an experience of community for audience members.

Structure ignites spontaneity (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.83)



## CHAPTER TWO

### Presenting Playback Theatre

The story depends on every one of us to come into being. It needs all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have [experienced] to keep on coming into being.

Trinh (in Somerville 1999, p.111).

The god of dirt  
Came up to me many times and said  
So many wise and delectable things, I lay  
On the grass listening  
To his dog voice,  
Crow voice,  
Frog voice; *now*,  
He said, and *now*,  
And never once mentioned *forever*

Mary Oliver (1986, p.50).

Trinh offers the idea that stories depend on *all* of us to bring them alive. In the poem excerpt from *One of Two Things*, Oliver sings of listening – *now* and that somehow this will be enough. In this chapter I introduce Playback Theatre, a ritual performance method where together audiences and performers bring personal stories to life, and where people are required to listen, *now*. In the first section of the chapter I recount the genesis and the development of Playback Theatre and the Playback Theatre movement. In the second section, I draw together a number of voices in the Playback Theatre literature to present an account of the form and its values and purpose/s. This includes an explanation of the central position of personal story

in the method. In the third section, I elaborate on the practice of Playback Theatre, with emphasis on its application in the community. Ultimately, I critique Playback Theatre scholarship and research, identifying the gaps in the literature and relate this to the focus of this study.

## **2.1 The Development of Playback Theatre**

Playback Theatre is an international movement with performing companies in over 20 countries (IPTN, 2001). Emerging in the USA in the mid-1970s, Dauber (1999a) suggests that this distinctive theatre form was responding to a specific cultural need. Salas (1993) states that it was a "response to human need, both individual and social, for the communication and validation of personal experience" (p.1). The idea for the Playback Theatre methodology came from Jonathan Fox (Salas, 1993, Fox, 1994, Fox & Dauber, 1999). Influenced by his own exploration of twentieth century experiential theatre and a fascination with preliterate storytelling and other oral cultural forms, Fox set out to develop a theatre form that espoused values of social justice and valued theatricality – a form that he would want to practice. A chance meeting with the psychodrama method served to crystallise his vision, and the early workings of the Playback Theatre method emerged (Fox, 1999a).

In the first decade, other people<sup>3</sup> joined Fox and co-founder Jo Salas, in an experiential, experimental development process, where practice and reflection were the basis for developing this hybrid performance form. In Australia and New Zealand, early proponents of the form (including some from the psychodrama movement) pursued equally foundational and experimental practice in dialogue with the US founders. Throughout the second decade, the practice and embryonic theorising of Playback Theatre focused on coming to terms with the application and evaluation of the form within the multiple practice arenas Playback

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<sup>3</sup> This group became known as the Original Company (Fox, 1994).

Theatre had infiltrated. Significant to this period was the thinking about what is required to effect *good enough*<sup>4</sup> Playback Theatre (Salas, 1993). This decade heralded the establishment of Playback Theatre Companies in the USA, Australia and New Zealand, with expansion into Europe, the UK and Asia.

The spread of Playback Theatre has been consistent yet contained, with the basic philosophy and methodology transferred through a predominantly oral process, including international gatherings. This approach has served as a form of quality control and risk management. On the eve of the third decade, access to the Playback Theatre method and the international community was advanced through the establishment of a centralised school of instruction and the formation of an international body – the International Playback Theatre Network<sup>5</sup>. These bodies have served to oversee the expansion of the form and to provide regulation (Fox, 1999a). Simultaneously, the first books about Playback Theatre were published<sup>6</sup>. The next section weaves together accounts of the Playback Theatre form, its values and purpose/s.

## 2.2 The Playback Theatre Method

Jo Salas, music therapist and co-founder of Playback Theatre states that from its earliest inception, the scope and purpose of Playback Theatre has been to

Reveal the shapeliness and meaning in any experience, even the ones that are unclear and formless in the telling. [Playback Theatre can] dignify stories with ritual and aesthetic awareness, and link them together so that they form a collective story about a community of people whether the temporary community of a public audience, or a group of people whose lives are connected in an ongoing way. ... [Playback Theatre] offers a public arena in which the meaning of individual experience expands to become part of a shared sense of purposeful existence (Salas, 1993, p.22).

<sup>4</sup> The notion of *good enough* is informed by Bettelheim's idea of good enough parenting (Salas, 1993, p. 30). In Australian and New Zealand contexts *good enough* has additional meaning drawn from the notion of adequacy fundamental to Moreno's theory of spontaneity (see Karp, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> The International Playback Theatre Network comprises delegates from Playback Theatre Companies from around the world and encourages reflection, discussion and writing about Playback Theatre.

<sup>6</sup> A Playback Theatre methodological guidebook, *Improvising Real Life*, was published in 1993 (Salas, 1993). Fox's documentation of the theory informing the development of the Playback Theatre methodology, *Acts of Service*, was published in 1994 (Fox, 1994).

Salas' explanation alludes to three defining elements of Playback Theatre: personal story (the content), a ritual aesthetic (the form), and the context. Fox (1994) reports that early Playback Theatre audiences included children in their schools, disabled residents at their group home and friends and family in their neighbourhood. It was the early application in places other than theatres, for people other than conventional theatre audiences that differentiated it from other forms of theatre. That these audiences were situated in specific contexts, e.g., education/school, rehabilitation/group home, community/neighbourhood, has emerged as a defining aspect of the Playback Theatre method. The contemporary terminology for applications of theatre in such contexts is applied theatre (Taylor 2003).

Three defining frames of applied theatre forms like Playback Theatre are the content, the form and the context. As suggested above, the context frames the process and provides a gateway through which audience members enter the participatory ritualised frame (the form). The context can act as an initial link among audience members and between audience members and performers. It gives focus, purpose and direction to the performers. Strong identification with the context can contribute to strong engagement in the process, or as Brook (1989) explains, soften up the audience and assist the performers to get the audience "to a state of readiness" (p.127). The second defining aspect is the Playback Theatre form. This is the ritualised process that both drives and is driven by the audience-performer interaction. In Playback Theatre the form consists of conventions of space, performance and content through participation. An illustration of the Playback Theatre spacial conventions appears in Appendix 1. Performance conventions include the performing roles<sup>7</sup>: actor, conductor and musician, and performance forms, for example fluid sculptures and story

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<sup>7</sup> Playback Theatre performing roles are discussed in Chapter 5. For a full description of the performing roles see Chapters 4-6 in *Improvising Real Life* by Jo Salas (1993) & Chapters 9-11 in *Acts of Service* by Jonathan Fox (1994). See also Good (1986) and Hoesch (1999).

scenes<sup>8</sup>, and styles, which could be unique to the specific ensemble. (For a description of a Playback Theatre performance see Appendix 2). Hosking & Penny (1998) propose an explanation of Playback Theatre as an interactive performance form:

Playback Theatre is spontaneous improvised theatre created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience. Someone tells a story from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, then watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape and coherence (Hosking & Penny, 1998, p.10).

While stories are mentioned in this description, Salas highlights the centrality of personal story in the theatre that is created during the performance. She writes:

Audience members ... are invited to [tell a story] ... guided by the director or "Conductor," [the teller] casts his or her story from the row of actors. The chosen performers, supported by music and lighting, transform the story into a theatrical scene, using boxes and pieces of cloths as props (Salas in Feldhendler, 1994, p. 101)<sup>9</sup>.

Efforts at describing and defining Playback Theatre have been limited due to the difficulty in capturing the ephemeral vitality of live performance in words. Despite his seminal role in developing Playback Theatre, Fox himself claims that the Playback Theatre process is not simple to describe or understand (Fox, 1999a). One reason for this could be its flexibility. Dauber states that "it can be adapted to many different specific needs ... [and] spans the conventional categories of theatre, psychology and education" (Dauber, 1999a, p.116). Salas reports that "it can work in virtually any setting, because by its nature it adapts to the needs and concerns of whoever is present" (Salas, 1993, p.1). Practitioners in New Zealand and Australia (Good, 2003, Hosking & Penny, 2002) write about Playback Theatre as a method of inquiry and dialogue.

Emerging in more recent writing about Playback Theatre are statements about what the form does *not* do. Most notably the fact that it is not message-driven like other applied theatre

<sup>8</sup> For a full explanation of the technical aspects of the Playback Theatre forms see Chapter 3, *Improvising Real Life* by Jo Salas (1993).

<sup>9</sup> The Playback Theatre stage is a simple arrangement of instruments and props, with two chairs placed stage left for the teller and conductor; opposite which is a semi-circle of audience chairs. For an example of the simplicity of the Playback Theatre stage see Appendix 1.

forms, for example, Boal's (1979) forum theatre, and popular theatre and theatre for development processes. Rather it is a process that is premised on inquiry. In their report on an application of Playback Theatre in the pacific island country of Kiribas, Hosking & Penny propose that Playback Theatre is:

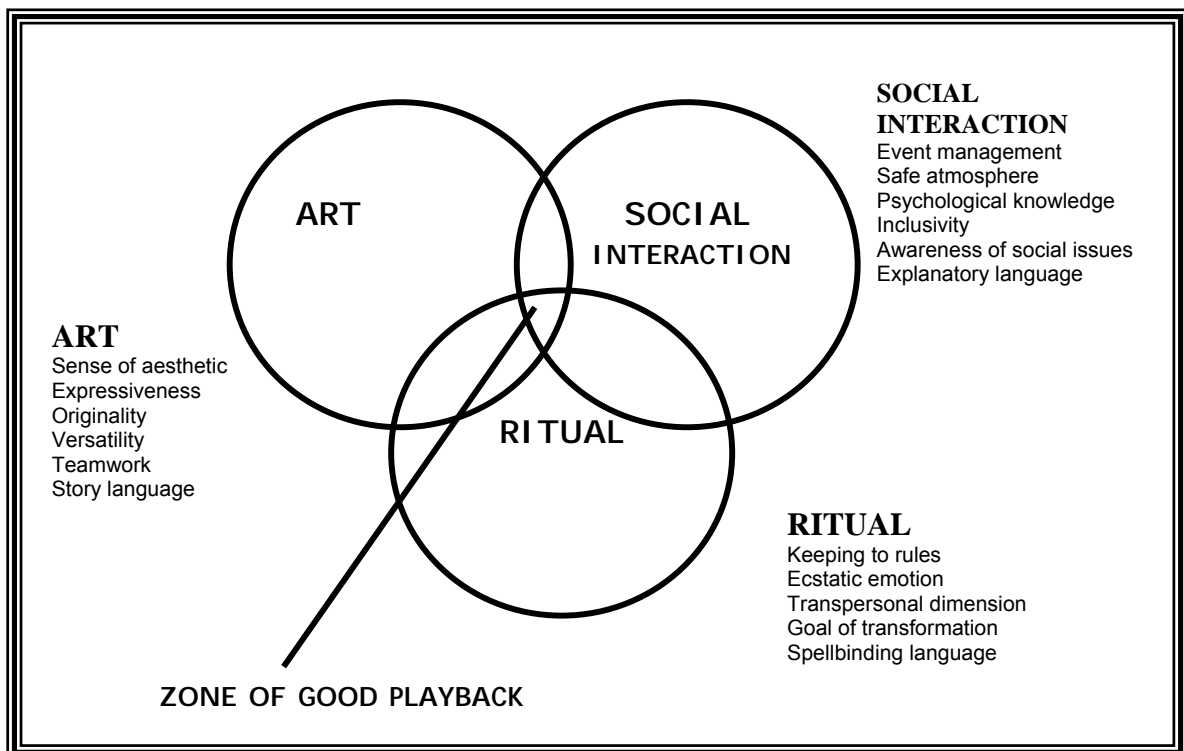
[A] methodology for the exploration of an issue or concern rather than message driven theatre. [Where a group can work toward] a comprehensive understanding and expression of what is occurring and the underlying social values. [It works at] a level under political motivation [and] may be used to stimulate change, to celebrate achievements, to explore questions, to address conflict and at the same time it will always build connections and strengthen ties within the group and in this way enhance the sense of community (Hosking & Penny, 1998, p.10-11).

Claims such as these provide insight into what some practitioners believe Playback Theatre can achieve. Mock (2002) asserts that researching live performance is difficult. Many of the claims made about Playback Theatre have been based on practitioner reflection and reveal the evolution of practitioners' understandings. In documenting these understandings practitioners have articulated their embodied knowledge or praxis. This is a legacy of the experimental development model and the way in which practice reflection has informed Playback Theatre knowledge to date. Embedded in the descriptions of Playback Theatre is practitioners' sense making with regard to the application of Playback Theatre in a particular context and informed by their personal values, biases and assumptions, and further informed by the values intrinsic to the Playback Theatre form. These values include: honouring diversity, listening, respect, communication through stories, artistry, social interaction and community building (IPTN, 2002). While there is a critical imperative in reflective practice many of the descriptions and explanations of the Playback Theatre form appear somewhat like advocacy. In recent research, Wright (2003) asserts that the claims made about Playback Theatre in learning and healing applications were probable. That empirical research is only just emerging from the field is discussed later in the chapter.

Fox (1994, 1999a & b) undertook numerous attempts to describe and define Playback Theatre. In the more recent re-presentation of his sense making about Playback Theatre, Fox

looks at the interaction between ritual, art and social interaction. This results in a simplified framework from which to teach Playback Theatre. The tri-dimensional model incorporating a ritual, an artistic and a social facet is documented as Figure 1. Fox argues that there is an interactive relationship between the three dimensions where at any time one could be dominant. In a 'good' Playback Theatre performance all three must continually balance over the course of the performance. Much of the tension of working in the dialectical flux of these three dimensions is the domain of the conductor. The actor's preoccupation tends toward the balance between the artistic demands of theatre and the social demands of listening or being present (Salas, 1993) as the storyteller performs. Salas (1999) deems that good Playback Theatre requires empathy and intuition in the interpretative enactment of the story and cautions against Playback Theatre that produces "superficial versions of stories told to therapists" (p30).

**Figure 1: Essential Elements of Playback Theatre**



Fox, (1999a, p.127).

In defining the essential elements of Playback Theatre, Fox gives each – art, ritual and social interaction – a set of qualifiers. Some of the qualifiers in the artistic realm: a sense of aesthetic, teamwork and expressiveness, in the social realm: inclusivity and awareness of social issues, and in the ritual realm: keeping the rules and goal of transformation, are co-operatively enacted by players and audience alike. Fox's model says little about the essential aspect of participation by the audience. This essential interactive basis of the form is perhaps the primary value underpinning the application of Playback Theatre and the thing that most gives relevance to the model Fox proposes (see Figure 1).

Coalesced with the value of participation, is the central place of personal story in the Playback Theatre form. As mentioned earlier, the intersection of personal story and interactive theatre demands strong containment. This is facilitated through the ritualised process where performances are built around the systematic application of basic theatrical devices, simple staging, and consistent shaping by a conductor who primarily uses repetition (of the invitation to tell a story) to build momentum in the process. The method provides a venue to tell stories. This may be construed as a warm and romantic idea. However, when the word *story* is preceded by the adjective *personal* to yield *personal story* some tension is present in the idea. Add to this the public nature of the telling and you have a form of theatre that is counter-cultural, occupies the margins, and elicits multiple responses. Asha Richard (1999), Germany-based Playback Theatre performer, suggests that such tensions and others arising from the unknown in Playback Theatre are what make it *theatre*, rather than specific artistic criteria. She questions "whether it is artistic theatre, which is not the same as good theatre" (p.115).

By virtue of its methodological structure and its various practical applications, Playback Theatre is a political form of theatre. The political nature of Playback Theatre is derived from the essential postmodern and anti-oppressive nature of the form. Hoesch (1999) reports that "Stories will not be judged or evaluated. Each carries equal weight. Everyone has the right to



the teller's chair. A good conductor will invite silent people" (p.63). Thus, postmodern ideas like: personal stories in public places, a public event with an agenda driven by participants, a theatre experience where the audience provides the text, a public meeting where people have a say without being judged, a community dialogue where marginal voices are actively sought, and entertainment that challenges the dominant social narrative are possible within the Playback Theatre performance. While these ideas are inherent in many of the claims made about Playback Theatre, there is also a belief that Playback Theatre is an *act of service* (Fox, 1994) with "citizen actors"<sup>10</sup> hearing and enacting stories of their fellow community members" (Bessko, 2000, p.2). This implies that Playback Theatre is a theatre of listening more than a theatre of telling. Hosking (2001) suggests that people who are interested in new experiences come to Playback Theatre and that it is the "being listened too" that counts (p.7). This expands Salas's (1993, 1999) idea that it is the presence of the performers (with their commitment to listening and being there) that constitutes the worth of the Playback Theatre experience. She states:

What helps most of all is simply the example of performers themselves, ordinary people standing up there willing to try anything, willing to be seen. It is a kind of courage and some audience members are inspired to discover it (the courage) in themselves (Salas, 1999, p.154).

And in some small way this describes Playback Theatre: from the simplicity of an ordinary actor "willing to try" to the profoundness of strangers gathered together with a preparedness to listen (Good, 2003), to the complexity of a process contained by a ritual frame where people come out of isolation and see their lives treated as significant (Hosking 2001) and where art evokes beauty so that we may see the truths in the stories of ourselves and others (Fox in Sperling & Fox, 1999).

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<sup>10</sup> The citizen actor is intrinsic to the values of Playback Theatre. Fox envisaged an actor who studies and performs Playback Theatre as an avocation, not a career; and who is embedded in an ordinary life in the community in which they live (Salas, 1993). This is made more complex by the artistic stance of the Playback Theatre actor, where they are "present as themselves often relating to the audience between stories in a human way" (Fox, 1999b, p.123).

The artistic endeavours of Playback Theatre may see players minimise the more difficult aspects that have been expressed in a story. In fact, the teller too, may have minimised these in the telling. Zánkay (1999) asserts that for Playback Theatre to succeed it must "show the dynamics of the contravening forces in the story" (p.192). In failing to do so the unexpressed aspects of the story are brought to stage in the next story; and again until there has been adequate listening and an accurate animation of the *intensity* of the experience expressed in the story. In his improvisational practice, theatre experimenter, Peter Brook (1989) found that performance such as this was "exceptionally difficult" and required the actor to accomplish "precise technique". He writes:

[Improvised performance] required specific training and also a great generosity and a capacity for humour. Genuine improvisation, leading up to a real encounter with the audience, only occurs when the spectators feel that they are loved and respected by the actors (Brook, 1989, p.112).

In the mutuality of the Playback Theatre process, where audiences and performers co-create theatre through the dynamic and collaborative vulnerability of performance such real encounters are possible. Through his growing understanding of the particular intimacy that improvised performance demands, Brook recommends that "improvised theatre must go to where people live", to their local neighbourhoods and communities (Brook, 1989, p.112). The next section explores the work of Playback Theatre as community performance.

### **2.3 Playback Theatre as Community Performance**

Playback Theatre has been described as a public avenue for celebrating difference and making connections (Salas, 1993). A sense of connections, in addition to belonging and security, has emerged as fundamental to experiences of community in recent scholarship (see Ahmed, 2000, Popple, 1995). Amit (2002) asserts that embracing and celebrating difference is a contemporary purpose of community-based practices. While a popular application of the Playback Theatre method is in a workshop format, in this study, it is the Playback Theatre performance that features. Specifically, it is the one-off community-based event. The

placement of Playback Theatre as a performance enables it to maximise the elements of public ritual intrinsic to oral traditions. Fox (1994) states that:

[T]he idea of performance is so important in the oral tradition. For each moment presents a new challenge, to be met with the heightened creativity we associate with a moment on stage (p.92).

In performance the 'unexpected' can arise from the formalised, predictable structure. This can capture audiences and carry them along to the surprise they experience as they listen to the stories or witness the immediacy of the enactment. The open – yet contained – space of the stage beckons the individual and ritualises time (Hosking, 2001). The liberty to invent stimulates imagination and play and elevates the imperfect-ness in the theatre of the playback performance to the level of art. Such improvised performance can be somewhat taboo in a culture that discourages experiences of the unknown and the *public* presentation of something that is likely to oscillate between success and failure as an art product (Fox, 1994). This flirting with the margins of art and culture bring a certain tension to the Playback Theatre form. Yet, over the years, Playback Theatre has found application in multiple contexts. These are discussed next.

The expansion of Playback Theatre across the world occurred simultaneously with the expansion of Playback Theatre into multiple practice sites. Much of this had to do with the diversity, experience and values of people practicing Playback Theatre. Fox (1999a) summarises these contexts into six categories. These were community-based theatre, education, social services, ritual, organisational development and therapy. These six practice sites are explained below.

The Playback Theatre community-based theatre event has often been referred to as a theatre of neighbours. Fox (1999a) suggests that many Playback Theatre Companies conduct open or public performances at regular intervals, in a 'home' theatre, throughout the year. The application of Playback Theatre in education is as both a process instrument providing

opportunities for children to express their feelings and see them validated, and has also found application in improving literacy, developing emotional intelligence and building confidence and self-esteem. In the social services sector Playback Theatre has been successfully integrated into practice frameworks as a process that builds cohesion through listening to each others' stories, highlights differences and similarities, and teaches listening and communication skills. The process and structure of Playback Theatre render it a ritual event in all applications. Playback Theatre has also found specific ritual application, for example, to open or close conferences or to mark special anniversaries like births and deaths. The reflective function of Playback Theatre has led to it finding relevance in organisational development. It has assisted organisational groups to honour and integrate emotional and spiritual processes like restructures and can ritualise aspects of working life to raise consciousness, grieve, celebrate or effect closure. A popular and consistent application of Playback Theatre has been in the therapeutic domain. Drama and music therapists see value in the way it validates personal stories, while psychodrama practitioners have used it for role training (Fox, 1999a, pp.13-14). The specific Playback Theatre application that features in this study is the one-off community-based performance.

There is a tendency in the Playback Theatre literature to refer to audiences at a specific event as "the community" (see for example, Fox, 1999b, p.116). Salas (1993) writes that Playback Theatre is "community building" (p.1). She suggests that the Playback Theatre performance links stories into "a collective story about a community of people" (p.22). The theory underpinning the thinking about the audience in this way is drawn from sociodrama theory. Sociodrama has been defined as "a deep action method dealing with intergroup relations and collective ideologies" (Fox, 1987, p.18). It is based on:

[The] tacit assumption that the group formed by an audience is already organized by the social and cultural roles which in some degree all the carriers of the culture share ... It is therefore incidental who the individuals are, or of whom the group is composed, or how large their number is (Fox, 1987, p.18).

In this way, the audience at the Playback Theatre performance is seen to represent the community from which it is drawn. Used in conjunction with sociometry – an observational and operational method that explores the "inside social structure of a group of people at a particular time" (Fox, 1987, p.24) – a sociodramatic approach assists the conductor to relate to the group as part of a broader context. In this study it is the idea that those who gather at the performance experience a "sense of community" (Salas, 1993, p.33) or share an experience of community that is of interest. This idea of community as an experience equates to Lash's (1994) conception of community as one that seeks shared meanings.

In his examination of non-scripted, pre-literary and oral theatre traditions Fox (1994) identifies a key element of the Playback Theatre experience as its capacity to be both communal and intimate. It is communal in that it has the capacity to connect people through common themes in stories about the neighbourhood and community in which they live, through familiar issues in individual stories, and through the humanity demonstrated both in the stories and in people's attempts at participating. Yet it is intimate as it enables the audience to share personal stories, to experience being listened to and heard, and in some cases experience transformation in witnessing the enactment of their story. Salas (1999) claims that the Playback Theatre performance meets the needs of the individual and the group. Drawing on the sociodramatic idea of the audience outlined above, Good (2003) proposes that Playback Theatre can act as a mirror for the community. I am more inclined to think of it as a window with the one-off Playback Theatre performance revealing a snapshot of the current interests and concerns of the particular community, through the personal stories of the audience.

The 'text' of the Playback Theatre performance, i.e., what gets revealed, shared and discussed, is comprised of what people are prepared to tell. The idea is that the audience members who share stories give an account of a real experience. These stories told from the perspective of

the teller constitute the truth from their worldview. Hosking (2001) and others (see for example, Hoesch, 1999) demand that the teller's chair be immune from judgement by performers and audience alike. This makes Playback Theatre unlike Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed where audience members are encouraged to assess actions made by different characters in the story and offer solutions toward overcoming oppression. The improvised nature of the Playback Theatre event means that at any given time anyone can tell a story.

As proposed above, the text of the Playback Theatre performance comes from the audience. As such, Playback Theatre can be conceived as a series of storytelling performances interspersed with a series of dramatic enactments, within a ritual framework. Each time a teller comes to the stage they are presenting themselves, performing in the way that Goffman (1959) suggests that we do everyday, enacting a familiar and recognisable social practice (Bauman, 1986). With little adjustment, this performance can be elevated to a more theatrical style, but is always enacted in the company of the conductor. This makes the storytelling performance a duet, with the conductor facilitating the teller's performance while simultaneously working to produce and shape the storytelling in the context of the complete performance. The conductor is also in relationship with the ensemble and the audience throughout the storytelling performance. The performance is multi-layered with the teller in "major" during the telling. Major<sup>11</sup> then shifts to the stage where the actors and musician animate the story in an improvised theatrical interpretation. The Playback Theatre performers are required to:

[F]ulfil the very essence of theatre's intention: to convey human experience by enacting it in distilled form; to embody narrative and meaning in the realm of space and time (Salas, 1999, p.18).

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<sup>11</sup> Major is an improvisational concept that denotes where the audience attention is at any given moment. I have seen it used in performance analysis of dance; and I am familiar with its use in the dance composition/improvisation technique, Viewpoints, devised by Anne Bogart (for more on Bogart's work see Bogart (2001) and Dixon & Smith (1995)).

At the completion of the enactment the actors on stage freeze, holding the final scene, and transfer their gaze to the teller. The gaze of the spectator is again directed to the teller. And so it shifts: back and forward between the audience and the stage, between the individual and the group, and between the tellers and the players. As the teller returns to the group the audience is in major as they recompose themselves and orient to the idea of the next teller. The conductor subtly caresses these shifts throughout the performance.

There is a good deal of interest in the effect of Playback Theatre on the audience participant who tells a personal story. This individual speaks aloud from the group either seated amongst them or on stage alongside the conductor. As suggested above, both sites of telling require the audience participant to assume a more direct performative role in the event. They step out, into the private/public threshold, bringing with them the content that forms the basis of the next dramatic display. While this transition and subsequent participation in the performance is somewhat central to the Playback Theatre method, it is in no way unique in storytelling theatre traditions.

In other narrative contexts (see for example, Bruner, 1986, Sayre, 1989) the storytelling participants are positioned as empowered or liberated, and as witnesses for the group. In Playback Theatre there can be a tendency to position the storytelling participant as vulnerable (see for example, Nash & Rowe 2002). Thinking about the teller in this way can have the effect of skewing the teller's performance toward a therapeutic frame. I am inclined toward a conception of the telling participants as risk-takers. That is not to say the act of telling will not render the teller vulnerable. In fact, like many performative roles vulnerability is central, for it is in the individual's capacity to take risks that we see their truth and their humanity. When they move to tell, they embark on a journey into the unknown possibilities of the performance. In this performance the conductor accompanies them. Penny (2002) asserts that if, in the enactment, the actors match the risks taken by the teller a primary condition for

advancing the ritual will be met. He states, "For the actor to advance and deepen the ritual they need a performance courage that matches specifically the courage the teller summoned to tell" (p.7). Experimental theatre technician, Peter Brook (1989) writes about the primacy of risking as an improviser. He asserts that taking "total" risks as a performer enables the ensemble to be influenced by the presence of the people, the context, the pace, and even the time of day (p.118).

In this section I have discussed the notion of Playback Theatre as a community performance ritual. This was achieved through a consideration of the way in which Playback Theatre interacts with the audience as community and in communal ways in a performance context. The notion of performance and the place of story generally, are explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Next, I present a description of the emergence of Playback Theatre scholarship and research.

#### **2.4 Playback Theatre Scholarship and Research**

Published works on Playback Theatre include the early works of Fox (1994) and Salas (1983, 1992, 1993, 1994) on the application of Playback Theatre, the artistic elements of Playback Theatre, and good enough Playback Theatre. While these works are necessarily advocating the fit of Playback Theatre to the contemporary world, they make sound attempts to present a thoughtful and critical gaze. In his book *Acts of Service*, Fox presents a comprehensive explanation of the conception of Playback Theatre. Based on his own reflective practice, *Acts of Service* reveals Fox's sense making processes drawing on literary theory, ritual and cultural theory, psychodramatic theory and the history and theory of preliterate theatre. He attempts to document what is required of the specific roles inherent in the form: actor, director, conductor and ensemble. Fox documents the place of language and form in non-scripted theatre and includes his conclusions about how the improvisational process has a contribution to make in educational and social spheres in society. As discussed earlier in the chapter, these



have not been isolated reflections but have arisen from an experimental ensemble, where he has been influenced by others, and by the processes that unfolded as they prepared, enacted and cooled down from their performances. Salas' contribution, *Improvising Real Life: Personal story & Playback Theatre*, published a year earlier but developed simultaneously (Dauber, 1999a) is structured like a Playback Theatre handbook. It provides a practical guide to doing Playback Theatre from how a performance could unfold, to the conventional Playback Theatre forms and many applications.

These two texts articulate the ways that Playback Theatre diverges from other oral theatre traditions, from theatre as art or theatre as entertainment, and from psychodrama and various other action methods that have informed Fox and Salas in their formative years (Dauber, 1999a). The two volumes also act like entry texts to the method yet do not stand alone.

Practice-driven writings proliferate and contribute equally to the early sense making, theory building and documentation of the Playback Theatre process, its values and vision, its diverse application, and potential outcomes. There is also writing about artistic style, artistic excellence and the aesthetics of Playback Theatre.

The International Playback Theatre Network publishes a quarterly newsletter, *Interplay*, and convenes biennial international conferences – both providing much needed forums for dialogue and critique. Since its inception, the *Interplay* newsletter has featured practice reflections, theory and concept development based on anecdotal evidence, and performance analysis writings<sup>12</sup>. The publication of the eclectic volume, *Gathering Voices* (Fox & Dauber, 1999), a collection of essays presented at the inaugural Playback Theatre symposium in Kassel,

<sup>12</sup> *Interplay* publishes a variety of articles reflecting on Playback Theatre in specific contexts. Some examples of these contexts include: organisations (Hofman, 1997); prisons (Bett, 2000, Southard 2000); housing estates (Murphy, 2001); disability (Day, 1998); mental health (Muckley, 1998); youth (Wynter, 1998); refugee groups (Robb, 2002); and in indigenous communities (Cox, 1996). There is also discussion of the form from various practice frameworks, for example, from a therapeutic perspective (Nash & Rowe 2001, Tselikas 2001, Salas 2000); and in development and social change: (Mills, 1999, Hosking & Fox, 2002).

Germany is the most recent contribution to the Playback Theatre writing. A milestone in the movement, Fox (1999a) states that the Kassel Symposium has acknowledged that the early period of experimentation is complete, and has signaled a move toward inviting more rigorous and critical research. Significant, in terms of providing a critical gaze to the mix, is the chapter by Dauber himself. *Tracing the Songlines* (Dauber, 1999a) documents a history of the evolution of Playback Theatre by way of considering biographical information about the founders, Fox & Salas, and examining the inferences therein.

More recently, there have been papers presented at academic conferences (generally not refereed) and student essays emerging from The School of Playback Theatre's Leadership Module. Conference paper topics have included the application of Playback Theatre in education & training by US academic, Linda Park-Fuller, and Australians, Deborah Pearson and Tarquam McKenna (see Park-Fuller, 1997a, Pearson, 1997, McKenna, 1993). McKenna and Park-Fuller have also published on Playback Theatre as a research method (McKenna, 1999, Park-Fuller, 1997b). An archive of available Playback Theatre writings is currently underway to enable access to these and others papers written about Playback Theatre (see for example Bett, 1999). Specially authored reports on work done with the support of government funding or non-government aid funding have included Hosking & Penny (1998, 1999).

These works represent the documentation of the body of knowledge about the form and practice of Playback Theatre. There is considerable scope for more formal research to be undertaken, a task already underway through the completion of this study, and the imminent

completion of further dissertations<sup>13</sup>. Further, the completion of this thesis coincides with the recent launch of a Playback Theatre journal.

Given its rapid development and worldwide expansion, there has been little empirical research undertaken on Playback Theatre. Heinrich Dauber, university professor and Playback Theatre practitioner, contemplates what Playback Theatre research might look like composing what he calls a "(tentative) definition." He writes that

Playback Theatre is both an **individual** as well as a **collective** experience, which on the one hand can only be understood from a **subjective perspective** – i.e., through (individual and collective) self-reflection, and on the other hand can be described from an **objective perspective** as an objective experience of a theatre performance in a particular social context (bold in original, p.159).

This provides another way of thinking about the dimensions of Playback Theatre elucidating the content dimension in addition to those of art, social, and ritual nominated earlier in Fox's model (see Figure 1). Dauber offers a qualification of each dimension (see Figure 2) by means of defining the perspective informing each and proposing congruent questions for research. In his critique, Dauber proposes four possible research foci: the storyteller's experiences, the artistic endeavours of the form, the aesthetic of the ritual performance, and/or the socio-political context. Drawing from the earlier discussion about Playback Theatre as an unconventional and applied theatre approach, the research could focus on the content, the form and/or the context. This study recognises the interaction of these three dimensions as integral to an experience of Playback Theatre.

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<sup>13</sup> Over the course of the research I have learned that there are dissertations underway or near completion. These are by Fe Day in New Zealand (The Application of Playback Theatre in Public Health Education), Nick Rowe in England (*Personal Stories in Public Places*) and Markus Hühn in Germany (title/topic unknown).

**Figure 2: Four Dimensions for Research**

<b>DIMENSION</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION</b>
Content dimension – individually subjective perspective	What does Playback Theatre achieve, or how does it work from the perspective of the storyteller?
Artistic dimension – individually objective dimension	What makes a performance artistically effective?
Ritualistic dimension – collectively subjective dimension	What does Playback Theatre achieve or how does it work in regard to the ritual interaction between the storyteller, conductor, players and audience?
Social dimension – collectively objective dimension	What effect does Playback Theatre have on the audience, the performing Company and on the social context in which it is embedded?

(Dauber, 1999b, pp.159-162).

The four spheres Dauber names are also mutually interactive. The Playback Theatre performance is layered and complex for audience members. Bharucha (1993) asserts that researching any performance demands a consideration of the contexts in which it occurs. The complexities of researching a Playback Theatre performance occur on multiple levels. As Dauber states, the pluralistic nature of Playback Theatre makes the task of researching effectiveness difficult (Dauber, 1999b, p.161). This study does not set out to measure effectiveness, rather it investigates the Playback Theatre performance through the experiences of the audience.

## **2.5 Summary**

This chapter has charted the development of Playback Theatre from the early experimentation by The Original Company in upstate New York, USA, through the international expansion

and the establishment of various elements of regulation, to the emergence of a more critical phase in which research such as this thesis now features. I have presented the philosophical underpinnings and integral values of the form and sketched the practice applications that have emerged. The dimensions of the Playback Theatre method have been acknowledged in relation to general applied theatre methods and the specific aspects identified in Playback Theatre theory - art, ritual and social interaction. An exploration of the many applications of Playback Theatre has assisted me to articulate the complex nature of the interactive purposes of this hybrid form in the community arena.

The final section discusses Playback Theatre scholarship and research with particular emphasis on the multiple levels at which Playback Theatre operates and the complexities of researching performance. The chapter argues that theory and knowledge about Playback Theatre has ostensibly been developed through practitioner reflection in the tradition of an oral culture. In undertaking this study, I aim to extend the knowledge and scope of understanding about Playback Theatre within the academic domain.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Review of Literature

One of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves through multiple forms: by telling themselves stories; by dramatizing claims in rituals and other collective enactments; by rendering visible actual and desired truths about themselves and the significance of their existence in imaginative and performative productions.

Myerhoff (1986, p.261).

Each story spun into other stories, binding us together so that process became community, however brief the time.

Anne Daveson (2001, p.38).

Myerhoff evokes the possibilities of ritual performances. Daveson's idea of an ephemeral experience of community is organic to a story-based form like Playback Theatre. As I depict in Chapter Two, Playback Theatre is a hybridised performance ritual that blends personal story and improvised theatre. In this chapter I draw from the literature on performance theory. I look particularly at the way in which liminal activities support experiences of flow for individuals in those performance arenas in which they are expected to participate. I explore the way in which flow is contingent on participants feeling confident with their capacity to join in and equate this to the way in which anxiety can inhibit spontaneity in participants. I consider how the ritual elements of performance can induce *communitas*. *Communitas* is

presented as an experience of community that is evoked when individuals encounter simultaneous experiences of flow during liminal activities.

I discuss the contemporary place of stories with emphasis on the storytelling act and the process of stories being enacted. I present three levels of engagement for audience members who are spectating – as a witness to the storytelling, as a witness to the enactment, and in reflection. Audience response and audience engagement literature has been arranged to shed light on audience experiences in both traditional and nontraditional theatre contexts. The review then considers the place of personal story as a relevant and potent public discourse. Ritual performance as an experience of community is discussed through the concepts of *communitas*; belonging and estrangement; collective experience; and diversity. In this review I argue that the centrality of personal story and the animation of stories through theatrical enactments in the Playback Theatre performance render it an arena for experiences of community. Thus, this literature provides a frame for positioning the Playback Theatre performances that I investigate in this study.

### **3.1 Performance Theory**

"It is hard to define 'performance' because the boundaries separating it on the one side from the theatre and on the other side from everyday life are arbitrary" (Schechner, 1988, p.85, Huxley & Witts, 2002). Carlson (1996) proposes that performance has become indefinable due to its "extremely popular" use in a "wide range of activities in the arts, in literature and in the social sciences" (p.1). The, now considerable, body of literature articulating theories of performance is informed by a wide range of disciplines (Carlson, 1996). In this section I begin by presenting some of these positions.

Anthropologists have tended to view culture and ritual as performance. Particular emphasis has been given to documenting the performative aspects of cultures and societies, e.g.

initiations, tribal celebrations, seasonal festivals (Turner, 1974, 1986, Schechner, 1985, 1988). Sociologists claim that there is theatre in everyday life (see for example, Read, 1993). Goffman (1959) positions social behaviour as performance, theorising that we all perform as part of everyday life. He posits that performance refers to "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (p.22). In socio-linguistics, language itself has been considered in terms of 'performance' with the performative act being defined as communicative (in a given cultural context). This elaboration similarly situates the potency of the performance in the relationship between the speakers (performers) and listeners (audience) (Hymes, 1975, Kunst, 1986). In the discipline of theatre studies, performance is predominantly conceptualised as art. In a bid to address the differences between traditional theatre and the emerging field of performance, the agency of the performer is named as central. Carlson (1996) suggests that "performance art places the (usually solo) performer's personal contribution in the foreground" (p.54). Therefore, performance potency hinges on the spectacular feats of the performer.

It is useful to contemplate that performance can be conceptualised in terms of its intention and its origins. Performance can be socio-political (Huxley & Witts, 2002, Holderness, 1992), emancipatory (Boal, 1979) or liberatory (Brook, 1989), poor (Grotowski, 1975), devised (Oddey, 1994) and liminal (Broadhurst, 1999). Political or socio-political performance ranges from works that position the performing body as resistant (Martin, 1990) to works that challenge the dominant paradigm, like the feminist performance works of Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch (Carlson, 1996, Huxley & Witts, 2002); to performances in which the internal structure of the genre challenges our accepted socio-cultural and political beliefs and systems (Broadhurst, 1999). Emancipatory and liberatory performance can also be socio-political, yet have as a primary purpose a specific intention regarding 'empowering' and 'liberating'



audiences, respectively. The "poor" in the performance genre of Grotowski refers to the resources required to create and perform the work, while devised performances may incorporate all the intentions and constraints that have been described so far. Broadhurst (1999) claims that "liminal performance" is a genre in which hybridization is the "quintessential feature" (p.69). The eclectic potential of the Playback Theatre method means that it can draw on any and all of these descriptive labels. The centrality of personal story immediately politicizes the form, as does the participatory process, introducing the possibility of social, cultural and political resistance. Little or no props are used (poor) and coupled with the simple, accessible internal structure it offers a potentially empowering and liberating theatre experience where liminal activity is fostered.

Over the years Schechner (1993, 1988, 1985) has proposed a number of models from which to speak about performance from his seminal position in the contemporary field of performance theory. Regardless of the way in which performance is defined, Mock (2000) argues that it is important that the definition states whether the performance is "live" or not. She claims that intrinsic to a conception of performance is its essential "ephemeral 'presentness' ... its 'liveness'" (Mock, 2000, p.2). She writes that a *live* performance is "one which is still happening and still has to happen [and that] includes the potential for change in its every moment of delivery through the dialectical processes which *need* to be experienced" (Mock, 2000, p.3). She is critical of Schechner's multiple attempts at defining performance claiming that "theories of performance that embed ideology into their construction leave themselves open to criticism of being irrational" (p.4). She argues that claims about live performance as "ideologically resistant" are irrelevant and that "it is more useful to suggest that the ontology of live performance somehow provides the *potential for* ideological resistance" (Mock, 2000, p.4, Huxley & Witts, 2002).

In his critical review of performance theory, Carlson (1996) reports that the performance process "can work within a society ... to undermine tradition, to provide a site for exploration of fresh and alternative structures and patterns of behaviour" (p.15). This echoes the claims made about ritual that are discussed in the next section. Turner (1986) positions performance as transformative for performers and spectators. In his work on ritual performance, he asserts that ritualised or symbolic dramatisation of important events in a culture are transformative for the audience (Turner, 1986). Performance is reflective – enabling us to show ourselves to ourselves, and reflexive – "arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves" (in Guss, 2001, p.158). Schechner (1988) is critical of Turner's conception of performance. He claims that it tends to locate 'the essential drama in conflict and conflict resolution' (p.170).

Schechner differentiates this idea from his own conception of performance as transformative.

He writes:

I locate it (performance) in *transformation* – in how people use theatre as a way to experiment with, act out, and ratify change. Transformation in theatre occurs in three different places; and at three different levels:

- 1) in the drama – that is, in the story;
- 2) in the performers – whose special task it is to undergo a temporary rearrangement of their body/mind;
- 3) in the audience – where changes may either be temporary (entertainment) or permanent (ritual) (*italics in original*, p.170).

Brook (1989) similarly claims the drama as a site of transformation. He suggests it is the unique capacity of theatre to replace a single point of view with many different views.

Schechner points to the possibilities of active audience engagement during performance beyond what Carlson claims is "a passive hermeneutic process of decoding" body, gesture, sound. Thus, audiences are

[M]uch more active, entering into a praxis, a context in which meanings are not so much communicated as created, questioned, or negotiated. The "audience" is invited and expected to operate as a co-creator of whatever meanings and experiences the event generates (Carlson, 1996, p.197).

He suggests that this shift from a passive to active audience position coincides with a shift in focus from *pretence* to *presence* in performance. Such performances are resistant to sending "a message about something" (Kirby in Carlson, 1996, p.126) instead they aim to make audiences more conscious. Marranta (in Carlson, 1996) argues that the performative imperative involves heightening audience members awareness so that they were aware of "*being there* in the theatre ... and [of] the immediacy of the relationship of the audience to the theatrical event" (p.127). McKenna (1999) writes of Playback Theatre as transformative; a "place of expanded consciousness ... [where] shifts in awareness, artistic involvement, and social reconstruction are attended to" (p.177).

Brook (1989) claims that the efficacy of theatre is in its "linking of the private and public, the intimate and the crowded, the secret and the open, the vulgar and the magical" (p.40). He suggests that performance can present a site of blurred boundaries where collective experiences of intimate truth are possible, a site of thresholds and convergence. Mason (1992) states that the performance is a site where the

[B]orders between entertainment and art, between audience and performer and between the performance itself and the larger social event; have become less defined in recent decades (Mason, 1992, p.3).

Its situated-ness on the margins renders performance a site for dialogue where different voices, different worldviews, different value systems, and different beliefs are brought together.

Conquergood (in Carlson, 1996) claims that performance can be open-ended and resist conclusions while encouraging interrogation. The historical challenges to the moral and social control agendas of theatre and performance by artists has resulted in the development of specific forms that express and enact empowerment and solidarity (Boal, 1979, Holderness, 1992, Martin & Sauter, 1995), or that privilege experimentation and authenticity (Brook, 1968, 1989, Grotowski, 1975). These alternative forms of performance emerge as practitioners seek

to return theatre to the people, and resurrect the primacy of it as an instrument of cultural celebration and social transformation. As suggested in the previous chapter, the genesis of Playback Theatre is a similar story. Experimentation in theatre, driven by the aspirations of the inventors, has increased the attention given to the junction between theatre and the social sciences (Carlson, 1996).

Fundamental to this study, is a conception of the performance act that emphasises process over structure, participation over competence, and the dialectics of socio-cultural processes over the logics of cultural and social systems (Turner, 1986, p.21). In effect, most useful to this study, is the conception of performance as a process that contains as a defining characteristic the interaction between the performer and the audience and where insight into human beings and human activity is attained (Carlson, 1996, Goffman, 1959, Hymes, 1975, Schechner, 1985, 1988). The inter-relatedness of performance, theatre and ritual is evident in much of the current writings on public events. The next section presents a critique of public events and suggests that the public performance is a form of ritual event.

### ***3.1.1 Public Events***

Public events can provide an avenue for communities to act on their own behalf. They are often one-off episodes where culture is celebrated. Manning (1983) suggests that events that celebrate culture both reverse and violate ordinary reality *and* replicate and uphold it.

Handelman (1977) conceives public events as an interaction between play and ritual. The public event embodies the paradox of the play message: let us make believe, and the ritual message: let us believe (Handelman, 1977). Schechner (in Ben Chaim, 1984) compares the belief inherent in the participants of ritual with the suspended belief that is required of the audience at the aesthetic drama event. Aesthetic drama "works to affect a transformation in [the] nonparticipating spectator's consciousness" (Ben Chaim, 1984, p.42). Turner (1990)

suggests that the public event could act to ritualise time for participants, support liminal activity and evoke heightened experiences.

During public events, be they ritual, aesthetic drama or play focused, participants engage in dialogue about things they may not usually speak about. In this way there is a reclamation of personal and community power, a claiming of responsibility and the opportunity to present the self. The public event ruptures the borders that Mason (1992) writes about where aspects of old forms converge to make new forms. Ben Chaim (1984) reminds us that "ritual does not exist in a vacuum but requires a social fabric and a deeply held belief system to have effect" (p.42).

Handelman (1990) differentiates between three types of public events: events that model the lived-in world, events that present the lived-in world, and events that re-present the lived-in world. Handelman elaborates on this three-tier typology suggesting that events that model the lived-in world facilitate change in participants and have direct impact on their social world. Events that present the lived-in world are designed to use and show the obvious symbols and icons of the social world. They depict familiar versions of relevant social realities. Events that re-present the lived-in world promote critical consciousness through the presentations. Handelman claims that these events animate the social world in such a way that participants can compare and contrast the event in "relation to [the] social realities" (p.49).

In his effort to develop theory about public events such as ritual performances, Handelman (1990) suggests that the public performance represents a conscious attempt at making meaningful connections by participants. Informed by his review of the definitions of public events by ethnographers, Handelman states that public events have social value. From such things as providing a reflection of collective understandings and principles of social structure to the possibility of recourse to address or redress social problems, public events meet social

needs. This is similar to the way in which O'Toole (2000) speaks of theatre as a social art form in a social context and therefore giving social permission for various (often taboo or unsanctioned) behaviours. The ritual containment of the public event facilitates this 'loosening' of social protocols. Handelman (1990) is critical of many of the definitional accounts of public events because they do not acknowledge that every cultural event can only communicate "a version" of the social order (p.9). He contests claims that "all occasions are constitutive of social order" saying that some "are primarily 'expressive'" (p.10). Significantly, he asserts that "public events are phenomenally valid forms that mediate persons into collective abstractions, by inducing action, knowledge and experience through these selfsame forms" (Handelman, 1990, p.15). In the context of this study, Playback Theatre can be constructed as a public event that facilitates conscious attempts at meaningful connections for participants. The deliberate social purpose of the public Playback Theatre event is evident in Fox's (1999b) description of Playback Theatre as social interaction in a dialectic relationship with art and ritual. The theory of ritual is discussed in the next section.

### **3.2 Ritual Performance**

The study of ritual has progressed adjacent to the study of theatre and performance in the past four decades. It is no surprise that the theories of ritual anthropologists (e.g., Victor Turner) appear in the writings about performance and experimental theatre. Nor is it surprising that the practice experiences of experimental theatre makers (e.g., Brook) are used to illustrate the theory of ritual. This interest in the overlap of ritual and performance has also been nourished by the post-colonial reclamation of indigenous cultural forms by local populations in developing countries (Chinyowa, 2002). I explore the intersection and overlap in ritual and performance in this section to provide concepts to write about the way in which Playback Theatre might straddle the performance/ritual threshold. At times, Playback Theatre appears to be all one, and at other times all the other, and at times in between or neither.

Cabral (2001) argues that rituals take many forms but are premised on a collective experience that is mediated through a patterned, sequenced, theatrical process. Myerhoff (1990) states that ritual performance provides continuity and predictability and "must be reasonably convincing, rhetorically sound, and well-crafted" (p.246). She asserts that while ritual events might desire to alter individual belief at the deepest level, this level of alteration is not required. Turner (1969, 1986, 1990) has been a key contributor in the exploration of ritual performance. Early on, he drew on van Gennep's conception of ritual as a process-based structure. Van Gennep's (in Turner, 1969) three-phase schema comprises a separation phase, a transition phase, and a re-entry phase. Carlson argues that fundamental to Turner's preference of van Gennep's three-phases over other frameworks to explain ritual is their derivation. Van Gennep developed the schema with the idea that performance occurs in the context of everyday life, in in-between spaces, rather than the idea implicit in the frameworks of Singer, Hymes, Bauman and Barba that performance is "set apart" (Carlson, 1996, p.20). "This image of performance as a border, or margin, a site of negotiation, has become extremely important in subsequent thinking about such activity" (Carlson, 1996, p.20). The first phase is the pre-liminal or separation phase. Guss (2001) reports this as the "period of separation of participants in time and space from their daily life sphere" (p.161). Participants shift to a more "sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time" (Turner, 1982, p.24). The shift opens a performance space that exists in-between rather than set-apart from ordinary life, a space on the "border, a margin, a site of negotiation" (Carlson, 1996, p.20). Within this, subjects encounter the second phase, the liminal or *transition* phase. Van Gennep referred to this as 'margin' or 'limen' (meaning threshold in Latin). Guss (2001) writes that this phase evokes "ambiguities of meaning which emerge on the margin between structures of the past and the future" (p.161). Turner (1982) claims that "the ritual subjects pass through ... a sort of social limbo" in this phase (p.24). He suggests that this liminal space invokes "anti-structure"

and facilitates an experience of *communitas*<sup>14</sup> (p.45). Exiting the liminal phase evokes the third phase, that which van Gennep called *incorporation*. This phase involves the incorporation of the liminal experience. The subject re-aggregates or re-integrates in society (Guss, 2001). They resume their everyday social roles carrying with them the new perspectives they may have from the experience. Guss suggests that this "performative sequencing can effect a transformation of consciousness" (p.161). Cabral (2001) asserts that transformation arises due to the way in which the ritual structure creates a bridge into "situations that would be tense in the real context" (p.56).

Schechner (1988) argues a link between ritual and theatre stating that one develops from the other: theatre from ritual and ritual from theatre (p.112). This circularity is inherent in Playback Theatre with the ritual repetition of the invitation to tell juxtaposed with and contained by the rhythmic theatricality of the conductor and the creation and presentation of the enactments. Performance genres are living examples of ritual "in/as action" (Turner, 1986, p.7). In the ritual containment, the representation of the ordinary life in which we are embedded is mirrored in a way that integrates the reflection of consciousness. We are able to see our living context in the interaction between "aesthetic drama processes and sociocultural processes" at a given time and place (Turner, 1988, p.28). Myerhoff (1990) explains that symbol and object become fused in the ritual process. The ritual frame changes the quotidian into a symbolic rather than temporal realm. This yields an in-between time, in an in-between space, where participants move in and out of the "liminal" (Turner, 1969, 1990). In the ritual frame

Invisible referents or realities to which ritual symbols point become our experience and the subject may have the sense of glimpsing, or more accurately, *knowing* the essential, accurate patterns of human life, in relation to the natural and cosmic order. ... Thus transformation is a multidimensional alteration of the ordinary state of mind, overcoming barriers between thought, action, knowledge, and emotion (Myerhoff, 1990, p.246).

<sup>14</sup> *Communitas* is discussed in length later in the chapter.



Sennett (1994) argues that ritual is healing and offers a site of resistance. He states that "ritual constitutes the *social* form in which human beings seek to deal with denial as active agents rather than as passive victims" (p.80). This notion of personal and collective agency is embedded in the participatory opportunities in the ritual process. Myerhoff (1990), however, reminds the reader that the experience "cannot be compelled, only invited or sought" (p.246). As people enter the ritual theatre event there is a possibility that they will be transported from "a collection of separate individuals into a group or congregate of participants" (Schechner, 1988, p.142). Bailey (2000) questions the notion of collective experience, suggesting that the phenomenon of people feeling and thinking in the same way, remains the "sum of individual experiences" (p.385). While very much predicated on the notion of performance as a culturally conservative activity in tribal and agrarian societies (Carlson, 1996), Turner's interrogation of the 'liminal' is helpful in examining the potential of the in-between or marginal spaces of the public ritual.

### ***3.2.1 Liminal Activity, Spontaneity and Flow***

Turner proposes that liminal activities are anti-structure or in opposition to the structure inherent in normative cultural operations. Carlson draws on Turner to argue that liminal activities "provide a space removed from daily activity for members of a culture to think about how they think in propositions that are not in cultural codes but about them" (Carlson, 1996, p.23). Like Turner, Schechner's (1985) work also examines the way in which performance evokes liminal or marginal spaces in which the everyday activities are elevated. He states that "in all kinds of performances a certain definite threshold is crossed. And if it isn't the performance fails" (p.10). Schechner implicates the audience in the successful performance, and therefore in the likelihood of a collective crossing of the threshold. He claims that the success of a performance is contingent on there being enough audience members to share the space with the performers so that together they can bring it to life through interaction. He

reports that "no theatre performance functions detached from its audience" (Schechner, 1985, p.10). In fact, it is this interaction that generates the level of intensity that enables the participants to cross the threshold, and attain a state of flow; "the state where action and awareness merge (Myerhoff, 1990, p.247, Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1992, 1997).

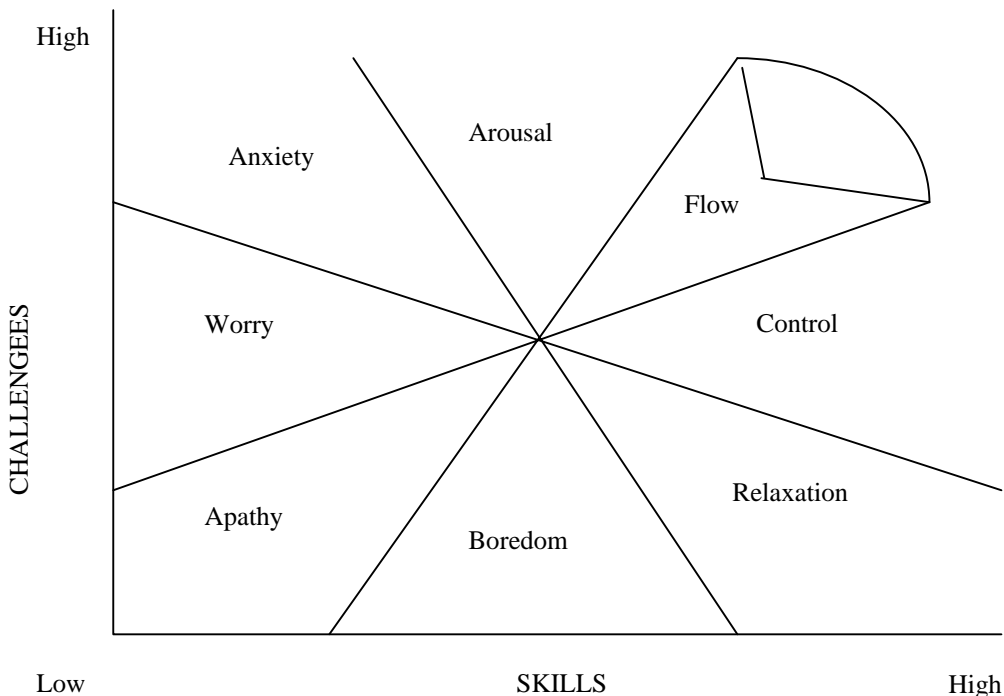
Turner (1982) differentiates the experience of flow from the experience of *communitas* that was discussed earlier. He posits that flow is primarily an individual experience, whereas *communitas* is between or among individuals. Also, he suggests that *communitas* is more likely "a matter of grace rather than law" (p.58). Csikszentmihalyi (1992) writes of activities where we experience *flow*, a concept that provides another way in which to speak of the liminal experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997) shows that the degree of difficulty of a sporting event must not exceed the level at which it becomes unachievable (too hard) for the individual. He proposes that we desire to feel stretched to the limit and yet simultaneously feel as though we are somehow "master of our own fate". The experience of flow equates to an *optimal experience* and occurs when our "body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (p.3). Yet it is his reframing of this "sense of mastery" to "a sense of participation" that is perhaps more meaningful in the context of ritual performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, p.4). The sense of feeling that one can succeed in participating adequately in the performance fosters a similar dynamic and could determine whether the participating audience joins in or withdraws, that is, whether they feel included or overlooked. Similar interactive relationships between play, participation and degree of difficulty is documented in the play literature (Carlson, 1996).

By way of explaining flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1992) proposes a simple Cartesian relationship between the two most important dimensions of the experience: the challenge and the skills we possess to meet it. As stated above, flow occurs when the degree of difficulty of the challenge and the skill level of the person are both high, that is, when the person is "fully involved in

overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.30). Either side of this optimum relationship between challenge and skill are the experiences of anxiety or boredom. Anxiety occurs if the challenge exceeds a reasonable gap between current skills or knowledge, and the skills and knowledge required to meet the challenge whereas boredom occurs when the challenge is too low (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). In his later text, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) extends this to include various other experiences outside of flow, anxiety and boredom (see Figure 3).

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggests that between flow and anxiety, arousal occurs, that is, skills may not be immediately sufficient, but there is scope for the person to engage in the challenge. Further, if skills are sufficiently high in a low challenge environment, rather than

**Figure 3: Flow: The Relationship between Challenge and Skill**



The quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills.  
Optimal experience, or flow, occurs when both variables are high

Csikszentmihalyi (1977, p.31).

boredom, the person experiences relaxation. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) nominates activities such as "play, art, pageantry, ritual and sports" as ones that induce flow due to the systematic way "they help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable" (p.72).

A seminal arena for the flow experience is in improvisational theatre. Improv<sup>15</sup> teacher, Viola Spolin's (1999) concept of intuition developed to maximise how actors learn, and what actors learn, can be equated with Turner's notion of the liminal. She states that

[T]he intuitive can only respond in immediacy – right now. It comes bearing gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us (Spolin, 1999, p.4).

She extends this to claim that in the intuitive act, the (full human) intelligence is freed. Sills (1999) suggests that Spolin is an authority on intuition, and has added his ideas to the mix when he explains that intuition is the "direct knowing of something without the conscious use of reasoning" (p.ix). In her actor training, Spolin identifies seven variables that contribute to the likelihood of the performer responding intuitively. The first of these variables are theatre games and physicalisation. In the games the familiarity with the internal logic of the game and the possibility of excitement assists the student actors to extend themselves. In physicalisation the actor is building a familiarity with their own repertoire of physical experiences and working to extend this. The second variable is freedom from the constraints that come with needing approval or when responding to feedback (or others' responses generally) as disapproval. Fear of disapproval can induce in the students a readiness to respond to attack and hinder their playfulness. The group expression variable is linked to the former two with group membership serving to provide an environment for contest and extension while simultaneously providing a space for students to develop resilience and robustness in relation to approval and disapproval. These four variables are significant in that they refer to the self.

<sup>15</sup> *Improv* is the popular American term for improvisational theatre performance, technique and practice. The Australian equivalent is *Impro*

The next two variables are the audience and the theatre techniques of the actors. In both these variables, the students must develop understanding: about the role of the audience, and the structure that techniques provide for the improviser. Finally, Spolin urges acting students to integrate their learning into their daily life (Spolin, 1999, pp.4-17). Essentially, Spolin's coaching directs students toward heightened concentration and focus, so that they find ways to enter the state of flow and to experience their performing work as a liminal activity.

Moreno's (1949 in Karp, 1994) theory of spontaneity is similar to Spolin's conception of intuition, with respect to the idea that it exists in the here-and-now. In his study of the spontaneity-creativity complex, Moreno (in Fox, 1987) posits a simple model that suggests there is a relationship between "the moment, immediate action, spontaneity, and creativity – in contrast to the customary link between spontaneity and automatic response" (p.40). This latter link is derivative of the Latin *sponte*, meaning "of free will" (p.42). However, unlike the seven aspects of intuition that Spolin articulates, Moreno articulates four forms of spontaneity: "creative, original, dramatic and having adequacy of response" (Karp, 1994, p.53). Drawing on the fourth element, Nolte (2000) explains that spontaneity can be defined as "an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation" (p.219). The notion of adequacy of response is a key conception of spontaneity integrated into the thinking about Playback Theatre. Previously, I discussed Salas' (1999) explanation of "good enough" Playback Theatre (see Chapter Two, p.15). In the Playback Theatre process, performers and audience alike experience repeated challenges to their spontaneity and thus require a readiness "to respond appropriately to the situation in which they find themselves" (Nolte, 2000, p.219).

### ***3.2.2 Liminal Activity and Emotional Engagement***

Berne (in Carlson, 1996) advocates that "the most rewarding moments of human experience are to be attained in ... 'intimacy' or 'spontaneity'" (Carlson, 1996, p.48). Participating in performance, or drama processes in general, is liable to produce feelings of intimacy. Bundy (2003) states that aesthetic engagement should ideally be an experience of intimacy, that is, of connection, animation and heightened awareness. These experiences of "feeling invigorated", "more alive, more alert", and stimulated to "think about questions regarding humanity in a new light" (Bundy, 2003, p.180) reinforce what Turner claims occurs during the liminal (performance) activity.

Intrinsic to any ritual process are the rules that frame it (Turner, 1982). The same can be said for improvised drama processes (Spolin, 1999, Sills, 1999). Spolin suggests that the ritual frames, or the rules of improvisation, exist to contain the performer and the performance. Yet, it is not the rules of manners or acceptable social protocols that offer containment (Spolin, 1999) and inhibit spontaneous self-expression (Johnstone 1981). Rather it is the rules of engagement in the particular activity. It is not that there are rules as such, but that the implicit rules are made known in some way. Establishing a ritual frame serves to announce that a certain set of rules are at play here and *release* participants to act beyond their constrained domestic roles and engage in other ways with themselves, each other and with the social environment (Turner, 1982, Schechner, 1985).

Turner (1969, 1990) asserts that the potential of this released, shared state is the enabling of liminal activity, i.e., activity that is oppositional to structure and that occurs in a transitional moment. This is perhaps one of the great paradoxes of ritualised activity. Ritual demands a solid structure. This frees participants to dare and to risk as they move toward an experience of flow. In acting freely, the (acceptable social) rules of engagement may be breached, e.g., the disclosure of personal stories in a public forum. The ritual event, therefore, could be seen to

promote resistance while seeming to order and control. Where Turner's analysis reveals that ritual processes induce the liminal Schechner's (1993) exploration of the intersections of theatre and anthropology experiments with the ways ritual heightens the theatrical experience. Use of ritual in theatre is linked with notions of maximising spectator engagement within the liminal potential of the performance (Bundy, 2001). It is possible that forms that promote uncertainty and anti-structure will be met with resistance. This is so in theatre forms like Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal encountered suspicion due to the risks involved in making the theatre that he advocates. The following passage reports his experience:

I proposed that we go to the streets to make forum theatre, but they (the organisers) would not accept that because you never know what is going to happen. You are [working at] creating a future and they want to reveal a past (Boal, 1994, p.22).

This caution by public officials toward "released" states can also be found within audiences in performance rituals. Johnstone (1981) asserts that childhood conditioning could act to block participants to this release, and thus block their spontaneity, intuition and inhibit flow. Fear of failure, or getting it wrong, attachment to being original and clever, uncertainty about rules and unexpressed or unrealistic expectations inhibit spontaneity and unselfconscious action (Moreno in Karp, 1994). Karp (1994) expands this theory of spontaneity further suggesting that if the task appears too hard, we feel anxious and subsequently lose spontaneity, that is, experience a diminished feeling with respect to our capacity to respond adequately to the (new) situation. This could induce a drop in our capacity for pleasure; an outcome that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies as a loss of flow. Thus, a perceived pressure to perform that evokes the same response as the pressure to perform in real life can hamper entering the liminal state. Karp reports that anything that causes anxiety extinguishes spontaneity. She states that "when anxiety is high, spontaneity is low, and when spontaneity is high, anxiety is low" (Karp, 1994, p.52). Blatner (1988) argues that spontaneity is essentially a freedom from the pressures and manoeuvres that inhibit playfulness. He proposes that play is inhibited by "the fear of making mistakes, the fear of comparisons, excessive competition, or hostile play"

(p.162). He suggests that Playback Theatre has the potential to invite play in adults as distinct from inviting performance in adults. Yet for some adults these two actions engender the same cautious response.

### ***3.2.3 Ritual Performance: A non-traditional theatre experience***

The Playback Theatre performance, like other ritual performance events, is considered a non-traditional theatre event. Significant to defining the event as nontraditional are things like the placement in nontraditional theatre venues or locations, participation of the audience members, and the emergent nature of the content. Coppieters (in Bennett, 1990) suggests that "audiences attending non-traditional theatre take more of a risk!" (p.97). There is also the likelihood that they are in search of the play experience that theatre and performance promise (Carlson, 1996, Styan, 1975). Participation of audience members in contemporary performance events is not unusual. Bennett (1990) proposes that the audience has become "a tangible active creator of the theatrical event" (p.10). She identifies the emergence of theatre for empowerment as fundamental in consolidating participation as a primary form of audience engagement. Interactive theatre processes (see Boal, 1995) demand the removal of the traditional notion of aesthetic distance. The fourth wall disintegrates into a blurred threshold for both performer and audience. O'Toole and Lepp (2000) assert that audiences have a pivotal role in what happens next. This role is guided by the way the ritualised framing of the process points to specific gaps in the action that invite genuine participation. This has emerged more lately as a trend toward the valuing of the process of performance, rather than the dominant text-based idea of theatre as the product.

Coppieters' research points to a number of ideas about audiences at non-traditional theatre events. He suggests they engage in a meta-process as they participate. In this process they are particularly aware of how the nontraditional event differs from what they expect of traditional



theatre. They commonly express embarrassment and ambivalence about becoming a participant and frustration about the lack of familiar cues as to the type of performance. They feel disadvantaged by not knowing what is expected (Coppieters, in Bennett, 1990). Bennett reports that Coppieters formed four general conclusions about aspects of audience perception at nontraditional theatre events:

- One's attitude toward/perception of/relationship with the rest of the public is an important factor in one's theatrical experience.
- Perceptual processes in the theatre are, among other things, a form of social interaction.
- Inanimate objects can become personified and/or receive such strongly symbolic loading that any anxiety about their fate becomes the crux of people's emotional experience.
- Environmental theatre goes against people experiencing homogeneous group reactions (Coppieters in Bennett, 1990, p.97).

Wider reviews of audience perception research sees Bennett (1990) add a further three elements influencing audience perception: the place of the performance; the history of the Company, and audience members' socially formed cultural values and personal ideas. Similarly, the values and beliefs of the Playback Theatre performers influence their perception in a compounded way: first in the listening and interpreting of the story, next, in its embodiment in dramatic form. Bennett (1990) concludes that there is a complex connection "between the actual theatre audience and social systems [and] between the theatre go-er and contemporary culture" (p.98). The influence and relevance of the context in which theatre emerges and is performed are documented in the literature (see Bharucha, 1993, Brook, 1989, Carlson, 1996). The Playback Theatre performance is similarly embedded in and therefore could be expected to similarly reflect the broader social and cultural context.

Nontraditional theatre events often provide opportunities for audience members to engage in a productive capacity. The agency of the participant in Playback Theatre extends beyond the reception and production of the traditional performance to include the selection of the "text,"

through the volunteering of and performance of the stories that are told and enacted. This agency exists both within the individual and within the group. The decision about who tells their story and when they tell it, is as much the responsibility of the audience as it is the conductor. The process is dialectic and calls forth the agency of the conductor as ritual shaman, theatre producer and sociometrist (in the case of performances that are mediated by the values of inclusion and diversity) (Fox, 1994, Good, 1986). Participants' experiences are built moment-by-moment and are composed of the complex intersection of the various elements of the performance: words and sounds – what they say and what they hear, movement and pictures – what they do and what they see, interactions, responses, and reflections. The meaning making process of the participant drives the response. In this way, performance is a site for "public reflexivity", an avenue to processes that are inaccessible in everyday life (Turner, 1982, p.33). For Myerhoff (1990), reflexive awareness is in opposition to the "the attitude of flow" and thus a paradox of ritual processes (p.247, Turner, 1982). She writes:

Many rituals induce reflexive awareness just as they invite the fullest participation and concentration that brings about flow. Rituals' perpetual play with mirrors and masks, with borders and transitions, make self-reflection nearly inevitable, telling the individual what s/he is and is not at once (p.247).

Turner (1982) calls this a "flow-break" or an interruption to the experience of flow induced by a retrospective look at memory. He suggests that a distancing from the communal experience occurs when participants move from being to thinking or doing. However, Myerhoff (1990) proposes that participants could have a transcendent experience, which she describes as being in a state of flow while simultaneously being aware.

Reflexivity in the theatre can be a collective or communal experience. Gaylord (in Bennett, 1990) suggests that the collective experience of reflexivity and flow is induced by the ritual frame of theatre, and enables the spectator to become

Part of an ad hoc collective consciousness, ready to find meaning and significance in the events taking place on stage. Thus, the theatrical occasion involves a double

consciousness for all concerned. The performance takes place on at least two levels of 'reality' simultaneously within at least two frames. The outer frames always embrace both audience and performers. The inner frame demarcates the playing space (Gaylord in Bennett, 1990, p 148).

The existence of two frames and of the ambiguity induced by the liminal experience is regularly discussed in theatre theory (see Artaud 1958, Grotowski 1968). In the Playback Theatre performance, this dynamic can occur twice, first as spectators (and performers) listen to the storyteller, and second when they listen/perform (performers) or listen/watch (spectators) the enactment. Sound artist, Paul Carter (1992) writes of listening:

Listening, the analysis of hearing, is not a panacea for a culture sick with seeing; but the binaural possibility of hearing "in the round", of experiencing a perceptual reality that enlarges the subject even as it contains and confines him or her, that incorporates both meanings of nature (human and environment) without subjecting one to the other, and accurately symbolises what the eye tends to forget: that the body, and not only the ear, is a trembling flame, a vibrating surface, ruffled water. The body does not photograph the world, but filters it across permeable membranes (p.129).

Carter's words suggest that we listen beyond our ears. Yet, in the Playback Theatre performance, the words spoken by the teller command specific attention. These words and the words the conductor chooses are not merely discourse they are performance. Bharucha (1993) proposes that "[w]ords may not be the realities that they allude to and attempt to embody ... [but] they have their own materiality that reflect, however arbitrarily and obliquely, the world we live in" (p.45). The very process of Playback Theatre as a series of stories that are dramatised spontaneously after each telling suggests that 'listening' to the 'words' is a central dimension of participating in the ritual. Somehow, somehow, the words of the teller direct what follows in the dramatisation. Indeed, when the stories are translated to stage, the "words" of the teller become text and actors must be mindful of how much they invest the text with their own meaning. The actors' function is to animate the story as theatre. Theatre itself, "is a kind of language" (Fortier, 1997, p.6), in which visuals, action, design, symbols, words, music and sound are framed to communicate something coherent and congruent to an audience (Esslin, 1987). For the Playback Theatre audience there are at least three separate and different performance genres: the first performance involves the telling by an audience

member, the second, the shaping by the conductor, and the third involves the dramatisation of the story by the actors. On all occasions, the audience is "receiving" or witnessing the narrative. Therefore, reading the narrative and the enactment demands that the symbols and text make some kind of sense to the receiver.

The dialectic imperative of theatre demands that the audience 'listen,' and that the performers 'listen', as an interactive dialogue emerges that embodies the collective world-views of the gathering. That is, embedded in both the telling and the enactment are the cultural dynamics of the community (Carlson, 1996). With this in mind, Playback Theatre could be described as a reflection or a mirror of the community and culture in which it is manifest. Unlike the intercultural theatrical experimentation ("borrowing, stealing, exchanging") of Brook, Artaud, Grotowski and Craig (Schechner, 1982, p.19), the Playback Theatre method offers an experience within one's own culture. This makes Playback Theatre both a mirror of the gathered community and a window into the social reality of the broader community. The dramatisations however, are only as accurate as the way in which the actors' knowledge, experiences and diversity matches the knowledge, experiences and diversity of the community. Bharucha (1993) suggests that this is not necessarily the only way of thinking about the actor's role and contribution. In his consideration of the outsider status of Artaud in Norway and the Orient and Brook in India, he writes that Artaud acted as a "catalyst in intimate new relationships between differing groups in the community" (p.63). Meanwhile, Brook, he claims, "captured the flavour of India", an accomplishment Bharucha believes is more valuable than merely presenting the substance of the nation: nothing is "harder in theatre than to represent the flavour of another culture" (p.70).

### ***3.2.4 Audience Reception, Engagement and Response***

Earlier in the chapter I introduced the Playback Theatre *performance* as the focus of the study. Drawing on the conception of performance as a process it not only includes the performer

and the performative act but also "who is watching the performance, who is reporting on it, and what the social, political and cognitive implications of these other transactions are upon the process" (Carlson, 1996, p.32). Barba (1995) asserts that the "attention, the seeing, the hearing, the mind of the spectator" makes theatre art more than the actor, the space or the text (p.39). Jackson (in Bundy, 2001) describes it as a meeting on metaphoric ground between artists and audience, where the performers' skill and artistry weaves with the individual responses of the audience to realise the aesthetic experience. Just as the actors' lived experiences determine their capacity to animate the stories in a drama, so too is the audience engagement and response limited by their cultural frames. The bringing together of the cultural frame and the fictional frame in theatre means audience members experience a "doubleness" when viewing the drama (Bauman in Carlson, 1996). Carlson reports that:

According to Bauman, all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of action. Normally, this comparison is made by an observer of the action – the theatre public – but the double-consciousness, not the external observation, is what is most central" to audience engagement (Carlson, 1996, p.5).

Boal (1995) uses the term metaxis to propose his idea of a double field of engagement. The state of metaxis occurs when participants belong "completely and simultaneously to two different and autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (p.43). In engaging in the parallel fiction/reality frames, a tension arises for audience members when the events of the real world are illuminated by the events of the fictional world (O'Toole, 1992). Participants' responses to this deviation of the fictional from the real lead to an additional layer of engagement. Many of the new participative theatre forms evoke multiple layers of engagement. O'Toole and Lepp (2000) suggest that this is a result of the reconfiguration of the aesthetic space and where participants may become "playwright, director, dramaturg, actor or audience, sometimes several simultaneously" (p.31). It is significant when this multiple consciousness is fundamental to spectators' engagement.

Nicholson and Taylor (1998) suggest that "audiences *interpret* a performance." They state that it is both an individual and collective process that entails audience members "drawing on their cultural understanding of the art form and their personal experiences" (p.122). Soule (1998) states that the collective experience of audience members in this process enhances engagement. It is in this collective witnessing, Brook (1989) urges, that theatre has the potential to replace "a single point of view by a multitude of different visions" (p.11). Brook uses the analogy of the hologram to describe the potency of the collective moment suggesting that a moment of life is captured in performance when the various forces emanating from the audience and the actor converge on a given point at the same time. Bundy (2001) proposes that emotional engagement could lead to changed understanding in audiences. She draws on Dawson to argue that the emotional response exists on a continuum somewhere between "complete sympathetic identification and complete detachment. A vicarious response to the event of drama requires some form of identificatory rapport to occur" (Bundy, 2001, p.54). Engagement with the drama in this way brings the audience member more fully into the aesthetic frame and creates the potential for new understanding. Bundy states that "if new understanding or awareness is to develop, the mental and emotional energies of the participants or spectators must be engaged" (p.57). This is not engagement for engagement sake, rather, in the manner that Bauman and Boal suggest above, to "bring to living consciousness" the new perspective for the spectator (Bundy, 2001, p.57). Participants' expectation of the experience and their preparedness to enter the fiction influences the level and nature of their engagement and determines whether they have a flow experience<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Flow is discussed earlier in the section.

### 3.3 The Ritual of Storytelling

The telling of personal story by audience participants is a central element of the Playback Theatre method. Interactive opportunities like this have been commended by narrative scholars as critical avenues through which people make meaning of their lives, and societies make meaning of their cultures (Bruner, 1986, Polkinghorne, 1988). These are identical claims to those made by theatre anthropologists Schechner (1988) and Turner (1986). Narrative scholars argue that enabling such intimate interactions to occur in a public forum paves the way for societal and personal reform through personal stories that hold within them the full social and political story of the era (see Bruner, 1986). Sayre (1989) states that narrative sharing is like ritual. He writes:

[Both] share a concern for audience, the engagement of a community. Narrative could be said to be a *kind* of ritual, an activity designed to unite storyteller and audience in a common cognitive, as opposed to overtly social, dilemma. Both implicitly envision transformation or change to result from our encounter with them (p.17).

Rituals are crucibles of cultural expression and a means by which to explain the specifics of the culture and the people (Schechner, 1985). Stories told in a particular community embody the cultural and social narrative of that group. In the Australian context, ritual performance and storytelling derive from the postcolonial "practice of resistance by indigenous Australians and a politics of difference demanded by non-English speaking migrants" (Johnson with Huggins & Jacobs, 2000, p.157). Embedded in the stories is the reality that colonisation was our history, and even more significant, that it is our present. This is evidenced by the seemingly stalled progress in indigenous autonomy – with ongoing "struggles for even small rights over land, resources and rights" (Johnson with Huggins & Jacobs, p.157) – and the state of affairs in the treatment of and access for refugee and asylum seekers in this country. Kalantzis (2001) urges that we must dare to tell the second story of our history, the story that is much harder to tell because "it is bound up with the problem of how to remember things that you don't want to remember". She claims that "to be true to ourselves, we must struggle

to tell both stories as one" (Kalantzis, 2001, p.20). While not yet a postcolonial society, the cultivation of spaces that juxtapose stories from the centre with stories from the margins in the way that Kalantzis urges, nurtures the possibility of Australians meeting each other.

Todorov (in Mantovani, 2000) writing about the Balkan wars admits that telling the harder stories contravenes how we are compelled to collectively remember. He posits that:

Collective memory in general prefers to conserve two types of past situations: those in which we were victorious heroes, and those in which we were innocent victims. ... The least glorious pages of our past would be the most instructive ... not when it serves to nourish resentment but when its bitter taste drives us to transform ourselves (Todorov in Mantovani 2000, p.119).

Burkett (2001) suggests that new approaches must be developed if we are to move toward experiences of community that embrace intercultural meetings. The improvised oral form of Playback Theatre provides a way.

Storytelling is a pre-modern culturally expressive technology. Poet James Cowan speaks about the state or spaces that are evoked in the storytelling traditions and the performance of culture for indigenous Australians as "the wild state". He says:

The wild state is clearly a part of a poetic and mysterious universe. Our attempts to understand it on an aesthetic level alone are doomed to failure. My nomad friends tell me that their survival rests not on fragile food resources, but on their ability to enter the Dreaming<sup>17</sup> whenever they wish. Yet to codify the spirit realm, to chart on a map the contours of the metaphysical land on which they live out their lives, would be to destroy the mystery that for countless millennia they have fought to preserve. Indeed, more than anything, it is the mystery they wish to protect because it signifies to them all the risks they must take in order to retain their primitiveness, their wildness in the natural domain (Cowan, 1991, pp.8-9).

Here Cowan eloquently articulates the intrinsic necessity of the oral, embodied performing culture for indigenous Australians. Theatrical and story-based traditions have been fundamental to claiming and expressing values, history and morality in pre-colonial indigenous communities. All indigenous cultures possess performance genres that are specific to the

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<sup>17</sup> Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal Tribe of Minjerribah country (Stradbroke Island) reminds us that Dreamtime is the contemporary name given to "Alcheringa". She says, "Our ancient history is locked in a cultural memory, which in turn is locked in the Alcheringa, or as it has been named (incidentally without our permission), the Dreamtime" (1990, p.108).



passage of tradition from generation to generation. Elements of these cultures are more evident in the post-colonial trend of reclamation and reconciliation in the grassroots societies in Africa, the Pacific, Asia and the Americas.

This return to indigenous expressive forms parallels a similar search in the West, to the time when the cosmos was a place of belonging (Berman, 1981), and where men and women, as

[M]ember[s] of this cosmos [were] not alienated observer[s] but direct participant[s] in its dramas. ... [Where] his (sic) personal destiny was bound up with [the] destiny [of the cosmos], and this relationship gave meaning to his life (p.16).

The post-modern and post-colonial movements have endeavoured to recover what has been lost during modernity's extended story of "progressive disenchantment. ... Where everyday life [is translated into a] landscape ... of mass administration and violence, [where] jobs are stupefying [and] relationships [are] vapid and transient" (Berman, 1981, p.16-17). Playback Theatre is both a post-modern and post-colonial form. Just as Brecht's work is described as a response to the political and social circumstances of the time, including the extreme events of World War 1 (where German religious and cultural institutions were seen to promote and prolong the war), the Bolshevik revolution and the German rightists' crushing of the Spartakus Revolt (Bryant-Bertail, 1991), so too is Playback Theatre seen as a response to the political and social circumstances of its time. Dauber (1999a) asserts that the union of co-founders Fox and Salas saw two contemporary movements converge. He expresses it thus:

[O]n the one hand, the culture of political resistance, as expressed through 'pedagogy of liberation' and the connected fight against the 'cultures of silence' (Freire); on the other, the search for alternatives to the consumer society of mass-produced goods and services, for a simpler, more 'convivial' community-oriented lifestyle (Illich) (Dauber, 1999a, p.70).

I would extend this to include the search for meaningful connection to place (Gunew & Rizvi, 1994) and recognition (Day, 1999) when considering Playback Theatre in contemporary multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-faith Australian society. Playback Theatre offers a culturally accessible form through which to express these needs in this era of post-colonial reclamation

of what can be seen as exotic and deeply embedded indigenous forms. Ancient cultural forms have provided means through which values were expressed and celebrated, something that has been part of everyday life, and yet a source for the new, a source of forms, a source of styles, a source of techniques. Playback Theatre can be a link to this past, and renders the ordinary action, extraordinary, where simple expressions of the everyday point beyond their value in the moment, to imply some existential value. Obiechina (in Chinyowa, 2002) claims that connection to and acknowledgement of such processes brings with it abundance and a source of hope that just *is*.

The Playback Theatre process is story-based and draws on the necessary ritualistic and social elements required for performing culture and thus expressing hope. It facilitates a liminal zone for intercultural meetings in (white) western societies caught in the confusing transition of the dream of a diverse and accessible global world, to the realities of living it. The idea of community as an intercultural meeting is regularly addressed in arts-based practices such as community-based performance rituals and applied theatre projects (see Taylor, 2003). Giroux (1992) advocates that spaces on the "borders" such as those evoked in a ritual performance like Playback Theatre enable a new kind of resistance. That is, a space where we might encounter ourselves and The Other, outside the protocols of everyday life, and in this encounter, see ourselves and our interactions between and with The Other, in a way that is removed, and possibly reflexive. Interestingly, reflexivity can also act to hinder flow and inhibit spontaneity if it is occurring during the liminal activity (Turner, 1982, p.76). Processes such as applied theatre can be used deliberately because of their ability to "activate human consciousness in unique ways" through an aesthetic event (Taylor, 2003, p.3) and hence encourage rather than undermine opportunities for flow experiences in community gatherings. The next section discusses community-based performance as a site for story-based performance rituals.

### 3.4 The Emergence of Community-Based Performance Events

Although the usual anthropological arguments could be dusted off to place the origins of community theatre, as indeed of all theatrical expression, back in pre-colonial and pre-Graeco-Roman times, its more immediate antecedents lie buried in the various forms of counter-cultural, radical, anti- and post-colonial, educational, and liberational theatre of the 1960s and 1970s (van Erven, 2001, p.1).

As reported in Chapter Two, the Playback Theatre method evolved in the 1970s out of the same influences that precipitated other forms of community theatre that van Erven acknowledges above. Van Erven (2001) suggests that while a broad range of performance styles populate community theatre world wide, "it is united ... by its emphasis on local, and or personal, stories (rather than pre-written scripts)" (p.2). If thought about in this way, Playback Theatre may be naturally defined as a community-based theatre form.

Similarly fundamental to an understanding of community-based theatre is its marginalisation as art. Kelly (1984) asserts that "the history of community arts is the history of a movement of naïve, but energetic activism" (p.97). Kalantzis & Cope (1994) report that the artistic *place* of community-based events are "classified as being on the margins of excellence, potentially excellent but not yet excellent" (p.16). Such placement, Hawkins (1993) argues, demands that the cultural practice, that is, the performance event, be valued (and thus, evaluated) in light of this. In fact, the peripheral position of community-based performance has become its defining element in recent decades. Van Erven (2001) posits that community-based performance privileges "the sociocultural empowerment of its community participants" (p.3). Thus, it could be claimed that community-based performance is premised on the participation of its audience. Participation such as this can empower audience members. Drawing on Boal, Elam (1996) suggests that spectators are "empowered with the will to struggle in their own lives" after an experience of participatory community theatre (p.32). Indeed, Elam (1996) asserts that the more fervent the participation, the more conscious the empowerment. To this end, Church and Tobias (1992) propose that community-based theatre workers "need an ear, an

eye, and a heart – listening and watching and being aware of what's happening around us" as we develop theatre projects (p.54).

Another contemporary manifestation of community-based theatre and performance has emerged as applied theatre (Taylor, 2003). Beyond empowerment and participation, Taylor suggests that applied theatre could help communities to process issues and transform human behaviour. He states that theatre becomes "applied" when

[T]he art form becomes a transformative agent that places the audience or participants in direct and immediate situations where they can witness, confront, and deconstruct aspects of their own and others' actions (Taylor, 2003, p.xx).

The purposes of applied theatre include: raising awareness, posing alternatives, healing past hurts, challenging contemporary discourses and voicing views from the silent and marginal (Taylor, 2003). Such agendas insinuate a specific intention toward change. However, van Erven (2001) proposes similar claims can be made about other community theatre genres.

Another facet of the community-based performance is the essentially social nature of the experience. In his conception of community, Cohen (in van Erven, 2001) suggests that it is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of home. The thinking about community as a social experience and as an experience of engaging with difference is elaborated later in the chapter in the section on Community. The contemporary revival of community is part of a larger, more general tendency toward cultural struggles and conflicts over belonging. A prominent response to this ambiguity is the rise in community public events and ritual performance events like Playback Theatre. Such events facilitate the "immediacy and the intimacy of face-to-face relations" that constitute an experience of community (Cohen in Amit, 2002, p.16), while simultaneously working to bridge difference (Kelly, 1984, van Erven, 2001).

Despite the marginalised position of community-based performance and other community-based theatre and applied theatre forms internationally, Australia has an "enviable" record in terms of the prevalence and position of community-based arts generally (van Erven, 2001, p.251). There continues to be significant growth in the application of theatre in community-based processes in Australia coinciding with this greater awareness of the need for sites of public self-expression and connection (Fotheringham, 1992, Hawkins, 1993, O'Toole and Lepp, 2000). Driven by public funding, community-based arts practice has facilitated a resurgence in popular public events in response to specific social problems and the popularity of certain events like Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras, and The Big Day Out (Hawkins, 1993, Kelly, 1984). However, Kelly (1984) cautions that the movement toward funding has resulted in a sector where "everyone is not free to participate fully" (p.44). Festivals and other public events have multiplied to such a degree that there are often two or three running concurrently, or at least serially in Brisbane alone. This social development has served to both 'teach' people how to participate in such events, and also built a hunger for variety, consistency and continuity. To this end it is not just large-scale events that thrive, but smaller, intimate (avante gard) events like the Playback Theatre performance.

Burkett (2003) argues for greater emphasis on those events that position local stories in collective processes due to their potential to enhance the experience of community. She suggests that such events enable people to "open up possibilities for disagreement, debate, contestation, anger and difference" (p.13). Drawing on Hoggett and Miller, Burkett proposes that emotions must be recognised as central rather than peripheral to any work within human communities (Burkett, 2003, p.14). Through such events, the community may once again become a place where individuals' needs for emotional or psychic connection draws them together at a local level (Lash, 1994).

Significant to the value of the community-based performance event is the way in which it accommodates the individual experience *and* the collective experience. Elam (1996) posits that collective reactions do not

[D]issipate nor negate the individual experience in the theatre; rather they serve to connect the individual reaction to the wider community's experience in the theatre and to the cultural and social developments outside of the theatre (p.29-30).

In earlier work, Kershaw (1992) reports on an experience of audience participation in a theatre event. He found that if a whole audience responds

[T]o the symbolism of a "possible world," then the potential of performance efficacy is multiplied by more than the audience number. To the extent that the audience is part of a community, then the networks of the community will change, however infinitesimally, in response to changes in the audience members (Kershaw in Elam, 1996, p.30).

Legitimate participation in the community-based theatre event renders it a place where audience members can remedy the legacy of the move from active public life to disconnected and isolated selves. This assumes that the self, who Sennett (1977) argues had a "right to silence in public," and who gains and produces knowledge through observation rather than social intercourse (p.27), wants to participate. This idea of the private self in the public sphere is further explored in the next section.

### **3.5 Community Public Performance as a Site for the Personal**

Earlier, I presented Handelman's (1990) thesis that the public performance acts as a conscious attempt at meaningful connections. Contemporary community theory (see Delanty, 2003, Dempsey, 2002) is preoccupied with constructions of community that enable a reclamation of lost intimacy and personal connection in the public domain. The sustained experience of lost intimacy is one explanation for the resurgence in our efforts to find opportunities to create and experience meaningful connections. This search drives the new era of community where estrangement can be mediated through the act of reaching out (Ahmed, 2000). Community exists in between family and society and offers opportunities for connections with others (see Pople, 1995). Given this, the emergence of new studies trying to restate what constitutes

community is not surprising (see Amit, 2002, Delanty, 2003, Hopper, 2003). It implies a desire to overcome the past fragmentation of society implicit in the following passage by

Tocqueville:

Each person withdrawn into himself, behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others. His children and his good friends constitute for him the whole of the human species. As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but he feels them not; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there no longer remains a sense of society (Tocqueville, in Sennett, 1977, front end).

The purpose of discussing community in the context of this thesis is to differentiate between two discrete notions of community that I wish to draw on. Firstly, the notion that community *exists* in some physical way, shape or form, and secondly, the notion that community is *experienced* as a feeling, even visceral internal state.

### ***3.5.1 Defining Community***

The literature is unanimous; *community* is a largely contested concept and difficult to define.

Many scholars (see for example, Amit, 2002, Bell & Newby, 1971, Dempsey, 2002) claim that this is due to the heavily value-laden nature of the concept. Bell and Newby (1971) propose that it has become the term that encompasses our existential yearning for belonging and self-expression, beyond our private or intimate world. Dempsey (2002) suggests that it is a special something that satisfies our longing for belonging and gives us a sense of social solidarity.

There is an undeniable sense of nostalgia or romance associated with the idea. Mostly, it is used in such a way to suggest that it is "good for you, and its absence is bad" (Dempsey, 2002, p.140), and this, Amit (2002) claims is part of the problem. Amit and Rapport (2002) argue that community no longer convinces as a metaphor. Yet, as reported in Chapter Two, the term has been regularly used when referring to the experience of Playback Theatre for an audience.

One notion of community is that of a physical place or a *specific* group of people. Engagement with community from this perspective tends to mean affiliation with some specific location. Alternatively, it could mean real-time contact with an identifiable group of people through a shared interest or a shared identity. This conception of community does not presuppose that everyone knows everyone else, however, chances are people will not consider each other strangers. This notion of community is relevant to this thesis in that Playback Theatre has been performed in various locations and many of the audiences have come because of their interest in or affiliation with the context. However, it is the second notion of community, though less tangible, that is useful as a way in which to think about audience experiences of Playback Theatre. This is explored below through Turner's (1969) notion of *communitas*, or community as an interpersonal experience and Amit's (2002) idea of community as momentary or ephemeral. Also relevant is the idea of community as collective action (Checkoway, 1995) and collective emotional expression (Giddens, 1990), and the possibility of community with a group of strangers (Ahmed, 2000).

### ***3.5.2 Communitas and Ephemeral Experiences of Community***

The idea of community as somewhat ephemeral and experiential is inherent in the notion of 'communitas', brought to prominence last century in the work of Victor Turner (1969, p.96). Turner states that he prefers the Latin term "communitas" to "community" in order to differentiate between interpersonal and inter-place connections. In his study of ritual processes, Turner distinguishes between existential or spontaneous communitas, normative communitas, and ideological communitas. Spontaneous communitas is that which happens in the moment and is situated outside the domain of the dominant societal structure. Normative communitas emerges over the course of time when what was once a spontaneous experience of communitas is the subject of social control agendas, and is organised into the fabric of the social system. Ideological communitas is that which is desired, and is "a label one can apply to



a variety of utopian models of societies based on existential *communitas*" (Turner, 1969, p 132). Of interest to this study is this existential or spontaneous *communitas*, that is, that experience of community which "is always completely unique, and hence socially transient ... [and has] something 'magical' about it" (Turner, 1969, pp.137-139).

Turner draws on Buber when he writes that *communitas* is "spontaneous, immediate, concrete" (p.127). An embodied experience, *communitas* involves the whole person in relation to others and "arises in instant mutuality, when each person fully experiences the being of the other" (Turner, 1969, p.136). Further to the ephemeral and relational qualities embedded in Turner's notion of *communitas* is the idea that it embodies resistance, and occurs on the margins. He asserts that there is "no specific social form held to express *communitas*" (Turner, 1969, p.138). It emerges at the intervening spaces in the social structure or in the absence of social structure and "interrupts and breaks through established patterns" (Veling, 1995, p.12). Veling expands Turner's thinking to assert that the experience of *communitas* was more likely to:

[R]evitalise and renew our social practices and institutions than experiences of structure and institution. The sources of renewed life and vitality are not likely to be found in structure equivalent to the institutional experience but rather in the antistructural experience of *communitas* or the quest for it (Veling, 1995, p.12).

While the flow of *communitas* requires the space available on the margins, it exists only in dynamic relationship with the centre. It is this dialectical tension that prevails. Turner states that we "are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by [our] experience of *communitas*" (Turner, 1969, p.129).

In his critique of examples of "fictive communality" that get presented "as the theoretical model of community," Amit (2002) asserts that "some of the most crucial forms of fellowship, of belonging" arise from incidental unstructured encounters. He states that "these forms of fellowship and belonging are intrinsically contextual and therefore often ephemeral" (Amit,

2002, p.64). Theologian, Veling (1995) articulates the ephemeral nature of community when he speaks about intentional faith communities. He claims that "community is a free blowing spirit, a vital force, ever renewing and always resistant of any effort to capture it, order it or control it" (Veling, 1995, p.12). Such could be said of articulating the individual and collective experiences at Playback Theatre performances. Wild (1981) attempts a definition that captures the ephemeral nature of community. He is against using the word 'community' when referring to "relationships of emotion developed through common experience and emphasising a sense of belonging" (p.39). Rather, he suggests the word 'communion' is better suited, differentiating the two by saying that "community is *given* and communion is *experience*" (p.40). Thus, the experience of community arises from both structured ritual experiences – *communitas* (Turner, 1969) – and incidental unstructured encounters (Amit, 2002). Regardless of the form it takes, the experience necessarily occurs in the public domain at a point where our private self is engaged, like that space found in community-based performance rituals like Playback Theatre.

The interactive space of *communitas* is dialogic. Freire (1982) claims that dialogue can not exist without critical thinking. Howard (2003) discusses her experience of facilitating dialogues within/by groups. Citing Buber, she constructs a meaning of dialogue as an exchange among human beings that accomplishes "a true turning to one another in full appreciation of the other, not as an object in a social function but as a genuine being" (p.3). It requires a setting where a group of people can maintain conscious collective mindfulness. Howard's description of the invisible energetic exchanges that occur in group-dialogue reminds one of the heightened ritual environments that Turner describes. She draws on Bohm's analogy of dialogue as superconductivity to state:

[W]hen electrons are cooled to very low temperatures they act more like a coherent whole than as separate parts. They flow around obstacles without colliding with one another, creating no resistance and very high energy (Howard, 2003, p.4).

The dialogic space of theatre positions intuition and emotional mindfulness alongside the conscious or rational mindfulness of Howard's dialogue. This enables theatre to reach beyond the limits of languages and thought in the exchange and incorporate the nonverbal, the physical body, the emotional, and the magical, in the dialogic space (Brook, 1968). Theatre is able to simultaneously privilege points of commonality or universality and enables a unique experience of liberation through the discarding of masks and the revealing of the real substance: "a totality of physical and mental reactions" (Grotowski, 1968, p.204). This idea of theatre is reinforced by narrative theorists who promote personal story as a primary form by which we make meaning of our lives (Bruner, 1986, Polkinghorne, 1988). Hardy (in Widdershoven, 1993) claims that we exist through the telling of stories for that is how we "remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love" (p.3). Frank (1995) terms this "thinking in stories" (p.61). It is the content of the personal stories told during a performance that constitutes a dialogic process in Playback Theatre (Hosking & Penny, 2003, Hoesch, 1999).

### ***3.5.3 Community and Diversity***

Earlier in this section I introduce the idea that community exists at some point in between family and society. This idea of community as a space between the public self and the private self is also relevant to the thesis. Wearing (2002) claims that the convergence of the public and private is a paradox of community. She suggests that public occurs outside of the family, which she says is a private space. She draws on Goffman's metaphor of the theatre to speak about the differences between the public and private selves. Goffman (in Wearing 2002) proposes that when we are behaving as our private selves, we are "backstage." Conversely, when we are performing to an audience, that is, when we are in the public domain "using various masks and other props to enhance our performance and to persuade our audience of our credibility and value", we are "frontstage" (p.130). I propose that an experience of

community can emerge from the convergence of the public and private, that is, that community is a place and space where people move in and out of their private-public selves. In this way community can be considered a space in-between that can invoke experiences of *communitas*.

As is discussed earlier in the chapter, performance rituals or ritualised performances offer such a space. The marginal or liminal space that can emerge when our public and private lives converge, a space in which individuals are drawn to act spontaneously, reinventing the primacy of personal agency, a space that is dialogical, reinstating the validity of the private voice in the public domain. The literature suggests (see for example, Ahmed, 2000, Amit & Rapport, 2002, Delanty, 2003) that accidental and spontaneous experiences of community outside formalised gatherings have become less likely. Ahmed (2000) reports that much of this has to do with the contemporary fear of The Other. She alerts us to the fact that preoccupation with others as dangerous impedes our social relationships and opportunities to build connections outside of formalised structures. She also interrogates the way in which the discourse of stranger danger competes with the multiculturalism discourse, the discourse she posits is the dominant community building discourse in contemporary Australia. The use of these discourses to drive social policy, therefore, sees them act against one another. Ahmed (2000) asserts that the 'stranger danger' discourse promotes a community where the stranger is expelled "as the *origin of danger*, whereas the multicultural discourse [operates] by welcoming the stranger as the *origin of difference*". By juxtaposing these two discourses Ahmed illustrates how an essentially colonial discourse like the stranger danger discourse – premised on the idea that another will invade territory and threaten person and property – serves to undermine the promotion of communities of inclusion and diversity (values promoted in the multicultural discourse).

In his analysis of spoiled identity Goffman (1968) similarly argues that The Other is constructed through the reading and rejecting of difference. He states that a reading of difference as deviant is used to justify an increase in social distance between self and the disabled body. Berman (1990) parallels the rise of mirror manufacturing in the modern era with the break down of "Self/Other unity". He suggests, "[n]ation-states, armies, self-portraits, perspectives, the collapse of magic – all these represent an increasing preoccupation with boundaries with sharp Self/Other distinctions" (p49). Simmer-Brown (in Cohen, 2003) speaks of the encounter with The Other as an experience of mirroring that induces fear of this Other (p.98). Interestingly, Jakubowicz and Meekosha (2001) suggest that this idea of mirroring one another has become a central feature of theories of difference like multiculturalism and disability theory. They draw on the work of Honneth to state that:

Society is formed through constantly reinforced networks of reciprocal recognition of social presence, and thereby of the right to participate in the defining of social agendas and cultural directions (Jakubowicz & Meekosha, 2001, p.88).

Berman (1990) asserts that "we are defined by what we exclude; the Self/Other game is dialectical" and acts as a reminder (p.186). The potency of the mirror is exploited in theatre where the stage as a mirror is the dominant metaphor. The performance is seen as a "reciprocal mirroring" where performer and audience create and affirm their identities (Soule, 1998, p.43). The performative moment enables us to witness ourselves in the living and enables insight and connection (Carlson, 1996). Brook (1989) proposes that theatre's unique gift is that it evokes "a multitude" of different perspectives (p.115).

Saunders (2003) examines the way difference influences social distance and community composition and identity through the concept of the foreign in contemporary life. She asserts that the most common meaning of the foreign is "opposition to the nation" and implicates *home* as an opposition to foreignness. This, she claims, enables foreign to be extrapolated to the root issue of *not belonging* and places it on the outside of community. This fear of difference

fuels what Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler and Tipton (1985) call the culture of separation, and contributes significantly to the widespread estrangement that permeates our lives and our community. Ahmed (2000) argues that estrangement could be the very issue that precipitates a response to the malaise of sameness. She claims that:

The process of estrangement is the condition for the emergence of a contested community, a community which 'makes a place' in the act of reaching out to the 'out-of-place-ness' of [The Other]. The work of such community formation is hence always 'outreach work' (Ahmad & Gupta, 1994: xiii). ... The community is reached through reaching across different spaces, toward other bodies, who can also be recognised – and hence fail to be recognised – as out of place, as uncomfortable, or not quite comfortable, in this place (Ahmed, 2000, p.94).

Could it be that estrangement is what is common to us all? Dillon (in Ahmed, 2000) suggests so stating, "the estrangement of human beings ... is integral to their condition of being here as the beings that they are" (p.93).

In *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett (1977) chronicles the way in which the requirement and use of social distance between people has changed in public life from the time of the Roman empire. Once, public life was a male domain, concerned with "face", in which people could expect to be "left alone" (p.27). The public domain was a paradox of visibility and isolation. The city was a "collection of strangers" (p.48), not so much the strangers-as-outsiders idea of Ahmed (2000) rather, strangers-as-unknown. Sennett argues that on the one hand the austere face of the public domain is a product of the structures required to maintain material and emotional order. On the other hand he admits that it fosters immoral behaviour and a lewd and opportunistic closeness mistaken for collective intimacy. This closeness is a product of what Sennett calls the century of personality where self-gratification reigned (the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and is used to shore up intolerance of difference. Sennett claims that in the proceeding century we became too precious with ourselves and our need for a separate psychic life, withdrawing from the public into the "idealized refuge" of the family (p.20). Bailey (2000) too, is critical of this preoccupation suggesting the "culture of therapy" is derived from a particular kind of "privatism which now has associated organisational and institutional forms in the

widely-available practices of 'personal growth', therapy, and counselling" (p.387). This trend underpins what Sennett asserts is the risk of social disintegration and increased self-absorption where we are fragile in ourselves and have trouble feeling and expressing feelings (Sennett, 1977, 1994). In Sennett's idea of society citizens appear to be devoid of autonomy, creativity and spontaneity, essential elements Burkett (2001) recommends for sustainable community.

In light of the complexities articulated above, there is a need for organised experiences of community that facilitate a move beyond estrangement. Delanty (2003) asserts that in the challenge to make community, human beings need experiences that mediate the individualism of a globalised cyber-world, foster resilience and reflexivity, and interrogate the boundaries between self and other. Merry (in Ahmed, 2000) calls for experiences that offer places/spaces where the "failed" community with weak or negative connections can meet neighbours who are otherwise "strangers to each other" (p.36). These are experiences where cultural difference is prized and celebrated, not where fear of crime and feelings of danger predominate. When premised on intercultural citizenship (Allegritti, 2001) experiences of community enables meetings between people. At these meetings we will share our memories and remind ourselves of what Marra James (in Bellah et al. 1985) promotes - that we all belong to "a community of memory" (p.159). I propose that public rituals like Playback Theatre can provide a place for this kind of experience of community, where subjectivity and voice meet the narratives of history. The Playback Theatre experience enables a reaching beyond notions of similarity and unity to propose a model of community, which fosters what Young (in Veling, 1995) calls a politics of difference and a place where we can remember together through stories (Schank in Frank, 1995). In animating our personal and cultural stories, there exists the potential for personal and shared insight and transformation. Sayre (1989) suggests that such moments are powerful and "revolve around the way in which [our stories] become present to us [and] invade our consciousness from the outside" (p.209). These are the same kind of elements

Delanty (2003) urges are constituent of contemporary community. He writes that the contemporary "resurgence of community is one of radical pluralization" (p.191). One manifestation of this multiplicity is through the emergence of personal story as constitutive of identity, and the treatment of personal story as a political and/or public narrative.

### **3.6 Stories**

#### ***3.6.1 Personal Stories and Meaning Making***

Burkett (2001) suggests that an experience of community could equate to "the creation of meaning between people" (p.244). Interactive opportunities for the sharing of personal stories are commended by narrative scholars because they are critical avenues through which people make meaning of their lives, and societies make meaning of their cultures (Bruner, 1986, Frank, 1995, Polkinghorne, 1988). Bruner (1986) argues that enabling such intimate interactions to occur in a public forum, paves the way for societal and personal reform through personal stories that hold within them the full social and political story of the era. Bruner (1986) claims that stories are imbued with the cultural, social, political and historical and provide a bridge between our sense of self and our sense of other. As discussed earlier, storytelling is imbued with ritual and acts to unite the storyteller and the audience (Sayre, 1989). This thinking about story-based forms has led to an increase in the conscious placement of personal story in public and private places in the past four or five decades. This has been influenced by feminist and other anti-oppressive sub-groups 'claiming' their stories as a way to challenge the hegemony of the privileged perspective of the white middle class heterosexual male. In addition, the act of telling our stories has been promoted as worthwhile, and even in some instances consolidating of our selves (Bruner, 1986). The place of, and the value of the act of telling our personal stories has similarly received attention and thus, the contemporary place of story-based processes has consolidated in recent decades.



The contemporary place of stories has been linked to the postmodern critique of grand narratives and the reclamation of the authority of personal experience. In response to the depersonalised, generalised, unified views of modernity, the post-modern era has facilitated a reclamation of the pre-modern place and importance of story. Frank suggests that the postmodern experience can be thought of as a time when "people's own stories are no longer secondary but have their own primary importance" (Frank, 1995, p.7), where the capacity for telling one's own story has been reclaimed. The post-colonial critique of modernity has also contributed to the recovery of personal stories from obscurity. "Post colonialism in its most generalised form is the demand to speak rather than being spoken for and to represent oneself rather than being represented, or in the worst cases, rather than being effaced entirely" (Frank, 1995, p.13). This sentiment is also inherent in the reclamation of voice and personal story through the rise of second wave feminism and in critical theory. The emergence of these different ways of seeing the world has resulted in stories, the telling of stories and story-based practices and processes again being principal to community and cultural life (Bauman, 1986).

In the critiques of narrative processes, there is a general conclusion that stories help us structure our worlds and make meaning of our lives (Bruner, 1986, Denzin 1989, Frank, 1995, Polkinghorne, 1988). Both in "listening to others and telling our own stories, we become who we are" (Frank, 1995, p.77, Day, 1999). The telling of stories is a link to memory. Schank (in Frank, 1995) explains:

[W]e need to tell someone else a story that describes our experience because the process of creating a story also *creates* the memory structure that will contain the gist of the story for the rest of our lives (p.61).

Frank (1995) suggests that the story is a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations. Stories enable us to reflect. Frank draws on Bruner when he proposes that the reflexive opportunity afforded through storytelling enables us to "turn around on the past and alter the present in its light, or alter the past in the light of the present" (in Frank, 1995, p.65).

Mienczakowski (1997) urges that an outward looking orientation is essential during this time in which there is a "preoccupation" with self (p.163). While he acknowledges that it was the postmodern theorists that have enabled us "to understand social life as a cultural plot" (p.166), he claims that this plot authorised certain voices and silenced others. Critical and feminist theorists (Lather, 1991, Razack, 1993) recommend the active application of story-based processes to seek such silenced voices. In so doing there is scope for what McLaren (in Mienczakowski, 1997) calls "*resistance postmodernism*" (p.167). Reinharz (1992) suggests that a critical-contextual approach is essential for such story-based processes. This enables us to face up "to other positions that might challenge and interrogate [our] own location" (Conquergood in Mienczakowski, 1997, p.167). Story-based process might assist us to invest our experiential life with moral significance and in doing so, influence human behaviour (Bauman, 1986, Bruner, 1986). Although, others (Rappaport, 1995, Stacey, 1988) warn that such processes must not undermine the agency of the storyteller, nor distort the purpose of the telling. This position places the act of listening in the centre of the story-based process. This is discussed further in the next section.

### ***3.6.2 Stories as Experience***

Much of the discussion in narrative, life history and folkloric writings about the form and content of stories revolves around the conceptualisation of *experience*. Shuman (1986) claims that "stories categorise experience" (p.20) and makes the following distinction in the relationship between stories, *experiences* and events. She writes:

Stories, experiences and events are different entities. Roughly, experience is the stream of overlapping activities that make up everyday life. Events, unlike experiences, have potentially identifiable beginnings and endings. Events are a category of experience; stories are constructions of experience. Stories frame experience as events. Stories are one of the forms that transforms experience into bounded units with beginnings and endings, and foci, and events are one kind of bounded unit. A story is a representation of an event segmented into sequentially arranged units (Shuman, 1986, p.20).

In Bruner's (1986) writing the distinction is between *experience*, reality and expression. He states:

A life lived is actually what happens. A life experienced consists of images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is. ... A life told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by an audience, and by the social context (Bruner, 1986, p.7).

Drawing on the work of Bruner, Denzin (1989) suggests that:

Persons as selves have experiences, *experience* referring here to the individuals meeting, confronting, passing through, and making sense of events in their lives ... experiences may be problematic, routine, or ritual-like. Problematic experiences are also called *epiphanies*, or moments of revelation in a person's life (Denzin, 1989, p.33).

It is likely that the desire to tell a story is somehow fuelled by the original experience. Denzin distinguishes between self-stories and personal experience narratives. He states that "a self story positions the self of the teller centrally in the narrative that is given. It is literally a story of and about self in relation to an experience" (Denzin, 1989, p.43). Whereas a personal experience narrative is a story someone tells "about their personal experience" (Stahl, in Denzin, 1989, p.43). In an effort to elucidate how these two versions of a story differ, Denzin concludes that:

Personal experience narratives are more likely to be anecdotal, everyday, commonplace experiences, while self stories involve pivotal, often critical, life experiences. Self stories need not be coherent, linear, accounts. They need not entertain or recreate cherished values and memories of a group, while personal experience narratives do (Stahl, 1977, p.19). Self stories ... are often mandated by the group, while personal experience narratives may be told only to another individual (Denzin, 1989, p.44).

Bauman (1986) adds the dimension of point of view to the discussion when he reports that regardless of how we classify the story that is told, it is necessary to make the point that the term "personal experience" implies:

(1) a particular class of reported events, and (2) a particular point of view. That is, the event recounted in these narratives is purportedly one in which the person telling the story was originally personally involved, and the point of view from which the event is recounted is that of the narrator by virtue of his or her participation in that event (Bauman, 1986, p.33-34).

This distinction is pertinent to the Playback Theatre method where the space that opens up has conditions placed upon it, e.g. the audience participant who elects to tell a story, consents

to tell a story from their own point of view, and that features themselves. This positions the teller as responsible (and ethical) in their act of telling a story. Drawing on the work of Kierkegaard, Frank reminds us that "[t]he ethical person [is] editor of his life: to tell one's life is to assume responsibility for that life" (Frank, 1995, p.xii). In constructing the storytelling act as an ethical act, Frank extends the potential of telling a story to include the potentiality of any ethical act to engender communion and to engender:

A sphere where the eternal loneliness stops. The ethical man is no longer the beginning and the end of all things, his moods are no longer the measure of the significance of everything that happens in the world. Ethics forces a sense of community upon all men (Frank, 1995, p.153).

The postcolonial critique of resurgence in the telling of personal stories is seen as a way to counteract previous practices that might have contributed to silencing some voices. Feminist scholars have been particularly vocal in advocating ways in which to represent such voices without minimising the teller's authority. Reinhartz (1992) concedes that this is a fraught area, with a high potential for re-colonising oppression. Yet, she recommends that we need not silence ourselves to let others be heard and in fact urges that we *use our authority* to help bring other voices forward. Such is the reality in the Playback Theatre method where there are various points at which performers collaborate with the teller to bring their voice forward. One example is in the interview with the conductor, where the conductor actively directs the telling albeit while attempting minimal authorial intrusion<sup>18</sup>. A second example occurs in the enactment where the actors are responsible for selecting which parts of the story to present and which to edit out (Stacey, 1988). This is the collaboration of the Playback Theatre storying process and moves the act of telling a story into the realm of performance.

Denzin (1989) asserts that all stories are derivation of the larger group, cultural, ideological, and historical context. He states that no story is "an individual production" (Denzin, 1989, p.73). The listener is also implicated. The listener is required "to unpack the relationship

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<sup>18</sup> The degree of intrusion will depend on the skill and experience of the conductor.

between the incidents described and the interpretation of what actually happened" (Shuman, 1986, p.21). In listening for the other, Frank (1995) states that there could be a mutual moment of witness. Waitzkin (in Frank, 1995) cautions that the listener is prone to interrupt when they become uncomfortable. The interruptions can work to silence the telling or turn stories away from their "truths" (Waitzen in Frank, 1995, p.63). Listening can be hard, yet is also a fundamental moral act (Frank, 1995, Razack, 1993).

Razack (1993) claims that it is the act of listening to the story that embodies the liberatory potential of storytelling. In listening, we can hear beyond dominant hegemonic discourses. She states that storytelling embodies the suppressed knowledge, the knowledge oppositional to established knowledge. The story is "the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms" (Razack, 1993, p.55). Thus, the challenge is to hear. This does not mean that any listener has a right to demand those voices to speak. While stories may break silences, they may also encourage listeners to view sociopolitical problems in individualistic terms (Reinharz, 1992).

### ***3.6.3 Stories in the Community***

The place of personal stories is progressively more prominent in community-based performance projects, boosted through community development and community cultural development projects (Burkett, 2003). Rappaport (2000) argues that this is premised on the belief that "community cannot be a community without a shared narrative" (p.6). Through the 1980s and 1990s significant effort has been invested in articulating what community means in the context of community development practice (see for example, Burkett, 2001, Ife, 1995, Kenny, 1994). Many of these efforts are directed at the need to define sites of practice. In this era of globalisation, scholars and practitioners are seeking to situate themselves in ways that are internationally relevant whilst remaining relevant at a local level. Central to community development practice is a plurality of methods guided by principles of social justice,

interpersonal connections, participation, integrity, creativity and inclusive processes that are aimed at collectively empowering ordinary people (Ife, 1995, Kenny, 1994). Story-based processes are often preferred as a way to enact these principles. Community is similarly a central term in the field of practice popularly known as community cultural development. In many ways, the creative sibling of community development, community cultural development is built on notions of social action, participation, empowerment and inclusion (Hawkes, 2003, Pye, 2003). This practice site is a primary avenue for the maintenance of cultural diversity in Australia (Theophanous, 2001). Community cultural development uses arts practice as a method for facilitating processes. Wiseman (2001) suggests that a primary aim of community cultural development practice is to foster

Cultural democracy, in which all people have a genuine opportunity to be involved in individual and creative activity through which they can express and communicate what is important to them (Wiseman, 2001, p.18).

Daveson (2001) suggests that processes should attend to collective and individual experiences and build active, inclusive and sustainable community practice. Rappaport (1995) argues that much of the work of social change and community development is in the direction of greater personal and collective empowerment. He critiques the use of personal stories as a resource in this context and raises questions about their use. He asks, Who controls these resources? Why are some stories rejected and others valued? Rappaport suggests that if narratives are resources we should be able to see who is controlling them, and who gives them social value otherwise there is a risk of social control, oppression and disenfranchisement. Rappaport claims that *who* tells the stories (that are positively valued) about one's self and one's community reveals how the resources are unevenly distributed and controlled by social values.

Everyone has stories, but some stories actively devalue people and other stories are not recognised as valuable at all. Some stories empower people and other stories disempower people (Rappaport, 1995, p.3).

Rappaport's treatise is highly relevant to the critique of Playback Theatre's application.

Premised on the telling of personal story, the Playback Theatre event has inherent in it the

potential for all the risks Rappaport proposes. This renders the Playback Theatre performance a political space, where authorship and entitlement are contentious.

Shuman (1986) discusses authorial rights with respect to personal stories. She likens the control over the use of stories told in everyday life to the copyright authors claim over "manuscripts prepared for publication" (p.1). This position is challenged when juxtaposed with Frank's position of stories being a liberation of multiple voices. He writes:

In stories, the teller not only recovers her voice; she becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voice. ... When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story (Frank, 1995, p.xii).

Shuman (1986) acknowledges that the preoccupation with "storytelling rights shifts the focus away from the stories themselves toward their use" (p.2). In Playback Theatre the focus shifts between the two with an emerging interest in the way in which stories can be used in specific developmental work in communities.

Frank (1995) proposes that working with story-based processes demands an ethics of voice, where those who have been objects of others' reports in the past, are now empowered to tell their own stories. He states that everyone has the "right to speak their own truth, in [their] own words" (p.23). This postmodern permission is inherent in the Playback Theatre method. The ethical stance is fundamental to the Playback Theatre method. Without it we are at risk of what Kelly (1984) alerts us to, causing further colonisation, further domination, further oppression.

The telling of our stories is more than a reflection of our culture. Bauman (1986) reminds us that storytelling is constitutive of social life. She claims that:

There is not much here – at least not yet– of literariness, or of performance as a special mode of communication, but there is a deep sense of context and of social action that is essential to any conception of literature as social practice (Bauman, 1986, p.113).

While the act of telling stories is in itself empowering, Boje (1991) identifies another level, a meta-level, in which the tellers self-reflexively tell stories about storytelling. The truth of stories is not simply what was experienced, but equally what is experienced in the telling of the story and in its reception (Frank, 1995). This continuation of the processes can be thought of as an additional opportunity for reflexive insight. Mienczakowski (1997) claims that this could move audience participants "towards being visible where previously they were not" (p.170).

Frank (1995) suggests that a useful way to consider how story interacts with everyday life is to imagine that we think *with* stories rather than be preoccupied with thinking *about* stories. He cites Cruickshank when he writes:

To think about a story is to reduce it to content and then analyse that content. Thinking with stories takes the stories as already complete; there is no going beyond it. ... To think with stories is to find it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one's life (Frank, 1995, p.23).

Applying Frank's conception of the place of story in contemporary life liberates thinking about the Playback Theatre form from a focus on what is told, to an appreciation that there is an interaction and a dialogue through stories.

In this section I have presented the literature on personal story and the way in which it features in contemporary life as a means to make visible those who were once excluded. In this thesis, the prominence of personal story in the public domain is viewed through the ritual performance form of Playback Theatre. The next section is a comprehensive summary of the literature I have presented in this chapter.

### **3.7 Literature Summary**

This chapter has focused on providing a context for this thesis from the perspective of the literature. It presents the way in which performance theory has informed the study. The theory of public events has been included to contextualise the public nature of the Playback Theatre performances that are featured in the study. Using the theory of ritual, I have established that



ritual frameworks support liminal activities, and I have looked with particular emphasis, on the potential of liminal activities to induce flow and other aspects of emotional engagement. I have addressed the theory on nontraditional theatre experiences for spectators and participants as a way to speak about audience positions at the Playback Theatre performance. Storytelling as a ritual has also been discussed.

The historical emergence of community-based public events has been addressed, with this forum depicted as a possible site for experiences of community. The notion of community has been considered. The chapter argues that community can be a physical place and an actual group of people or it can be understood as an experience. *Communitas* and ephemeral experiences of community have been presented. Community has also been discussed in terms of diversity.



**Figure 4: Literature Summary**

Finally, I have introduced literature on personal story and have considered the act of telling a personal story as a form of meaning making. The stories of interest in this thesis are those that

recount personal experiences. I have discussed the function of the listener in the storytelling exchange. In the final section I have portrayed the applications and contexts of personal story in community-based practice. I have drawn the various literatures together in a visual summary in Figure 4.

### **3.8 Conceptual Framework & Research Questions**

The final section in this chapter draws together elements of the literature in a statement of the conceptual framework that informs the study. Looking at the interactions, overlaps and gaps in the literature, I propose a rationale for undertaking the study. While the field of inquiry has been re-negotiated throughout the study, the eventual focus is presented below. I accomplish this by stating the research questions and pointing the reader forward to the methodology.

#### ***3.8.1 Conceptual Framework***

The literature reviewed in the previous sections identifies significant overlap in the way performance, ritual, and storytelling are written about and applied. Performance is "live": an in-the-moment experience that is not necessarily ritualised but offers containment of a similar kind to that offered by ritual events. The ritual event insinuates that participants will cross a threshold into a liminal zone and perhaps become compelled in some way or enter a trance state. Schechner (1985) suggests that audience members *must* cross a threshold in performance in order for it to succeed. Perhaps Csikszentmihalyi's notion of the flow experience provides a more likely description of the way in which audience members engage in performance. The ritual and performance dimensions of Playback Theatre interact and build on one another. Performance brings with it the condition of aliveness or immediacy, surprise and risk taking.

The performance facilitates audience members' role as spectator. Ritual contributes containment, structure and some form of predictability through rhythm and repetition. Ritual facilitates the audience members' role as participant. In the performance event and in the ritual

event there is a simultaneous experience of reality and suspended or altered reality for participants. The similarities and differences of performance and ritual that are articulated in the theory illuminates a multiplicity or hologram of possibilities for audience engagement in Playback Theatre, and audience members' responses to this.

In Chapter Two I recommend research that explores audience experiences of the one-off community-based Playback Theatre event to address a gap in the current Playback Theatre literature. I also identify that there is limited empirical information about the application of Playback Theatre as a one-off community-based event. As demonstrated in this chapter, performance theory supports a valid place for story-based form like Playback Theatre in the development of connections and the building of bridges across difference in communities. Thinking about individual experiences of flow and the way in which individuals respond in new situations point to various factors that may help or hinder an individual's desire or capacity to participate as a storyteller in Playback Theatre. Theory on ritual and the thinking about ritual performance add the concept of *communitas* as a possible way to understand collective experience of the community-based Playback Theatre event. Constructions of performance as "doing" and "re-doing" consolidate this, where there exists the possibility of embodying the tension between the form or content from the past and "the inevitable adjustments of an ever-changing present" (Carlson, 1996, p.195). This contributes to an understanding of Playback Theatre as potentially transformative for participants. A similar idea emerged from the writing about ritual with references to reflexivity and critical consciousness that are invoked through the anti-structure of the ritual event. The literature about experiences of community, or community as an experience, claim that the potential to blend elements of cultural self-examination (Carlson, 1996) or conscientisation (Freire, 1972) and promote opportunities for the personal and communal transformation (Schechner, 1985) is essential if an experience of community is to be attained. In this way, community theory

provides another platform from which to think about the place of personal story in the ritual performance of Playback Theatre. Fox (1999b) suggests that Playback Theatre is a "kind of community conversation through stories" (p.120). Engaging in this conversation perhaps equates to an experience of community for audience members. Maybe this experience of community will also express values that promote inclusion and inquiry.

The generic performance, ritual and storytelling literature, as yet, does not include significant reference to the Playback Theatre method when it discusses processes and forms. This reinforces what I have discovered with respect to the limited scholarship about Playback Theatre. It also suggests that what is available has had a limited audience. One aim of this study is to place writing about the Playback Theatre form in the domain of public performance, ritual performance and community-based storytelling.

### ***3.8.2 A Framework for Thinking about the Playback Theatre Performance***

The experience of the Playback Theatre performance occurs along the temporal continuum of the process including, but not limited to "the show", or the formalised part of the ritual performance. A participant's experience begins prior to the commencement of the show, and continues throughout the show, and after the show. Schechner (1985, p.16) describes a seven-part sequence for the ritual performance: training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, aftermath. Mock (2000) names five stages in her analysis of live performance: conception, development, presentation, reception, and reflection. In Schechner's terms, the Playback Theatre performances that are featured in the study can be understood in terms of five of the seven stages: rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down and aftermath. However, in reality, the rehearsal phase is the domain of the performers, and the audience warm-up is likely to be less formalised than what Schechner's model suggests. Mock's terms are perhaps more useful. Applying her schema to the Playback Theatre performance enables a discussion of the dialectic relationship between the preparation, the

performance and the post-performance period. The processes of conception and development occur in a dialectic manner in the lead up to the performance. Brook (1989) suggests that warm-up (preparing) "means going toward [the] idea" (p.3). This applies to both players and audience participants in the Playback Theatre performance. In terms of audience engagement, the preliminary or preparatory stage determines what audience members expect from the experience. For the performers, preparation involves physical and emotional warm-up and orientation to the context of the performance, the purpose of the performance and the target audience. The conductor has additional preparatory foci that includes "a conscious, rigorous study of any obstacle and the manner in which to avoid or surmount them" (Brook, 1989, p.7).

Mock's (2000) processes of development and presentation can be simultaneous, and provide scope to think about the performance as dialectic. This enables a consideration of the way in which the Playback Theatre performance develops through the telling of stories by audience members and the dramatisations of these stories by performers. Mock emphasises the idea that the live performance "exists as it is received", that is, that presentation and reception are similarly dialectic (p.2). It is this dialectic of engagement by audience participants that fuels the dynamic nature of the Playback Theatre performance.

#### *Performances within a Performance*

Playback Theatre can be thought about as a number of performances within the ritual framework. These include the performance proper, the performances of the teller/s and the conductor, and the performances of the theatrical enactment by the actors and the musician. The teller's performance could be in the style that Goffman (1959) and Read (1993) allude to as a presentation of self, or a performance of the everyday. Shuman (1986) also reports that storytelling is a familiar social act. In the Playback Theatre performance, the ritualised atmosphere could lead to a heightening of the teller's performance. This might see them take

up a more formalised performative style as they enact their agency as a performer (Carlson, 1996) in both authoring the story text, and holding the performance focus. This can be a compelling element of the overall performance.

At the completion of the narrative telling, the performance focus shifts away from the teller. This transition can again be a compelling part of the ritual rhythm of the performance and is contingent on the skill and experience of the musician particularly. This demi-performance claims multiple dimensions. There is a moment of silence after the conductor introduces the enactment, at this point music swells and fills the stage area to effect a clear transition away from the narrator toward the evocation of scenes in dramatic form and style. The second performance within the performance is initiated. Actors take the stage and draw on the symbols of traditional theatre – the stage, actors, props, and lights – and enact the teller's narrative. In a hybridisation of art and the everyday, citizen actors improvise scenes in response to the audience member's narrative. The audience watches. They already know the end of the story. Where is the theatre in this? How is tension mediated so that the enactment is rendered art? Part of it is in the simultaneity of watching the author – the individual whom brought the story forward – watch themselves. Another dimension of the theatre comes from watching the actors create their own reading of the first narrative against a backdrop of the individual audience member's first reading. A third level comes from watching the actors working to produce art. This part of the process is driven by the audience members' commitment to learning the ritual process and coming to understand the imperfect nature of improvised performance. Finally, there is the move by audience members to suspend belief so that they may engage as spectators at the theatre.

The multiple performances emerge through collaboration between performers and audience, and are contained by the ritual frame. The delineation in Playback Theatre between spectator and performer extends beyond the traditional fourth wall to include performing or

participating audience members. This enables the ordinary protocols about the privacy of personal story, the public nature of performance, and the aesthetic expectations of theatre to be seemingly breached in the liminal space. Schechner (1988) asserts that the success of the performance is contingent on a high level of participation. Masterson (2004) claims that all audience members want the performers to succeed. In the Playback Theatre performance, they want the entire show to succeed. Thus, in the 'live' moment, there is collusion by all present to believe in what is happening. While this seems a contradiction to the creation of work with artistic merit, it brings forward a new collective production. This infers, as Myerhoff (1990) suggests, that in the collective action of ritual performance there is enhanced potential for personal and community transformation for audience members.

### ***3.8.3 Research Questions***

In distilling the literature to frame the inquiry, the focus of the study has emerged. The literature assisted me to consider the roles of the audience in Playback Theatre. Similar to the domains of performance, ritual and storytelling, Playback Theatre offers a simultaneous experience of spectating and participating. The way in which Playback Theatre draws on personal stories and theatrical form within a ritual performance process could be said to expand the potential for engagement in the public event and encourage individual and group agency and responsibility. A hybridised performance form, Playback Theatre combines solo telling performances by spontaneous, self-elected (often-untrained) audience members with improvised theatrical enactments performed by citizen actors<sup>19</sup>. As stated earlier, the experiences of audience members are the focus of this study. Emerging from the review of the Playback Theatre literature in Chapter Two, I have identified a number of claims that influence the direction of this study. These claims are that Playback Theatre:

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<sup>19</sup> A citizen actor has training in the forms and philosophy of Playback Theatre, but may have no formal theatre training. They do not derive their income from Playback Theatre and undertake their Playback Theatre practice in the spirit of service. Fox (1994) suggests that Playback Theatre is avocational.

- provides an experience of community;
- is generally a 'good' experience for audience members; and
- is empowering for storytellers.

In considering these claims in light of the development of Playback Theatre theory I have found limited documentation of the experiences and perceptions of audience members. Similarly, I have found that the one-off Playback Theatre public event featured little in comparison to theory derived from an extended exposure to the Playback Theatre method through a workshop situation, for example. Thus this study sets out to seek audience members' experiences of the one-off public performance event. Situating the study within the domain of my local Playback Theatre Company precipitates an additional defining aspect of the performance genre examined. This is due to the context-specific work of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company during the research period. Thus, the research focuses on the application of Playback Theatre as a *one-off community-based public event* and is guided by questions that have emerged as the study progressed.

Clarification of the research questions guiding the study has been a dialectical process informed by my experience in data collection and analysis. The question at the centre of this study is:

- What are audience members' experiences of the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance?

The one-off context based Playback Theatre performance is described in Chapter Two with more detail provided in Appendix 2. The study explores audience members' experiences across a range of different contexts. The exploration is framed by the following sub-questions:

- In what ways do the audience members engage and respond during and after the one-off community-based event?
- In what ways does the Playback Theatre form induce these experiences?



- In what ways is Playback Theatre an experience of community for audience members within the specific context?

This study focus aligns somewhat with the ritual and social dimensions that Dauber's (1999b) framework proposes. However, rather than asking what does it achieve in the ritual dimension, I focus on audience experience of Playback Theatre. His question for the social dimension: *What effect does Playback Theatre have on the audience, the performing Company and on the social context in which it is embedded?* is perhaps wider than the scope of this study, which excludes the experiences of performers. The research aims to frame the practice of Playback Theatre beyond the often self-referential frames that are a feature of the Playback Theatre writing. It adds the voices and perceptions of audience members to the Playback Theatre scholarship, specifically with relation to the one-off context based performance. As an inquiry into audience experience the research process seeks to articulate ways in which people participate in the Playback Theatre ritual, the impact of telling, listening and watching the stories as they unfold. Finally, it determines how the experience of the repetitive embodiment of an ethics of listening beyond words, and of the values of mutual respect, co-operative creativity, acceptance of difference, promotion of personal truth, interest in the other and awe in our human imperfection contributes to an experience of community for participants.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Methodology

The show is over. There is so much to document - my experiences and perceptions. The text. Other things I have observed. Meanwhile, the ritual is incomplete. I go off with the actors for an exhilarated (or not) debrief. Then back into the crowd. I see people and wave. Meet people and listen to people. There is a buzz. It feels as if people are all talking at once. Someone tells me a story. I am listening. I am juggling my competing agendas. I resist asking too much wanting them to lead me in the conversation. It is their spontaneous reflections that I am interested in. Upstairs, a group has gathered. Their conversation will be captured on audiotape. I will not have to strain to remember. Others stand around sharing stories and critiquing the form, the theatre, and the event. I let go of what I think I should ask and what I think I should have documented already. I once again surrender to the liminal, brimming with my unwritten reflections and observations. The ritual maintaining its influence.

It is some time later crammed with multiple conversations - I sit alone. The show reverberates in me with such energies that I cannot write. How to express all of this. The pen and page appear so limited, so reducing of the experiences, the feelings. I jot names or descriptions or some other identifying note about who I want to interview. Eventually, I make abbreviated notes that will guide me toward more comprehensive memos. I document my perspective on the themes of the performance. The analysis is underway (Reflective journal, July 2002).

This excerpt from my reflective journal is an example of the visceral and embodied nature of my reflective practice. My experiences of these somewhat intense interactions between the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual engagement during Playback Theatre performance work have been instrumental in precipitating this research project. The study has provided a place to examine my practice of Playback Theatre in a bid to better understand and better articulate its purposes and potentiality. In this chapter, I report on the methodology that I have implemented to explore the application of Playback Theatre in the community contexts in which I practice.

When planning and conducting research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000b) state that the researcher must "confront two issues: research design and choice of strategy of inquiry" (p.367). Crotty (1998) asserts that the choices made at this stage must be congruent with the "purposes" of the research and take into consideration four elements: methods, methodology, theoretical perspective, and epistemology (p.2). The requirements of researching performance are considered in the first section. The rationale for and application of the multi-method approach I implement in this inquiry are documented. I discuss my choice to combine the ethnographic activities of informant interviews and observation with researcher reflexivity derived from my purposeful practice reflections as an insider-researcher. I introduce and describe the use of reflective partners to ensure transparency, rigour and trustworthiness through techniques of co-observation and co-analysis. I describe how the inquiry was physically situated in specific community contexts defined by the performance program of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company. I recount the iterative data collection, analysis and reporting stages of the research process and describe how this process has entailed conversations, transcription and journaling. The shape of the thesis has emerged by looking for patterns, for disconfirming data, or what Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont (2003) call "divergences" (p.155), contradictions, absent voices, and singularities. Finally I discuss verifiability and trustworthiness with respect to this approach.

#### **4.1 Researching Playback Theatre**

Researching performance is a complex proposition. Roberta Mock (2000) articulates this complexity suggesting that it is in part due to the interaction between theory and practice in an emergent field that is seeking ways to define itself. Further, she acknowledges that documenting

The ephemeral 'presentness' of performance, its 'liveness', can make any attempts at retrospective analysis relying on memory seem somewhat obsolete and redundant, since even watching a mediated re-production on, for example, video is incomplete, or at the very least 'different', and one must (re)construct the

atmosphere and feeling evoked in the course of a performance. In many ways the 'moment' has passed and another had begun (p.2).

Here, Mock (2000) suggests that data about audience experiences of the live performance are generated after the event and therefore exist as a retrospective. Elsewhere in performance theory, a retrospective data collection such as this would be conceived as another 'performance' in which I, as researcher, become audience (see Carlson, 1996). In many ways I *have been* audience to informants while simultaneously performing the research role and creating the research domain through solo and ensemble improvisation. Given this, selecting the methods for this study has presented me with an interesting conundrum. This is particularly due to what seems to me to be similarities between the requirements of qualitative *inquiry* and the way in which the Playback Theatre method is *inquiring*. For example, Hosking & Penny (1998) claim that Playback Theatre is

A methodology for the exploration of an issue or concern rather than message driven theatre ... [that facilitates a move toward the] understanding and expression of what is occurring and the underlying social values. ... [It] may be used to stimulate change, ... to explore questions ... (p.10-11).

I have experienced additional layers of complexity coming to terms with the methodology and methods of inquiry in the study due to the similarities or overlap of what has been required of me as researcher and what I have long experienced in my own reflective practice. It has been essential for me to come to terms with the differences and similarities of these two roles for the purpose of the study. A primary similarity has concerned the improvised nature of qualitative inquiry: a process that requires a well articulated framework so that as researcher I am enabled to respond to the data as it emerges, engage creatively with informants and make intuitive decisions in-the-moment. Meanwhile, the primary difference has been the containment of the reflexive process through purposeful reflection informed by the emerging research questions and the focus of the study. There have also been similarities and differences in the way in which stories feature. This is discussed further later in the chapter. Both because of and in spite of these similarities and differences I have elected to implement

the "multi-method" approach Denzin and Lincoln (2000a) claim is required in such studies (p.5).

The research design is derived in response to the stated purpose of the research. In the previous chapter I stated that the overarching question guiding the study is:

- What are audience members' experiences of the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance?

The sub-questions this study seeks to answer are:

- In what ways do the audience members engage and respond during and after the one-off community-based event?
- In what ways does the Playback Theatre form induce these experiences?
- In what ways is Playback Theatre an experience of community for audience members within the specific context?

As Maxwell (1996) predicts, the study has required me to undertake a "significant part of the research before it [is] clear what specific research question" I can answer (p.47). In the spirit of exploration, I have been influenced by the Marshall and Rossman (1995) recommendation that an ethnographic approach is appropriate in exploratory studies seeking to understand what is happening. The study is what Denzin and Lincoln (2000a) and previously, Lather (1991) term interpretive inquiry. Lather (1991) recommends the interpretive research paradigm when the researcher wants to *understand* a social world. The research has therefore been premised on relationships with informants in their social world. As an interpretive inquiry, informants' experiences have been considered in light of the context within which they have occurred.

Crotty (1998) suggests that stating the research paradigm makes explicit my assumptions and highlights the theoretical perspective implicit in them. He proposes that assumptions implicit in interpretive inquiry are: that there are multiple realities in the social world being studied, i.e.,

Playback Theatre; that any "understanding" I develop is co-created dialogically with participants and the social environment; and that "naturalistic" methodological procedures are used. Next, I elaborate on these methodological procedures.

#### **4.2 A Multi-method Approach**

As stated above, the focus of the research has been audience members' experiences of Playback Theatre. Writing about their vision for the future of qualitative research, Lincoln & Denzin (2000) state that they are certain of some things with regard to qualitative inquiry. They concede that "the qualitative researcher is not an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer" who stands outside of the text (p.1049, see also Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003). Rather, the qualitative researcher is both historically positioned and locally situated: an "all too human observer of the human condition" in a world where meaning is plural and political. "Qualitative inquiry is properly conceptualized as a civic, participatory, collaborative project. This joins the researcher and researched in an ongoing moral dialogue" (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p.1049). An ethnographic approach provides adequate scope to embrace this spirit and address the transient nature of the performance environment alive with spontaneous activity.

Crotty (1998) recommends an ethnographic approach when seeking meanings and perceptions from the point of view of informants. The ethnographic approach also facilitates my insider stance with researcher/practitioner reflexivity facilitated through the observer role. My insider positioning in the social environment has been embedded and has inhibited my capacity to appreciate how I have accomplished the requirements of rigour and trustworthiness in the research process. Rather than this being problematic it has been instrumental in my establishing the creative process through which my limitations and biases have been interrogated as the research progressed. This has involved co-observational and co-analysis activities with reflective partners. This arrangement has provided some counterpoint to the

highly subjective nature of my gaze, and has acted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The way in which the reflective partners have contributed is discussed later in the chapter. The combining of reflexivity and the methods of ethnography has resulted in a research design that Lincoln and Guba (2000) call a multi-method approach. Denzin & Lincoln (1994) draw together a number of voices in acclaiming the value of multiple methods for maximising the rigor of ethnographic projects such as mine. They promote the triangulation arising from the use of multiple methods as a sound alternative to validation. They state that the multiple perspectives generated in a multi-method study act to add "rigor, breadth and depth to any investigation" (in Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000, p.119).

A naturalistic form of qualitative inquiry, ethnography is derivative of both anthropology & sociology (Agar, 1980, 1986, Brewer, 2000, van Maanen, 1988). In the past four decades, it has established its currency in non-exotic locations, or locations in which the researcher is not a stranger (Ely, 1991) and is the method of choice in performance contexts (Donelan, 2002). In response to what Lincoln and Denzin (2000) term crises of legitimation, representation and vocality, contemporary ethnography has become new (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003), critical (Brewer, 2000) and conscious (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). This revamp coincides with ethnography's response to criticisms of its inherent colonising potential and move toward what Donelan (2002) calls "participatory anthropology" (p.37), a position that implicates the researcher particularly in observing and writing roles where their authority may previously have gone unchecked (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). The contemporary ethnographic methods of participant observation, informant (participant) interviews and reflexivity (in the form of research journal and reflective partners) have been used in this study.

Employing an ethnographic approach has enabled me to privilege the voices of the audience members and include my subjective voice. Writing four decades ago, Schutz (1964) argues that

social research must safeguard the subjective point of view, otherwise the reported social reality could be "a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer" (in Holstein & Gubrium, 1998, p.138). The contributions of feminist researchers (Olesen, 2000, Reinharz, 1992, Stacey, 1988) and anti-oppressive research proponents (see for example, Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000) has seen the valued inclusion of the subjective voices of both informant and researcher. The interaction of these stances is intrinsic to a qualitative inquiry such as the one employed in this study. The study design is responsive to the 'alive in the moment' then gone, changed, or transformed nature of the performance. Agar (1986) suggests that ethnographic methods can assist the researcher to focus on the moment, on "what just occurred" not what comes next (p.16). Similarly, an ethnographic approach supports the emergent nature of the process, the spirit of which is expressed by the eloquent, albeit somewhat dramatic metaphor:

As the carver holds the unworked ivory lightly in his (sic) hand, turning it this way and that, he whispers, "Who are you? Who hides there?" ... He (sic) rarely sets out, at least consciously, to carve, say, a seal, but picks up the ivory, examines it to find form and, if that is not immediately apparent, carves aimlessly until he sees it, humming or chanting as he works. Then ...[it] emerges (Carpenter in Wolcott, 1995, p.27).

While far from aimless in my whittling, or carving, as the case may be, the metaphor expresses the essential exploratory nature of the research process. Next, I describe the methods used for data collection.

#### ***4.2.1 Researcher Reflexivity ↔ Reflective Practice***

Researching as a *real* participant observer in my own social (practice) world implies an intention to a critically reflexive stance. Olesen (2000) argues that research in which the distance between the researcher and research is dissolved demands "strongly reflexive" descriptions about the researcher's role in the research (p.229). One could assume that in taking on the researcher role I am inclined to critique the social environment and myself. Notwithstanding, ethnography demands such a critical position (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez,



2000). Through reflexivity the researcher assumes a stance of self-consciousness. This demands that I reflect on my influence on the data that I collect and interrogate it for the assumptions that inform my interpretations (Lather, 1991). Schwandt (2000) reminds the reader that meaning is negotiated in the act of interpretation. Maxwell (1996) suggests that experiential knowledge and critical subjectivity expressed while doing practice represent a valid creation and use of theory. However, Bundy (2001) cautions that knowledge claims arising from reflective practice must be "considered tentative and situated" (p.22). While the study has not been "my practice" per se, data have been generated from my reflective practice activities - as I have researched I have continued to perform. The juxtaposition of my researcher/practitioner roles has continued throughout the research. I have experienced a high degree of congruency between my natural style and practice values, and the research method I have been enacting. I have felt comfortable with the way the research role has pushed me onto the margins of my work, of the Company, in the academy. I have been simultaneously observer and integral participant.

#### ***4.2.2 Observation***

Observations have been undertaken from an engaged-participant perspective rather than the once preferred neutral, detached perspective (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). Throughout the research I have utilised co-observers in a bid to maximise the data I have sourced in the transient episodic social environments of the Playback Theatre performance. I have employed three co-observers - Dawn, Craig and Rebecca - each with a different relationship to Playback Theatre. Dawn has had no affiliation with performance-based environments other than through her association with me. As my partner, she has been involved in Playback Theatre for as long as I have been involved. Her previous audience experience has been at Brisbane Playback Theatre Company's public performances. She has also fulfilled the front-of-house function at the annual Pride performance. She maintains a healthy skepticism toward the form

and has never told a story during a Playback Theatre performance<sup>20</sup>. While she is supportive of my involvement, she is often critical about elements of performances or dispassionate about what she experiences. Craig is an associate who teaches secondary drama at a private girl's school in inner-Brisbane. Craig's Playback Theatre exposure has been limited to an encounter approximately ten years ago. His position about Playback Theatre includes that it might have something to offer but he has concerns about teller safety and agency, the influence of the conductor on the outcome of the performance, and the scope of the form to generate aesthetically pleasing theatre. Rebecca was a novice in the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company at the time of the research. Relatively new to the form, she has offered the enthusiasm of a disciple coupled with a desire to deconstruct and interrogate Playback Theatre as a learner<sup>21</sup>.

My observational activity has been enacted from my participant roles as conductor and actor, while the co-observers have participated as audience members<sup>22</sup>. In addition to observing others in the social environment, Donelan (2002) posits that participant-observer activity demands observation of the self as participant. In effect observational activity has involved noting my own experiences of the performance: what I have observed through my eyes, ears, nose, and skin, what my thoughts have been, and what I have felt in my body. Donelan (2002) suggests that such ethnographic activity is "deeply linked with performance in its awareness of itself as an embodied practice" (p.38). The employment of co-observers has contributed to the

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<sup>20</sup> For many years, she found Playback Theatre tedious or overly indulgent. She stated, 'I used to think, what rubbish is this, come on let's go home' (Dawn, OD01, L1423). On the eve of the research, she attended a performance in which the subject matter was so closely aligned to her personal life she felt drawn to tell a story for the first time in ten years of Playback Theatre. She remarked, 'It was at a point when I hadn't told any stories. I thought, I might [interfere] with it (the research), so I shut my mouth. ... [The conductor] kept looking at me, and I thought, 'No. I can't' (OD02, L594).

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca's motivation to deconstruct is based on her desire to understand Playback Theatre better and perform it better. I found her critical approach to be uncommon in my experience of people new to Playback Theatre.

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca was also role of front-of-house at the performances she attended.

transparency of researcher motive and has added the element of safeguarding participants that Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000) report is required of research striving to be anti-oppressive. A description of how the co-observer data has been used occurs later in the chapter.

### ***4.2.3 Informant Interviews***

Literature reports that informant interviews can take multiple forms from "casual conversations" (Wolcott, 1995, p.169, Fetterman, 1998) to facilitated group discussions<sup>23</sup> immediately after the performance (Sauter, 2002). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) recommend a group-style interview as a way to maximise participant reflectivity. They suggest that the group interview is an effective way of gaining multiple perspectives and facilitates more diversity and depth due to the interaction between informants. Fetterman (1998) suggests that interviews can be structured, semi-structured or informal. Glover (2003) promotes a less formal approach as a way of giving greater control of the direction of the interview to the participant. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) assert that approaching interviews as conversations could generate rich data. The informal conversation exchange between the researcher and participant invites the informant to recount stories. Drawing on Mishler, Coffey and Atkinson recommend that interview responses can be considered in light of the stories they embody. This has provided a useful framework for conducting group and individual interviews during the research. In some ways, audience members have been like participant observers attempting to articulate the story of what happened, and what they have experienced. This has best been articulated in a conversational fashion where participants have told stories as a way of reasoning or making sense and as a way of representation (Richardson, 1990). In some respects the "live" nature of the event has continued after each performance, through this

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<sup>23</sup> My thanks to Willmar Sauter (2002, pers. comm.) for this interview structure. While I was familiar with focus group interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), an encounter with Willmar assisted me in my research design. My concern that interviews at performances would be overly intrusive was eased when he explained his prior use of after-show conversation groups.

recounting of experiences and perceptions by informants. My response has been to listen from my experience of the performance without trying to interpret or direct. I now discuss the reflexive activities I have implemented in the study to ensure transparency and trustworthiness in light of the inter-subjectivity discussed above.

#### ***4.2.4 Reflective Journal***

Throughout the research, my journal has been a constant companion. In it I have made direct observations and stream-of-consciousness reflective notes. These notes express my feelings and preliminary thinking about what I have observed and experienced. They contain debriefing statements and details of my engagement as a performer and researcher. The journal houses a "hotch-potch" (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997) of voices and genres that have emerged from different stages during the research journey. My Playback Theatre practice has always been deeply affecting. My experiences of speaking or writing about the resonances from my Playback Theatre practice have often been fraught with inadequate words, or inaccessible unexpressed ideas and feelings that felt lodged in my body, deep in my muscle. This is not uncommon with embodied practice. Anthropologist, Margaret Somerville (1999) writes of her experience:

Journal writing was reluctant and spasmodic because I had to remember the images during the massage, and these images were often not articulated into words. It meant bringing myself out of a deep trance-like consciousness to cross over the bridge between semiotic and symbolic, to give the images words, and then to remember them. I decided it might be possible to reflect on the experience of my body in other places (p.14).

This phenomenon has also permeated my research experience. My reflective journal eventually contained conceptual memos mapping my thinking about themes, possible informants, questions for reflective partners and what I have identified as gaps in the data. In many ways, the journal has been a documentation of my practice reflection continually re-framed in light of the emerging research questions. In other ways, my journal has documented my emotional journey and what I have been learning from my emotions. Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont

(2003) draw on Gearing to recommend an approach to ethnography that embraces "what we learn from our emotions ... [and where] sensation, emotion and intellect operate simultaneously to structure and interpret our experiences of the [social] world" (p.57).

#### ***4.2.5 Researcher Bias***

Researcher reflexivity demands that I reveal the assumptions and biases that have arisen from my embedded position as an insider. Feminist researchers suggest that there are "multiple positions, selves, and identities at play in the research process" (Oleson, 2000, p.227). During the research I have undertaken the roles of researcher, practitioner, performer, activist, teacher, director, and producer within the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company. While the researcher and practitioner roles have been dominant in terms of the reflexive dimension of data collection, excellence in performance (my estimation of what's possible with the Playback Theatre method) has been a key value driving my research journey. I am individually committed to understanding better what worked and what did not work from the point of view of the audience. This has included a particular interest in the stylistic and bold theatricalising of personal story, the acknowledgement of the context-specific influences on the work, and the intuitive and daring conducting of audiences and individuals. Adjacent to the values of excellence in performance are personal values of social justice and poetic expression and the belief in a "yes and" approach to life. These personal and professional perspectives influence the way in which I have enacted the research.

One idea I had about Playback Theatre at the start of the research journey aligns to Muckley's position (1996). She writes that the Playback Theatre performance contains scope "to reveal truth[s] and facilitate understanding between people" (Muckley, 1996, p.2). Bett, Pearson and Russell (1999) assert that in its simplest form, a Playback Theatre performance is a place where "people tell their story, and in their telling, the story of the audience or community unfolds" (p.1). In addition, Playback Theatre should provide a place where:

- risk is valued over caution;
- marginal voices are actively sought;
- interaction is alive and dialogic;
- social and political structures are illuminated; and
- people have fun.

Gergen and Gergen (2000) assert that this act of explicating my biases and assumptions is a fundamental aspect of reflexive research. I also wish to acknowledge the parallel process of reflective practice that has juxtaposed the researcher role. My reflexive activity has been iterative and dialectic and at times has converged with my practice reflection. Given the influence of my biases on my researcher role, it has been necessary to extend my reflexive practice purview for the course of this study. This has resulted in the interrogation of my presence, my data and the way in which I have interpreted the data. This critical approach to reflecting on my research self, my research relationships and my analysis has made up a large part of my personal journal and transcription notes. Thus, with the ethnographic methods enabling me to frame the inquiry in a way that incorporates multiple perspectives, and with my participatory function giving me legitimacy and affording me extensive access, the reflexive process has provided additional data for verification and trustworthiness. Further, the combination of these methods has elevated my ethnographic position to a more humanistic realm where people's interpretive practices are privileged in the constitution of social reality (Brewer, 2000).

### **4.3 The Place of Reflective Practice**

As suggested earlier, my reflective practice has been a source of data in the study. This has emerged from my intensive "personal involvement" in the research (Agar, 1986 p.12). It has been an exciting time where, as practitioner and researcher, I have been at the centre of the

process, with all the likely confusion and imperfect outcomes that holds. In a countenance to the traditional tendency "to view the self of the social science observer as a potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralised, minimised, standardised, and controlled," (Fine et al. p.108), my stance has been to deliberately draw on myself as central to the story. This centrality has positioned me as an "instrument" in the study (Ely, 1991, p.33) and has been congruent with roles in my Playback Theatre practice. By maintaining my roles as an active Playback Theatre performer during the research, I have been also in the parallel role of "citizen scholar", so eloquently named by Saxton (in Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p.59).

As a practitioner, I have been constantly keeping an eye out for theory and as a scholar, I have been constantly contextualising my thinking about what I was observing in my practice experience. Soule (1998) claims that theatre and practice in theatre-making is "bonded in organic interaction, so much so that if, at some point in the process we try to disassemble the activity into two ostensibly individual parts, both theory and practice stops growing" (p.39). Hoogland's (2003) insights about the interaction of practice and scholarship provide clarification for me as I embark on the data collection. She states:

Although I have been a practicing artist for longer than I have been an academic ... I did not understand how my practice was inextricably fused to my scholarship, and how my poetic and dramatic writing informs my research and teaching (p.211).

I too have experienced this inextricable fusion. So, in many ways, this study has been constitutive of my reflective practice. Schön (1983) and Hess (1995) assert that practitioners often play critical roles in advancing knowledge and understanding. Hess states that we are in a position to:

Observe, evaluate and report the effects of [our] practice; identify relevant practice knowledge; and pose questions emerging from [our] practice (Hess, 1995, p.56).

Fook (1996) proposes that when practitioners reflect two things happen: 1) they learn from their experience; and 2) they unearth "all sorts of theoretical assumptions they were not aware of" (p.2). She states that a reflexive approach builds knowledge (Fook, 1996, Fonow & Cook,

1991). Mattingly (1998) promotes it as a way of making sense of the practice context. The reflexive process has demanded that I interrogate my practice but perhaps more accurately, it has demanded that I reconsider my practice behaviour, values, and assumptions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). It is in these ways that the reflective practice stance has much in common with a critical ethnographic approach where, as Donelan (2002) suggests, performer (researcher) experience is regarded as a way of knowing and a mode of understanding as well as a method of critical inquiry (p.38). Research/practice reflections have contributed to the body of data as observation notes, journal notes and interpretation of audience experiences.

Throughout the research, I have encountered some of the ethical quandaries predicted in contemporary critiques about practice-based research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). I have made an impression. At times I have made an impact and have wanted to change things in the Company's work ethic and artistic expression. I have been drawn to contemplate the various social or institutional changes I desire both in the Company and in the broader Playback Theatre movement. These are the behaviours Angrosino and Mays de Pérez (2000) warn about, as possibly intrusive in research (also see Atweh, Kemmis & Weeks, 1998). The study of my practice has influenced some members in the Company and has led to my advocating for some changes. This has caused some unrest, yet the disturbance certainly stimulated creativity in our performances. The intensity of the reflective requirements of the research has led to other consequences as a performer and rehearsal director. While strategies like those Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong (2000) recommend have helped me maximise the transparency of the process and assisted me to maintain a research focus, I have not always known what is required to balance the impact of the research on my practice. In some ways, the researcher/practitioner interaction has been an ethical dilemma for me as I have undertaken the research.



#### 4.4 Researcher Subjectivity and Trustworthiness

Fetterman (1998) writes that insider researchers require a third point of intersection or "multiple voicing" (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p.1028) beyond that of the researcher and the informants to ensure trustworthiness in empirical research processes (Olesen, 2000). In the past decade researcher subjectivity has been established as an intrinsic dimension to qualitative research where notions of validity and veracity have been replaced by notions of trustworthiness and verifiability (Smith, 2002). This shift emerges from the postmodern rejection of absolute truth and certainty in favour of multiple perspectives and 'goodness' (Smith, 2002). Schwandt (in Smith, 2002) state that the goal of qualitative inquiry "is not to produce knowledge of the social world as an entity but to engage in knowledge making as a human activity". This insinuates that researchers approach human inquiry with "a sense of moral purpose and responsibility" (Schwandt in Smith, 2000, p.140). Researcher reflexivity is promoted as a valid avenue to trustworthiness and transparency (see Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, Smith, 2000).

The insider stance and the integration of reflective practice have introduced a significant challenge for me as researcher. In Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont's (2003) terms I have had to find ways to render the familiar environment, strange. This has required me to shift between the intimate insider stance to a more distanced stance to ensure rigour. I have enlisted the aid of reflective partners to assist me in this shift. Unlike the co-researchers of participatory or collaborative research who engage in the research for the purposes of testing their own theories (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) the purpose of reflective partners has been to provide a foil for me to explicate my biases and assumptions in data analysis. The co-observers introduced earlier fulfilled the role of reflective partners in an extension of the data collection. This role has emerged as a result of early taped discussion with co-observers where I immediately identified a preliminary level of analysis in the verbal presentation of their

observations. While I had anticipated taping what became known as Observational Dialogues, I had not anticipated their relevance for triangulation purposes. A key feature of the Observation Dialogue in terms of triangulation has been the inclusion of two co-observers. This has enabled the discussion to flow to areas that I as researcher would not have created. This also addressed an early concern that I could unduly influence the co-observer toward my thinking. Through these dialogues I have been able to challenge my biases and assumptions. This system has also been instrumental in reflective discussions in which I have identified the themes that I have used to organise the data in the study and has exposed absent and dissenting voices regarding the themes<sup>24</sup>. This section explored my insider status and the way in which reflexive activity has contributed to the generation of data, transparency in analysis and trustworthiness in the findings and conclusions that the study reports.

#### 4.5 Selecting the Site

Implicit in ethnographic inquiry is the contextual nature of the study. This study has been contextualised in the 2002 performance program of my local Playback Theatre Company. This is my home-Company, based in my home-city of Brisbane, Australia. Brisbane is in Queensland, the Sunshine State in Australia's North-East. Brisbane's population is 1.6 million. It is Australia's third largest city after Sydney and Melbourne. The Brisbane City Council (2004a) *OurBrisbane* website reports that before white settlement, Brisbane was home to the Jagera and Turrbal Aboriginal clans. The first white presence came with the Moreton Bay Settlement in 1824. Brisbane was freely settled from 1842, with entry to the national federation in 1901.

The average age of Brisbane's population is thirty-three years, with twenty-one percent of the total population under the age of fifteen. The population is culturally diverse. Over twenty-six

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<sup>24</sup> As the research progressed another Brisbane Playback Theatre member fulfilled this role. Kris replaced Rebecca who fell pregnant. Around the same time Craig's twins were born which meant that Dawn and Kris undertook to reflect with me in the latter stages of analysis.

percent of Brisbane's population have been born overseas. In 1996 over fifteen percent of the population spoke a language other than English at home with Cantonese, Italian, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Greek, Spanish, German, Tagalog (Filipino), Polish and Russian being some of the most commonly spoken languages. Brisbane City Council website (2004b) reports that disability services, indigenous programs and culture, migrants and refugees, and youth are recipients of significant community service funding.

Choosing to undertake research in my home-Company in my hometown has been the hardest and easiest of decisions. Ely (1991) urges "that it is increasingly important to study the familiar" (p.17). Having been actively involved in the artistic and administrative operations of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company for over nine years, it is very familiar to me. I have been a strong influence on the direction and the development of the Company. Yet, I have felt protective of the Company, and ambivalent about the prospect of exposing it. Choosing this 'site' has required me to overcome these concerns and enter a social environment that is dear to me, with the express intention of interrogating it. I am not a stranger (Agar, 1980) in this social world and my 'native' or insider status has maximised my access. Werner & Schoepfle (1987 in Ely, 1991) urge that in the move from studying "people who are different from us [to] those who exhibit much smaller, more elusive cultural differences ... we must have methods that let us see even the most subtle departures from our expectations" (p.17). The way in which this has been addressed was discussed earlier in the chapter.

I have felt some uncertainty in asking people to get involved in this sticky business of ethnography, where they would inevitably be led to reflect on their own practice, and ask questions that often took the very fun that purportedly kept them doing Playback Theatre, out

of the equation altogether. Colleagues<sup>25</sup> and friends have encouraged me to consider my own community for work that required such interior scrutiny. I could not have asked for more generous support. As reported earlier, the idea of situating my research in my community of reflection has been further extended with the decision to include my partner, Dawn and my associates, Rebecca and Craig, as reflective partners and other friends as discussion group facilitators. A description of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company is offered in Chapter Five.

Situating the study within the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company's performance commitments for 2002 has contained the research. Each Playback Theatre performance I have observed during the study has its own micro-context. Micro-context refers to the fact performances have been produced with a particular community or community event in mind, and thus audiences are "communities of identification" (Delanty, 2003), that is, they are composed of individuals affiliated through identifying contextual information, for example aboriginal reconciliation or mental health. The data sourced for this thesis has been derived from the eight performances<sup>26</sup> documented in Chapter Five. By way of situating the reader at this stage of the thesis, these eight context-specific performances that generated data for the study are summarised below.

#### **4.6 Summary of performance contexts**

The focus of this study is the one-off community-based event and includes a number of context-specific events and the series of performances the Brisbane Playback Theatre

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<sup>25</sup> My thanks to my friend and colleague Ingrid Burkett whose comments led me to choose a community of people who would be willing and interested to reflect with me. She assisted me to extend my thinking about the study to include attention to my own practice, and my own practice peers.

<sup>26</sup> Performances outside the criteria: one-off community-based events were excluded for the study. For example, performances that featured as a 'session' at a conference or training day; and performances where attendance was restricted and/or compulsory.

Company host for a more 'general public' audience. The performances that have been included in the data collection phase are listed below.

<b>Performance Name</b>	<b>Performance Context</b>	<b>Date of Performance</b>	<b>Abbreviation used in thesis text</b>
March Public Performance	Part of Brisbane Playback Theatre Company Public Performance Program (Theme: Savouring Life)	14 -3-2002	Mar
Reconciliation! What's' the Story? <sup>27</sup>	Sorry Day Performance hosted by me, produced specifically for data collection	17-5-2002	Rec
Pride Festival	Women-only Performance as part of the annual Gay & Lesbian Pride Cultural Festival	20-6-2002	Pride
Connecting Communities	Disability Action Week (DAW) Performance	27-6-2002	DAW
July Public Performance	Part of Brisbane Playback Theatre Company Public Performance Program (Theme: Traveling)	9-7-2002	Jul
September Public Performance	Part of Brisbane Playback Theatre Company Public Performance Program (Theme: Meeting change head-on)	11-9-2002	Sept
Launch of the Recovery Kit	Mental Health Week (MHW) Performance	5-10-2002	MHW
Colourful Communities	Multicultural Development Association (MDA)/ Refugee Week Performance	18-10-2002	MDA

As suggested above the data collection has focused on the performances conducted by the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company. These performances have been generated in the conventional way in which the Company operates with the exception of the Reconciliation Performance (see Appendix 3). This performance has been produced especially for the research project in response to certain conditions the Company placed on me with respect to

<sup>27</sup>Local indigenous elders were approached as a sign of respect and invited to the performance. Protocol is sacred in indigenous lore and this demonstration of respect meant that the performance was promoted through indigenous agencies. Unfortunately, due to a death in the indigenous community that week there were no aboriginal audience members. Reconciliation networks also promoted the performance.

video-documentation. In the preparations for this show, particular attention was given to audience participants' knowing beforehand that it was to be recorded and that it formed part of the data for a doctoral research project. The idea for a performance for Reconciliation/Sorry Day had been simmering on the backburner of my own practice ambitions for a number of years. While in principle the Company has been interested in contributing to the broader social dialogue on reconciliation in Brisbane, we have no formal link to local aboriginal communities. The limits the Company placed on me (elaborated in the following section) have meant that I have had significant autonomy in bringing this idea to fruition.

The topic of reconciliation has been well supported by Company members, a number of whom work in the community sector or with other disenfranchised groups. Members of the Company had been very aware of the importance of the reconciliation debate. In a preparatory discussion with the Company, I expressed my concern that the reconciliation debate had gone quiet since the Tampa crisis<sup>28</sup>, with the national gaze falling more fully on refugees and asylum seekers. The Company members' responses indicated their good feeling about raising the topic for discussion in Brisbane at that time. A number of Company members have supported me as I thought through and prepared for the performance. This process has been essential in setting a clear pre-text, in effecting my own warm-up, and in guiding a number of decisions I have made about the show – decisions that have attended to the practice-research interface. On the one hand, I set about mounting a show that I had wanted to do for a number of years. I wanted it to succeed for the sake of future shows on

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<sup>28</sup> The captain of the Norwegian freighter, *Tampa*, acted in accordance with the mariners' humanitarian code and rescued 433 refugees from a sinking fishing boat in Australian waters in August 2001. They were within 2km from the coast of Christmas Island (an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean) when Prime Minister John Howard refused them entry. There were claims that Howard's actions were motivated by his ambition to win an upcoming election. Most of the Tampa refugees were redirected to the Pacific Island, Nauru, with others going to New Zealand. The Tampa crisis dominated local political debate and was prominent in the international arena until it was displaced by the shocking events of Sept 11. For a detailed analysis of the political manoeuvring underpinning the Tampa crisis, see Marr & Wilkinson's *Dark Victory* (2003).

this topic. On the other hand, the Reconciliation performance marked the beginning of the intensive stage of data collection. I wanted the research to be of a high standard. Both purposes have been significant in buoying my focus during data collection. The progressive steps of the data collection process are reported in the following section.

#### **4.7 Data Collection**

The commencement of data collection has been a time of adjustment for me. Undertaking the dual roles of researcher and performer has heightened my experiences of performance. This has resulted in the stories that I witnessed and the people I met occupying my thoughts for days, longer than I have previously experienced. Often, the resonances have been persistent and interfered with my capacity to organise and analyse the data. In addition, my experience of the research process has been visceral and abstract. It has been an isolating time where I also felt alienated and disconnected within the Company due to the intensive nature of my Playback Theatre interest. In retrospect I feel delighted that my research design made demands that included reflective writing and the consequent discussions I had with my reflective partners. Through these dialogues I have often discovered ways to express my embodied knowledge, and my experience of the research process. In this section I give an account of the stages of data collection.

##### ***4.7.1 Phase 1: Preliminary data collection phase***

Early on, the scope of my study was wide and this has led to three renegotiations of the line of inquiry. The first steps have been like a practice run (Ely, 1991). Interviewing two experienced practitioners<sup>29,30</sup> who had recently performed in a Playback Theatre performance represented

<sup>29</sup> 'Experience' in this sense was defined by a number of criteria, most notably that the performer had a minimum of five years experience in the practice of Playback Theatre, and was still actively involved in Playback Theatre practice.

<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, this data tended toward a limiting process of trying to recall what happened from memory; rather than what their experience was and highlighted a common issue in practitioner reflection where experience is embodied and knowledge is tacit, and where opportunities for sense making are limited. For more discussion on this see Mattingly (1998).

this practice and has served as a pilot stage in the overall research journey (Pilot01). This data helped reorient my focus as the following journal entry states:

Listening to the tape of the interview I had with [two practitioners] after the last show I am beginning to question my idea that playbackers can shed new light on coming to terms with what happens. Ever since I listened to them again, I have been worrying constantly about entering the field. What is the field? How do I ask permission? From whom do I ask permission? No matter what happens, my research is going to effect people. It is not neutral. This helps me to get some distance. I think one of my biggest issues is my closeness to the form, to the participants. I have some way to go before I feel as though I have consolidated my research identity within the Playback Theatre community (Reflective journal, August 21, 2001)

As the excerpt highlights, I had been cautious at the time. The second stage of data collection has resulted in an intensive period of in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of experienced<sup>31</sup> practitioners. Preliminary analysis of the practitioner interviews has revealed significant limitations in terms of providing information about what happens in the Playback Theatre performance ritual beyond my own practice experiences<sup>32</sup>. This data has further served as background for the major data collection component of the study. It has assisted me to renegotiate the line of inquiry and narrow the focus of the study to that of audience perspectives of the performance experience. At this time, the Brisbane Company and the community-based context emerged as the site for the intensive phase of data collection. During this period, I have also consolidated the use of my own reflective processes as a data source. As the realities of the stages of data collection have surfaced, a more acute and deliberate researcher role has emerged for me.

<sup>31</sup> By way of diversifying the sample I extended the criteria from the initial field visit to included a range of practice experiences - from 5-22 years; from performing to teaching and directing; and a range of practice locations, e.g., organisations; community; private practice. A total of thirteen interviews were conducted with practitioners from Companies in Eastern Australian capital cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Tasmania & Brisbane, New Zealand cities of Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch; and independent practitioners in Brisbane, Melbourne & Wellington.

<sup>32</sup> By containing my study to these views I felt the risk of the study being overly self-referential was very high, and may have led the research report to read more like advocacy than critique. However, more significantly, practitioner reflection tended to be either focused on making better art; interrogating the texts of the performances; or theorising about why Playback Theatre does or does not 'work', rather than the 'what happens' angle of this project.



### ***4.7.2 Phase 2: Intensive data collection phase***

In order to carry out the data collection, I needed to establish permission to research within the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company and commence participant observation and informant interviews. The Company granted provisional permission to undertake some observation at the March public performance. Dawn and Rebecca attended as co-observers, with Rebecca also doing front-of-house. I performed as an actor in this performance. We also observed and approached participants for preliminary comments after the performance. I then arranged to pilot the informal interview process with one audience member who was familiar with Playback Theatre and a long-term supporter of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company.

While I have found the participant observer role complex, co-observers found they became preoccupied with trying to remember the performance. The complexity of performance that I allude to at the opening of the chapter has resulted in limited observational notes in this early stage, with co-observers overly worried about accuracy of recall, and being unable to relax and reflect. This has led to a discussion about our experiences of observing. We all comment that we had found observing intense. My experience coincided with what van Maanen (1988) calls *thick* description with my observer perspective as an active performer embedded in the improvised Playback Theatre ritual, while simultaneously being embedded in the social situation of the Playback Theatre performance that I was hoping to document. Perhaps Malinowski's expression of the observer's dilemma best sums up what the three of us felt about trying to document our observations. His journal note says: "[i]f only I could somehow 'document' all this, I'll have valuable material" (in Wolcott, 1995, p.69).

Additional useful information emerging from this performance has revealed the after-show discussions as a rich source of data. The interview with the audience member has provided valuable insight into specific experiences of the Playback Theatre performance for the informant. This performance has appeared to primarily assist in refining the way in which I

came to implement the methods. Armed with this learning, I approached the Company to continue observational and interview activity, and seek permission to videotape the performances. Feeling nervous about asking, I turned to my journal. It states:

[I am] not wanting to use my influence, [I am] feeling shy and reluctant, possibly because I do not want to be rejected. ... Bringing this request into the Company means I [am] showing more of myself than I have in the past - what will the consequences be? (Reflective journal, March 2002)

As a long-term and established member of Brisbane Playback Theatre Company I have been alert to the possibility that my leadership and artistic roles in the Company could influence their decision. It became clear that a formal letter of request was an appropriate method to inform the Company of my intention and to inquire about any conditions they wished to place on the research activity. This also provided a structure within which to discuss the research and its possible impact on the Company. They granted full permission with one exception. This concerned my request to videotape the performances as a means to support memory recall and to capture other observational data. This essentially resulted in the negotiation to produce the Reconciliation performance for the purposes of videotaping. The consent and support of this initiative has been contingent on the condition that promotional material informs prospective audience participants that the performance is part of a research project (see Appendix 3). This is explained below.

I have been somewhat relieved by the Company members' thoughtful response to my request. It demonstrated their concern for their audience and purpose while also supporting mine. Following this, the researcher role has 'enlarged' my presence in the Company and has had a greater impact on my social relationships with Company members than any of us could have predicted. Some Company members have become very engaged in the research and wanted to meet after the performance to reflect on the work. This acted to create an intense sub-group in the Company for a period of five months. Other Company members have been less involved in the intensity that the increased focus on our practice generated. This is of course, a

natural outcome in these circumstances (Janesick, 2000). Despite this, Company members were supportive of the research. This took the form of ongoing access to the Company's performances for the remainder of the year<sup>33</sup>. My decision to abandon video documentation of the performances has been based on the relative insignificance of the data it generated in comparison to the intrusive and time-consuming nature of the process. A more naturalistic approach to data collection emerged in the latter part of the year. This is discussed further below.

While proper attention to the protocols at this stage has been essential, at times it felt as though starting data collection took forever. Ely (1991) reports that it could be "a longer, more active process than many of us envision" (p.23). This has certainly been my experience. There were many times when I questioned whether or not I had actually started. The following journal entry reflects my relief at finding myself in the thick of observations, interviews and performances:

Here I am now, submerged. People to interview, notes to make, tapes to transcribe ... I have well and truly started - all other aspects of my life are fading into the background (Reflective journal, July 18, 2002).

It has been an engrossing and fascinating time tinged with the odd feeling of futility brought about by the limitations I experienced in my capacity to document what I saw, heard and felt and the reductive nature of language. For example, how do I write about deeply embodied experiences when words seem too limited to express them? I have been so appreciative that I established co-observers. I have come to see how important it is that my presence has been framed deliberately, that the research activities have been structured and transparent, and that I have managed my research role and the additional reflective activity I engaged in so as not to overload the Company. As a "citizen scholar" (Saxton in Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p.59) it has been essential to be highly organised. This has included the specific support of co-observers,

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<sup>33</sup> Some Company members have continued to be excited by their involvement and interested in how locating the research within our practice contexts would enhance their experience of Playback Theatre.

discussion facilitators, and technical support (for the video recording). Performers also undertook a series of reflective dialogues after the Reconciliation performance, however, the time required for their ongoing reflexivity has meant this did not continue.

#### *The Reconciliation performance*

The Reconciliation performance was a milestone in the research. It has generated significant data and expanded the possibilities of the research. The audience discussions after the performance have revealed a high level of engagement with the theme, the Playback Theatre form and the idea of researching it (or perhaps the idea of talking about it). In the three after-show discussions more than half the audience added their voices to the tapes that have informed the direction of the thematic investigation. Engaged in my own reflexive process meant that my researcher reflection frames have consistently influenced my observational frames. Studies of this ilk are often deemed perception driven and thus shaped by researcher perspective, experience and personality (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The co-observers I selected have naturally different worldviews to me<sup>34</sup>. They reserved the right to hold skeptical opinions about the form. This has resulted in interpretive frames that were driven by more than just my perceptions.

As stated earlier, informant interviews have formed a large proportion of the data used in the construction of this thesis. The social environment of the Playback Theatre performance is essentially transient, contextualised and episodic. Audience engagement in this social environment is contingent on the complex interactive performance ritual. I became aware of the importance of sourcing diverse informants through the data generated from the Reconciliation performance. For this performance, I developed a simple feedback page that

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<sup>34</sup> My assessment of the co-observers is that Craig's gaze has been concerned with what is happening on-stage, or what he has felt the audience members might be responding to on stage. Dawn seems more attuned to whether audience members have been engaged in the process. Rebecca is positioned somewhere in between the two.

asked audience members to state contact details so that I had the option to approach them beyond the performance. The feedback page, included as Appendix 4, was set alongside the front-of-house desk on a table at the venue. People were directed to the table and asked to complete a form for the purposes of the research. When teamed with observational data and discussion group data, the information proved extremely useful in selecting audience members for further interviews. For example, Craig, Dawn and I all had questions about the experiences of particular, yet different, audience members (see excerpt from the Observer Dialogue recorded after this performance in Appendix 5). Dawn suggests, if given a chance, she "probably would have spoken to [Juliet]" (OD01, L1495). While Craig says, "I'd go for Bea, because I was interested in her for some reason, still waters run deep" (OD01, L1499). I also nominate Darren who has expressed his disappointment in not telling his story in the discussion group. I also state my interest in Rebecca's friend Elizabeth, who has stated she had problems with the way stories featured.

After the Reconciliation performance the combination of data collection methods were established. Our observations, the group discussions, and (an amended) feedback form have assisted me to select and approach informants from future performances for interviews. The introduction of the feedback form has enabled audience members to indicate their interest in getting more involved in the research. The feedback form has also provided me with identifying information that guided me to informants with diverse experiences of Playback Theatre beyond what we ascertained from observation. The feedback form has also assisted me to check the accuracy of my observations with respect to audience member engagement. Interestingly the co-observers and I found that our reading of audience members was either superficial or totally inaccurate when compared to what individuals have revealed in discussion groups or one-on-one interviews. An example of this was observations of relative inactivity of audience members as a group in the early stages of the Reconciliation performance. Various

Dawn and Craig read this as disinterest, confusion or apprehension. On speaking with informants, individuals have recounted the considerable inner life that was occurring for them at the time. Another example was the obvious activity at the Pride performance. Dawn and I have both read this as an indication of a high level of engagement and general comfort with the process. Informant interviews have revealed the opposite with comments made about discomfort due to who was known in the audience, the presence of a baby, and the possibility that a story had been told for superficial reasons. The feedback form has also facilitated access to audience members with a range of experiences, including those who told stories, and those who did not, those who wanted to tell stories and those who did not, etc., with whom I have conducted interviews.

As I allude to above, participants were invited to join a conversation group immediately after the formalised part of the performance. Prior to the performance I had organised three Playback Theatre - savvy friends<sup>35</sup> to assist me as discussion facilitators. Their role was to capture the immediate after-show interaction of audience participants on audiotape. The three groups that were convened after the Reconciliation performance had ten, seven and three participants respectively. Each group had a different focus during the discussion: one group were telling more stories, another group debated what reconciliation is and means, and the third expressed their experiences of the performance and the on-going resonances. There was also some inquiry about storytelling experiences<sup>36</sup>. The diversity within the discussion groups provided a wide canvas from which to draw for early patterns, adding to and challenging my ideas.

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<sup>35</sup> Thanks to Peter Howie, Ann Bermingham and Julie Newdick for your generosity and skill in facilitating these groups and later groups.

<sup>36</sup> It was in the discussion group that Darren first revealed his discontent at not sharing his story and engaged in articulating the various reasons why he may have felt unable to tell.

At the completion of this first after-show contact, some participants consented to a follow-up interview. I had positive responses when I contacted audience members from the information they provided on the form. Many of them consented to participate further. People were generally delighted to be asked to speak about their experiences. Some elected not to continue involvement. Respondents were encouraged to use what Reinhartz (1979) calls a storytelling style in interviews due to the conversational approach I used. Glover (2003) concedes that thinking about qualitative data as stories expands the possibility for the researcher (see also Polkinghorne, 1995). He proposes that, as researcher, I need to come to terms with the way in which research participants respond in interviews by telling stories that under the microscope of analysis could fail to present clear and useful thematic pointers at first glance. He suggests that rather than trying to deconstruct the stories told by research participants, I should treat them as "windows into the lived experience" of the participants, as "salient insights into the subjective realities" of the participants (p.146). Thinking of the data in this way has enabled me to engage with participants' stories from my own story of the incident that they were recounting. This has freed me from trying to divorce my researcher role from my experience of the social world of stories and performance that I had been steeped in. My role, therefore, felt like an extension of the Playback Theatre role in which they had previously encountered me. I have been required to listen, and in so doing, provide or create the necessary opportunity for people to tell stories about telling stories and about hearing stories, or to tell new stories. I have not used questions to guide the interviews, instead I invited people to continue to talk about what was bubbling up in them at the time. For others, I have undertaken a brief process of recalling the show, asking informants to speak about the stage of the performance that they felt most engaged. A new pattern that emerged in light of these first one-on-one conversations concerned the significance of the broader context in understanding audience members' responses to a Playback Theatre performance.

As reported earlier, I attempted to source additional data using videotape. Goldman-Segall (1998) recommends the usefulness of videotape for capturing detail that could otherwise be missed by a participant observer. However, as Mock (2000) suggests, the video evidence lacked the intensity of the 'live' performance and failed to make visible much that indicated the multiple and complex nature of audience members' experiences. The video-evidence has provided little, if any, insight into the experiences of individuals watching enactments, and listening to stories. It was decided that the complication of ensuring the performances were videotaped did not match the value of the material it delivered (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez 2000). The data sources for remaining performances have included discussion groups, individual conversations sourced through the informal feedback form, and observations, reflective writing and reflective discussions. By the September Public Performance the observational data was no longer introducing new information. At the final two performances I was oriented to unearthing information about the irregularities I had identified from the body of data, and absent voices I had overlooked. This process was guided by the specific use of the feedback form and informant interviews.

#### **4.8 Data Analysis**

The nature of the data collection activities implemented in this study have demanded close and prolonged engagement with the social environment (Tedlock, 2000). Similarly, the methodology has demanded close and prolonged engagement with the data in analysis and interpretation. "Data analysis done simultaneously with data collection enables you to focus and shape the study as it proceeds" (Glesne, 1999, p.130). And so it was, with these processes essentially occurring simultaneously once the data collection was underway. The simultaneity of the stages has precipitated a discursive, yet somewhat systematic, progression through the performances. I have documented the parallel processes in Appendix 6. This section presents



the processes undertaken to organise, interpret and extend the data during the course of the study.

As discussed in the data collection section, the preliminary phase of data collection served to focus the line of inquiry and point the intensive phase toward audience members' experiences and perceptions of the one-off community-based performance. I have conducted and transcribed all the interviews as part of my commitment to maintaining confidentiality and my desire to remain in the research process in an embodied way. To overcome the isolation and risk of self-referential analysis and interpretation as I listened to the tapes, I have written my reflections in my journal and periodically met with reflective partners. I have been interested to note how repetitive the content of the reflective writing has been and have come to better appreciate the iterative circular nature of analysis and interpretation. A number of thematic categories featured as early as the first week and kept emerging in various ways in the reflective writing. The journal is one long conversation with myself (Ely, 1991). It has served an important function in "moving the methodology and analysis forward", as Ely (1991, p.80) suggests, and has provided a site where I could begin to interrogate my thinking. One side of the dialogue has been like an ongoing stream-of-consciousness address to myself, while the other posed questions like, What else is happening? What is missing? Where am I in this? Who else do I need to ask? Sometimes the intensity of this inter-textual activity led me to feel unable to write. During these times, no amount of sitting at the desk would do. Booth, Colomb & Williams (1995) claims that this "kind of temporary aphasia ... afflicts us when we try to write about matters we do not entirely understand" (p.29). Ely (1991) posits that this experience means that I had left the writing of that particular memo too late. She calls it an "input overload" and suggests that this is accompanied by a feeling of "floundering" because as researcher, I have not given myself the "direction" I need (p.80). I am more inclined to

explain these times through my appreciation of the embodied nature of performance that Somerville alludes in the following quote:

Each individual has a unique point of view, with each experience difficult to articulate, due to the largely nonverbal, embodied and ephemeral nature of performance (Somerville, 1999).

This experience has similarly been discussed with respect to practitioners' attempts to articulate practice (Ely et al., 1997, Mattingly, 1998). Prior to this research experience I have often found myself turgid with my own embodied experience of the performance. Fox (1999b) speaks about the role of the conductor in the following way:

[B]ecause of their intensity, rituals place a heavy personal demand on their shamans, and it is essential to take time beforehand to assume the role and afterwards to release it (p.129).

In re-reading my observations and reflective notes I have been constantly aware that they lack a certain something that is present in the 'live' moment (Schartz & Walker, 1994, p.126). As I have moved from the making of my reflective notes to the using of them (Lederman in Wolcott, 1994), it has been the awkward drawings, the lists, the concept maps and poems that have often spoke loudest in terms of what is absent in the text rather than what is present.

Apart from a little specific transcription to inform my focus early on, the data collection and transcribing work have emerged as mutually exclusive activities for me. During the intensive data collection, I continued to perform, mainly in the role of conductor. In addition to the interactions and experiences usually associated with performing Playback Theatre I have engaged with audience members and players in order to maximise access to people for the research purposes. Conversely, transcription has occurred in front of the computer screen, ear pieces in. As I have listened I have been transported to a different time and place.

Transcriptions are word for word translations of the audiotape with some acknowledgement of gesture and tone of voice. This has required a high level of concentration. Transcribing has demanded a single mindedness as it is like a re-living of the original taped encounter. The following comment is from my journal:

As I listened to [the] conversation, I was immediately transported to that time ...  
 Black on white does not evoke the energy with which [we] spoke ... or [the]  
 thoughtfulness (Reflective Journal, March 2003).

There are forty-five interviews, five observer dialogues, the texts of eight performances, and twelve notebooks filled with observational and reflective notes. Samples of excerpts from the unedited transcripts and from my reflective journal are provided in the appendices (See Appendix 5). Verbatim excerpts in the findings chapter have been edited for readability. Transcripts are identifiable using the following method. Interview transcripts have the informants' assumed names<sup>37</sup>, the performance code, and the transcript number. For example: Hillary, MHW06, L34 refers to something that Hillary said in the sixth interview from the Mental Health Week performance and the quote commences on line 34 of the transcript. For Observation Dialogues, I have used the similar system. For example, OD03, L91 refers to the third taped session with reflective partners, with the extract commencing on line 91 of the transcript. An example of the citation symbol I have used when citing performance text is: RecVT, L27. This refers to the Reconciliation Performance (video) transcript, line twenty-seven. I now turn my attention to the way in which I have worked with the transcribed interviews, observer dialogues and the reflective journal.

#### ***4.8.1 Performing analysis, composing meaning***

When embarking on the organisation of data I found myself drawn to, and repulsed by the piles of transcripts and notes books. The fact was I had been making meaning since before collecting the preliminary data. In the previous section I allude to the intrinsic sense making activities that have occurred throughout the data collection. Each time I have encountered the data I have reconstructed the stories about the performances and the stories about particular informants from my perspective in that moment. This has been a recursive process that integrates why I was interested in the topic "in the first place" (Ely et al., 1997, p.20). The

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<sup>37</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to ensure privacy.

purpose of the research has been to understand more about Playback Theatre from the perspectives of the audience. From the outset my purpose has been to engage with audience members and to make sense of what they say, in light of my experiences and the theory I have selected to frame the analysis. Ely et al. (1997) assert that humans are drawn to analyse. They state

There is no way as thinking human beings we can not analyse. The same human minds that think and remember and relive and retell in narrative also work with a different and sometimes contrary motion to classify and abstract (p.161).

This engagement in what Frank calls "the baggage of modernity," where one "retell[s] stories and then, like a good modernist, place[s] them into analytical frameworks" (Frank, 1995, p.23), has presented a number of challenges for me during the research. Frank (1995) claims that we "think with stories" (p.23). This has certainly been my experience from the preliminary analysis through to the end of writing. Glesne (1999) refers to this deep engagement with the data as entering the "code mines". She cautions that this work is "part tedium and part exhilaration". She states that the researcher has to move from telling stories to "making connections among the stories" (p.135). This has been challenging for me. By this time, my experience of "living with [the stories] and having them shape my perceptions" had become intense (Frank, 1995, p 24). I have had to find ways to transform my memories of the original stories so that the way in which they interacted with my story seemed new. It took time for them to "become mine" in the way Frank (1995) asserts is necessary if I am to write them into my manuscript. In all it has been a "highly personal sedimentation of experience" for me (Frank, 1995, p 24). The following reflective note expresses this experience:

It was hard for me in one sense because my Playback Theatre role was also one of inquiry and - while in my data collection I was focused on the social situation that was the performance - I was continually seduced by my curiosity as a Playback Theatre practitioner with a commitment to expand my knowledge of particular cultural subgroups. When I was interviewing after a performance within the refugee (sector), I became distracted with the stories from informants as if the interview was an extension of the performance (Reflective Journal, Nov, 2002).

Glover (2003) asserts that researchers in this position might need to tell their own stories as they struggle to bring them to conscious awareness. Valuing this position has enabled me to tell and re-tell my story about being submerged in stories. The sessions with my reflective partners have facilitated this. Reflective dialogue sessions became what Atkinson and Coffey (1996) call knowledge production exercises. These have been shaped by our exchanging of stories and informed by our asking of questions. The reflexive component in the reflective dialogues has enabled me to focus beyond the "frequency of key words" approach to the themes in the transcripts (Glover, 2003, p.157). This liberated what Glover (2003) terms the fidelity of the narrative embedded in the transcript. This dialectic process between the integrity of the story and my interpretive frames has continued as I constructed the manuscript. At the time it surprised me that a dominant interpretative phase in the study has coincided with writing. The process of writing the thesis is discussed in the following section.

#### ***4.8.2 Writing***

Constructing the thesis has been a continuation of the iterative dialectic process that permeated the research process. In interpreting and representing the data, I have sought to weave the lived experiences of informants with relevant literature and my own perspective. The voice of the writer in ethnography is undeniable (van Maanen, 1988). By way of trustworthiness in the work I have assembled the thesis using multiple voices (Gergen & Gergen, 2000): the informants, the co-observers and researcher reflexive voice. Writing the thesis has been like a call and response between the data and the conceptual framework. I began to organise the data based on an assumption of the internal logic I had recognised in the words of the informants, then the literature would lead for a phrase or two, informant voices would then speak again as a *conversation-in-text* was constructed. While my insider's perception of reality has been "instrumental" in understanding and describing situations, the multiple gazes woven into the text of the thesis have helped to mediate the limitations of my

insider position and compelled "the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities" (Fetterman, 1998, p.20). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) term this a "dialogic methodology" (p.79). Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2003) assert that each voice used in an inter-textual document is reported with the informants' personal vocabulary. Bharucha (1993) makes a similar claim when he writes about language in the theatre. He asserts that "the words may not be the realities that they allude to and attempt to embody ... they have their own materiality that reflects, however arbitrarily and obliquely, the world we live in" (p.45). The same has been true for my words as researcher and compiler of this report, with my words embodying my perceptions. Van Maanen (1988) suggests that:

The narrative and rhetorical conventions assumed by a writer also shape ethnography. Ways of personal expression, choice of metaphor, figurative allusions, semantics, decorative phrasing or plain speaking, textual organisation, and so on all work to structure a cultural portrait in particular ways (p.5).

The next phase of sense making lies with you, the reader as you engage with the text from your perspective and make your own meaning, for as van Maanen (1988) describes:

Meanings are not permanently embedded by an author in the text at the moment of creation. They are woven from the symbolic capacity of a piece of writing and the social context of its reception (p.25).

### ***4.8.3 Verification and Trustworthiness of Text***

As reported earlier, I have undertaken reflexive activities to maintain a critical stance in the study. This has translated to the writing phase, through the use of my reflective partners as I have organised data and constructed the two findings chapters. This has involved Kris and Dawn reading early versions of the chapters for the purposes of critiquing the organisation, and questioning assumptions and other things that they felt had been poorly substantiated. Fine et al. (2000) assert that this process is only worthwhile if the disagreements in perspectives are reported. The influence of this process has emerged in the final selection of excerpts used to develop the thesis.

I have also employed a version of member checking (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, Janesick, 2000) to ensure verification is also coming from informants. Most often, this has involved having audience members check the transcript of their interview. This has required them to comment on the transcript's accuracy, and add insight if verbatim representation of their voice lacked clarity. Janesick (2000) acknowledges that the researcher generally has authority when determining the form of checking research participants engage in. It is with the data that are selected to appear in the thesis or particular data that are spoken about in the thesis that I have been most concerned about. For these, I have approached participants to authorise the context of the excerpt. There have been some audience members who have not been interested in the on-going involvement that this required. For them, their contribution had been in the moment, connected to their performance experiences, not an experience of research. For others it created extra tension. One example of this is Asha's story. She had previously expressed concern over her story being considered in what she called the "public PhD context" (Mar03, L16). When approached with the transcript excerpt I was proposing to use, she states that she felt somewhat embarrassed by what she must have been feeling "back then". She said, "I can see that was me two years ago, but I don't think I would feel like that now". These concerns were eased after she considered the excerpt, as it was contextualised in the thesis (Mar06). Some participants have been unavailable for comment. Janesick (2000) suggests that this is not uncommon. For consistency and privacy, pseudonyms and minimum identifying material have been used in the manuscript.

#### **4.9 Summary**

This chapter documents my research design. By considering the complexities of researching a *live* theatre event such a Playback Theatre I argue for a multi-method approach to the design. The ephemeral nature of performance coupled with my presence as an insider to the research context is critiqued and offered as a justification for this methodological direction. The various

methods of observation, informant interviews, and researcher reflexivity are elaborated in the context of practice-based ethnographic research. I introduce the reader to the proposition of reflective journaling and reflective partners as the means by which I ensure trustworthiness of data and researcher transparency in the conduct of the fieldwork and the construction of the thesis. My experiences of the collection, analysis and interpretation of audience member interviews and observation data are recounted. This illuminates the reader to my encounters in the field and how these are translated into the inter-textual document that is this thesis.

The next three chapters present the findings. Chapter Five acts like a bridge to the findings. In it I establish the way in which the research site has been manifest in this study and introduce the reader to the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company. Descriptions of each performance are constructed as a means to position the reader in each specific context and familiarise them with the story content as they enter the inter-textual discussions documented in Chapters 6 & 7 - the findings and interpretations drawn from the performances.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Brisbane Playback Theatre Company and Performances**

The liminal period is that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another.

(Turner, 1982, p.113)

The journey of this inquiry has occurred in those spaces betwixt and between that are evoked through the performance of Playback Theatre. In this chapter, I establish the way in which I have framed the context for the research. This context has been contingent on my local Playback Theatre Company and so I discuss the history, structure and aesthetic style of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company. In the second part of the chapter, I exhibit the 2002 performances that have formed the basis of the data collected for the study by providing some identifying information. Each performance is a discrete event and is situated in a specific context, for a specific audience and a specific purpose. This results in each performance having its own specific micro-context. The values and experience of the individual members of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company influence the broader context of the performances.

#### **5.1 Brisbane Playback Theatre Company**

##### ***5.1.1 History***

Francis Batten founded the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company in Queensland, Australia in 1989. Francis had previously established the Sydney Playback Theatre Company in the

southern state of New South Wales. He was one of the first practitioners of Playback Theatre in Australia and New Zealand. A respected elder in the Playback Theatre movement, Francis is now based in the UK. Batten's artistic influences were rooted in Lecoq's physical theatre<sup>38</sup> modalities and commedia dell'arte. Psychodrama theory and practice influenced his leadership style. The first intake in the Company was drawn from the local psychodrama and community arts networks. By the time this study is underway the Company had undergone numerous changes. The eleven core members have various backgrounds and experience in community and welfare, theatre, environmental science, psychology, and the public service. Only three Company members have links to psychodrama practice. A number of performers identify as group workers, process facilitators, and teachers of community groups, in yoga or impro, for example.

The Brisbane Playback Theatre Company operates as a part-time business. Historically, Playback Theatre performers have been discouraged from drawing their primary incomes from their Playback Theatre work. This has emerged as a defining condition of the citizen actor model proposed by the founders. Brisbane Playback Theatre Company members share the performing and administrative roles. In 2002, I was the principal conductor, and had a significant artistic influence in the Company. I had previously been heavily involved in administration as the Company prepared to incorporate. I reduced my contact in the administrative roles as I undertook the research. My increased presence and focus on the Company's activities due to the research has required active management.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A useful handbook for the exploration of physical theatre is Dymphna Callery's (2001) *Through the Body*.

<sup>39</sup> The impact on the Company of the research and my expanded role repertoire was difficult to determine. There were times when I worried about this. In retrospect, I am able to see multiple variables affecting The Company at the time I was collecting and analysing data.

### ***5.1.2 Mission & Company Structure***

The Brisbane Playback Theatre Company is a small not-for-profit community based organisation dedicated to the performance and development of Playback Theatre in South-East Queensland. It has an overarching purpose to "develop the community including the Playback [Theatre] community" and is dedicated to a developmental approach to both Company training and community performances (BPTC, 1994).

The Brisbane Playback Theatre Company operates under a shared leadership structure (Harris, 2003). Rather than being a traditional consensus model, it is an ensemble model premised on the notion of "yes and" that sustains the improvisation performers and ensembles. In this way, any member can demonstrate leadership in any number of roles depending on their availability and preparedness. Similarly, any other member can take on a supporting role, or in transitions, take the role up fully, as the former leader moves toward rest, or a new task.

There are multiple roles in the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company: These include the performing roles - musician, actor, conductor; the operational roles - front-of-house, treasurer, secretary, producer (performance liaison), conductor; and artistic and strategic roles - rehearsal director and artistic director, for example. During the data collection period, my primary roles have included artistic direction, conducting, and producing (Reconciliation performance and Pride performance). I have also acted in two performances conducted by others.

### ***5.1.3 Artistic Style***

The current artistic style of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company has residual influences from former artistic director and founder, Francis Batten. It combines a commitment to a physical basis for performance with spontaneity training, a legacy of the psychodramatic

influence<sup>40</sup>. The ensemble style, however, derives from the combined influences of current group membership and the active pursuit of playfulness as an ensemble. There is a tendency toward a logo-centric style by some performers where the use of direct presentation to the audience and dialogue driven enactments prevail. Sometimes this style leads to a *tell* rather than *show* type of theatre with the risk of skewing the story through value-laden language. Other Company members favour movement and mime where the creation of physical relationships on stage drives the emotional and narrative content of the enactment. Sometimes this style leads to abstraction and results in elements of the narrative being overlooked for the sake of an aesthetic aspiration. The Company combines these two ends of the continuum in ensembles formed for performances. Thus, the strengths and weaknesses of both influence the work.

Performers improvise within the conventional forms of the Playback Theatre method. The artistic attributes of members are considered alongside experience and knowledge of cultural, political, social and historical facets relevant to our community of practice. The Company values emotional robustness, a diverse theatrical repertoire, a good sense of play, and well-developed spontaneity as vital attributes for the Playback Theatre performer. Emergent theory suggests that the combined skills and risk-taking capacity of an ensemble determines what the audience is prepared to contribute in any given performance (Penny, 2002). This is not particular to the Playback Theatre improviser and ensemble<sup>41</sup>. As I suggest earlier, the composition of the Company was diverse in the period coinciding with the data collection. However, the core performance ensembles in the shows were comprised predominantly of women due to the limited availability of male actors and most ensemble members were over

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<sup>40</sup> The notion of spontaneity in psychodrama influenced the development of Playback Theatre in Australia due to the earlier proponents of Playback Theatre coming through the psychodrama training institutes.

<sup>41</sup> Earlier I discussed the work of Peter Brook, who reported on the importance of risking in improvised work performed in a specific context.

40 years of age. A dominant shared value at this time concerned activism and service in the community.

## 5.2 The Performances

This section is designed to present a snapshot of each of the events that has figured in the study. Each event has included a 90-minute performance featuring the Playback Theatre forms of fluid sculptures, pairs, and stories, performed by an ensemble of four or five actors, a musician and a conductor. This is the conventional structure that The Company recommends. An exception, however is the performance conducted during Mental Health Week where this has been adjusted to a 60-minute show at the request of the commissioning agent. The interaction between the players and the audience during a Playback Theatre performance is governed by a contract implicit in the form, which includes Day's (1999) notion "that the tellers will be cared for responsibly by both the conductor and by other audience members" (p.89). I would extend this to include the responsibility of all audience members to care for themselves and others in the audience as they engage in the ritual.

The content of a Playback Theatre performance emerges through stories individual audience members tell. The stories are framed by the context in which the performance is conducted, however, there is also liberty afforded to the audience in terms of what stories are told. The context of a performance relates to the specific nature of the show, e.g. refugee week. Context also includes the social, cultural and political dimensions of the society in which the event is placed. It is common practice to treat the stories from a Playback Theatre performance as if they reveal the contemporary issues and concerns for that group in that context (Hoesch, 1999). That stories contain the social, cultural and political truth of the era is not a new idea. However thinking about a Playback Theatre performance in this way expands the notion of the performance as singular and isolated to an idea of it as representative and collective. An

intensive analysis of the thematic content of the stories that are told during the study is outside the scope of this thesis<sup>42</sup>.

The values implicit in the Playback Theatre form promote access and inclusion. The various contexts in which the 2002 performances have occurred are congruent with these values. The context has provided a doorway through which audience members can enter the participatory ritualised frame of the performance. Throughout the study it has been evident that the context has acted as an initial link among audience members and between audience members and performers. It has given performers focus, purpose and direction for the overall event. For audience members, strong identification with the context is an essential pre-condition to strong engagement in the process, or as Brook (1989) puts it, a key element to softening them up.

The focus of this study is the *performance* event and the experience of the audience members during and after it. The data I report in this thesis has been derived from the eight performances I have documented in this section. In a bid to situate the reader, I record particular aspects of each performance including information about the wider context, the purpose, place and space, target audience, and the actual audience. I also provide a summary of the stories and observations on the period immediately following the performance.

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<sup>42</sup> For the way in which the story content from a performance might be treated see Appendix 7.

**Performance 1: March Public Performance**

<i>Wider Context</i>	<i>One of five bi-monthly performances hosted by The Brisbane Playback Theatre Company as part of a public performance program that has been running for over 10 years. It attracts 20-50 audience members to each show. Public performances are often 'themed' with the theme introduced at the start of the show through the opening sequence. Performers and audience members create a collaborative theatre experience in response to the theme.</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Some of the reasons the program continues are: to contribute to the local community; to maintain a public presence; to develop skills and train new members; to 'exhibit' or showcase the form to interested clients. Theme of the performance was <i>Savouring Life</i></i>
<i>Place And Space</i>	<i>The performance occurs in a non-theatre venue. It is a venue that is often used for psychodrama training and other group events and is situated in an inner-city suburb of Brisbane. Audience members describe the room as intimate (Pride04, L37) and as having a loungeroom feel (MDA04, L07).</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>This is open and tends away from mainstream theatregoers. There are often people who are new to Playback Theatre at the public performances and also some regulars in the audience. The Company invites potential clients to this forum as a way to showcase the form and enhance the preparation for a context specific performance.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>22 participants; 18 women, 4 men The age range includes: under 25 (6), over 55 (3) More than half the audience is new to Playback Theatre and most have come with one other person. There are some regulars in the audience.</i>

*Stories – Performance1*

The performance opened with a dramatic presentation of a poem lamenting lost opportunities and a desire to seize the day. Early stories offered by audience members demonstrate an immediate response to this idea. Experiences that are shared include feeling burdened by over-responsibility, the disappointment of missing out, feeling tired with life, standing up to a boss, appreciating life, the tension of doing something you don't want to do, doing something for someone and having it bring unexpected surprises for you.

As the show progresses the theme of values conflict emerges with a woman telling of her son's choice to join the military in response to the September 11 attacks. As a pacifist, she is torn between supporting his decision as a young man and desperately wanting to influence him toward another way. Following this story, a man tells of his confusion about loving a dear friend who does things and says things that contravene his values. He is frustrated with his friend's prejudice against Muslims on the one hand, yet her liberated expression of her sexual life on the other. He really wants to change her. Next, a young man speaks of the pain and heartache of the early birth and

subsequent death of his baby daughter. She had been unplanned, and precipitated many changes in the life of her parents. He experiences conflict with his partner's mother about how the baby is to be buried. While his efforts in communicating with the baby's grandmother had been difficult for him he is persistent in having his views respected.

The show ends with a variety of audience responses to this final story. A woman shares her growing awareness of her own vulnerability while pregnant. A man expresses his confusion (and judgement) about the paucity of the values of young people. A woman announces that she feels moved by the grace in which the teller had told this painful story and, finally, a man recalls his own entry to fatherhood as a major life transition for him.

#### *Post Performance*

People remain seated after the actors leave the stage speaking with others around them. Some move to get tea and coffee. Many continue talking. The final storyteller, the young father, is in the kitchen surrounded by his friends. Observation notes suggest they are shielding him from more attention or the possibility that he may be called upon to explain his story further.



**Performance 2: Reconciliation Performance**

<i>Wider Context</i>	<i>Reconciliation<sup>43</sup> Week and Sorry Day occur annually in May. In 2000 millions of Australians participated in a nation-wide solidarity march for the rights and recognition of indigenous Australians. The surge in concern for refugees and asylum seekers in 2001 seems to have silenced the aboriginal agenda and Sorry Day 2001 was a low-key affair. After the September 11 attacks, I see Sorry Day 2002 as an opportunity to re-state the local issues alongside the global issues that are receiving attention in Australia.</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	<i>This show is produced for the purpose of the research. While, my request to videotape Brisbane Playback Theatre Company's performances has been denied due to some concern for participants' safety and worry that it would be too intrusive, Company members are encouraging when I elect to take responsibility to mount a specific show for the research. I have been interested in the application of Playback Theatre within the local Australian indigenous community and as yet have not pursued this further. I see this situation as an opportunity to bring my interest in the local reconciliation debate and my work with Playback Theatre together. In consultation with a local aboriginal organisation, I schedule the performance close to Sorry Day, and in the week of related activities.</i>
<i>Place and Space</i>	<i>Wanting an inclusive space, I choose to use a venue in the inner city that is both accessible and somewhat neutral in terms of black/white usage. A contemporary, accessible church building, it is often used for community events while it still functions as a church on weekends.</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>The performance is promoted through the local reconciliation network hoping for a 'reconciliation-motivated' audience rather than a substantively pro-Playback Theatre audience. I seek the help of Company members to invite people from their extensive networks. Local aboriginal activist networks are also approached and invited.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>There is a diverse group at this performance (Rec01). Due to a death in the aboriginal community, none of the indigenous women who RSVP-ed attend. Audience members are all non-indigenous Australians. There are 30 women and 15 men, aged from 22 through to 60+ years. More than half the audience has no or little prior experience of Playback Theatre. There are people who come because they are interested in the theme, and others who come 'to see Playback Theatre', or 'because my friend asked me.' The notion of warm-up and how it interacts with people's expectation and why they come also emerges from other performances.</i>

<sup>43</sup> In the context of this performance, reconciliation refers to the ways in which non-indigenous Australians are seeking to reconcile with indigenous Australians over the devastating impacts of colonisation (see Gale, 2001, p.139 for an account of the origins of reconciliation in Australia). The date of the performance coincided with National Sorry Day, a day specifically set aside for the expression of sorrow and apology for the losses of family, culture, and life endured by the "Stolen Generation." For more information on Australian Reconciliation and Sorry Day see the National Sorry Day website @ <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/sorry/> and the Apology Australia website @ <http://apology.west.net.au/>

*The Stories – Performance 2*

The show commences with a dramatic presentation of a number of contemporary responses to aboriginal reconciliation. Early contributions from audience members explore the word *reconciliation* and propose a variety of meanings. Why didn't I know the truth of the past? Aborigines must be remunerated for past labour. Am I racist? When I listen to aboriginal elders I feel inspired. Reconciliation requires outreach and courage.

Stories are told. A young woman speaks of her dilemma when asked if she is married. In a committed lesbian partnership, she wants to say, "yes, I am married", yet she feels that this alone is misleading and offers further explanation of her relationship. The other party has not spoken to her since. A teller shares her dilemma about the tension of activism, "how do I do enough without being over-extended?"

A woman who has recently attended a workshop to learn the ancient aboriginal craft of weaving fibres from two aboriginal women comes on stage. She tells of how she found the teaching style of the aboriginal women frustrating. She is distressed by what she saw as her lack of success in finding a way to "connect" with the aboriginal women. She says, "there was a gap I could not bridge." Almost immediately, a woman of Cherokee ancestry asks if her story would be welcome: "it's not about the Australian Aboriginals." Her story is about the difficulty in claiming her ethnicity in the USA because of the political correctness associated with claiming indigenous identities. Having been raised outside the Native American Indian tradition, she says, equates to having no rights. Here in Australia, she has found that she is able to begin to claim this part of herself. This has been most evident in her work as an artist. Next, a man speaks of his experience of his father's incongruent messages to him as a boy, "while you can play with aboriginal kids, you can't marry them." The teller explains that it was to do with "not mixing blood." He remembers, as a young man that he had a girlfriend whom is aboriginal. The story ends with his cousin doing the family tree and discovering that a great-grandmother who had been mythologised as a Spanish Princess was in fact African American from New Orleans. The teller states cheekily: "I wonder what my Dad would have made of that?" The final story echoes many of the themes thus far. A young woman raised "on the wrong side of the tracks" freely played with the aboriginal children in her neighbourhood until high

school, when she learned that there were two worlds: the neighbourhood and the school yard. As a young adult she has become actively involved in the reconciliation movement and been disturbed by her growing awareness of the contradictions of her childhood. She confronts her grandfather about his unsubstantiated racist comments. He responds, "I am too old to change," yet acknowledges that she has a different path. She is furious with him in his apathy and determined to keep challenging others in her family and her life.

*Post Performance*

Over twenty people join the facilitated discussion groups I have organised. There are three other small groups seated in the audience. Observation notes suggest these are people who have arrived together and who remain together to talk after the performance. A number of people stand around the coffee table talking. When people break from the discussion groups they leave.

**Performance 3: Pride Performance**

<i>Wider context</i>	<i>A women-only event performed during the Lesbian &amp; Gay Pride Festival. It is the 9<sup>th</sup> year that Brisbane Playback Theatre Company is part of the Pride Events Calendar. Pride is an arts festival dedicated to the celebration of and expression of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender lives and lifestyles in the Brisbane district.</i>
<i>The Purpose</i>	<i>To provide a women-friendly space for lesbians to tell stories from their lives.</i>
<i>Place and Space</i>	<i>Located at a recently formalised women-only venue, "Womenspace," in the suburbs. This venue is dedicated to the spiritual and creative wellbeing of all women. I choose the venue for two reasons: 1) to support the initiative of the Womenspace group by introducing the venue to the women who attend the Brisbane Playback Theatre Pride performance; and 2) to draw on a space dedicated to ritual for women.</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>Women in the Greater Brisbane district who access information distributed through the networks of Lesbian &amp; Gay Pride Festival Network, other Lesbian contact networks, and arts organisations.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>32 women, 2 children. Many of the audience have some experience of Playback Theatre due to a regular following for this annual event. One-third of the audience has no previous experience of Playback Theatre. For newcomers this event is also their first time to a Pride event and for some, it is their first time to a lesbian-specific event. This latter category suggests that the ritual of Playback Theatre offers something accessible to women exploring their sexual identity in public.</i>

*The Stories - Performance 3*

The performance begins with a short presentation by a guest singer-songwriter, an aboriginal artist who is keen to support the Playback Theatre event. This opening and the presence of a very small infant influence the initial responses, these are: feeling filled with warmth after the song, the sensation of heaviness being lifted, filling with love, and experiencing "a fire" within. The emerging stories shift. A woman shares about the joy of getting some time to herself, even though it isn't as much as she had hoped. There is a story about the relief of telling the truth, and another about the deep experience of being really listened to. A young woman refers to that baby and acknowledges she is ovulating. She is captivated in that moment by the mystery of being a woman. In the next story a young woman who lives 90-minutes south of the city tells of having had two car trips to Brisbane that day: in her first trip she feels alone and small as she visits a friend in prison. She is quite exhausted by the experience and not sure she can make the second trip. She does - to the performance. She speaks of feeling light and fulfilled.

At this point in the performance the vocal presence of the baby has increased and I invite the mother to share: she announces her conflicting feelings at around 2am each morning - how can I love someone so much and feel so much frustration? Maybe I am too old for this! After this another mother reveals her dilemma with her teenager: I want to give him a big hug and make him speak to me like he used to, yet, I want to respect him growing up and give him his space. There is a short intermission where audience members are invited to share some part of their story with someone in the audience.

The story following this involves a group of friends from different cultures, including aboriginal women. A different approach to modesty by a white woman, results in one of the aboriginal women feeling embarrassed. In her self-consciousness she makes a faux pas as they leave that the others find hilarious. Other members of the party are in the audience. The storyteller tells on behalf of the group. There is great laughter as she announces the mistake: "quick, get in the car, I have to reverse around the breasts!" What she means to say is "reverse around the rocks." The laughter escalates when this part is dramatised. A young woman comes to the stage. She is feeling sad about her changing relationship with her brother as he becomes independent and meets an intimate partner. She does not want to smother him like she feels her

mother does, yet is worried when he takes a job in New York so soon after September 11. The story ends with her question: where do I fit in his life now?

The singer from the opening sequence tells the final story. She recounts her confusion in trying to live in what she identifies as two worlds. When touring in the USA her complete identity seems to be "the Aborigine from Australia". Yet when she returns home to Broome, she is shocked when her grandfather calls her "a whitefella". The story ends with the woman's resolve to return home and learn from her grandfather. She leans forward and speaks softly about the women in her family, "I can be one of those women now". She knows she has to keep her opinions about what the other world can teach them to herself for as long as it takes to rebuild her family connections.

*Post Performance*

Supper is served and women stay and talk in clumps. There is a social feel to the after show period with women introducing themselves to each other and approaching members of the Company. Some of the women admit that they come because they know it is a chance to catch up with people they don't often see. Julie facilitated a small group discussion with 5 young women.

***Performance 4: Disability Action Week Performance***

<i>Wider Context</i>	<i>Disability Action Week is a week dedicated to raising awareness in the community about the needs of people with disabilities. The local transport &amp; rail authorities host this performance as a gesture of good will in their commitment to meeting the needs of people with disabilities.</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	<i>There is a conscious effort to conduct an event that is not targeting transport issues, but rather takes a positive approach to working together. The event is titled Community Connections. Throughout the performance, two sign language interpreters perform on either side of the stage.</i>
<i>Place and Space</i>	<i>A generic contemporary-theatre venue where other community arts events for people with disability feature throughout the year.</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>A diverse audience including people with disabilities, government bureaucrats in the State Rail and Transport Authorities, representatives from the non-government sector who support people with disability.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>As above. There are 70 audience members. 48 women, 22 men. More than two-thirds of the audience have no prior experience of Playback Theatre. Of the individuals with disabilities present, most are representatives of non-government organisations in the sector.</i>

*The Stories- Performance 4*

This performance opens with a short skit by a member of the organising committee who has impaired vision. Early contributions encompass people's curiosity about or interest in the event. A man tells about being excited to see such a mix of people coming together. A story emerges about wanting communities to be different, so people with disability are not so lonely. A woman remembers how a chance meeting influenced her to study ethics at University at a time when she did not know what to do next. A man shares his inner conflict regarding his wife constantly agreeing to help others despite her wanting otherwise. He finds it hard to express his angst about watching her repeatedly deal with this dilemma. Another audience member speaks about how he felt when others didn't seem to hear what it was he was saying. These early themes emerge again in the stories that are told later in the show.

The first storyteller on stage is a government bureaucrat. He shares his experience of working for the public service. He wants to get good solutions for everyone: the government, people with disability, the bus and train drivers, etc. No matter what he does, it seems that people do not want to help themselves. They want to blame the government and have them fix it. He feels disappointed and confused about this. He dreams of bringing people together to solve the problems that affect them all. The second storyteller on stage is a woman in a wheelchair. She recounts her recent experience of a Wheelchair Basketball event organised especially for Disability Action Week. Elite wheelchair basketballers competed with elite basketballers who were unused to using wheelchairs. She ends her story describing her satisfaction with the way in which the public audience and the participants got together to make the basketball game a success. For her, it was a good laugh and a great time. The final story is by the young woman who has lobbied for the inclusion of Playback Theatre in the Disability Action week program. Her story is about how her personal life (a brother with a disability) and public life (raising awareness about disability issues) converge in the staging of the performance. After recounting her experience I ask her, "Is this where your story ends?" She quickly replies, "No! This is where the story begins!" Her experience of producing the show marks the beginning of something new for her.

*Post Performance*

People have been formally invited to after show drinks for networking purposes. The performance generates a number of points of divergence in the conversations. Audience members are also keen to speak to members of the Company. Half the audience completes a feedback form.

***Performance 5: July Public Performance<sup>44</sup>***

<i>Wider Context</i>	<i>One of five bi-monthly public performances hosted by The Brisbane Playback Theatre Company.</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Theme of the performance — Traveling</i>
<i>Place and Space</i>	<i>The performance occurs in the regular venue.</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>Diverse, often not mainstream theatregoers, many are new to Playback Theatre, some are regulars.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>There are 21 participants; 17 women, 4 men. The age range includes: under 25 (7), over 55 (3) Approx. one-third of the audience is new to Playback Theatre. For one-third it is only their second show. There are some regulars in the audience.</i>

*The Stories – Performance 5*

The performance opens with the conductor's reflections on her traveling experiences. Audience stories converge around the theme of recent trips and their purpose, and recent trips and their impact: how a road trip provides time for reflection, how a trip to Sydney brings new opportunities and a special meeting. One woman has traveled from Kiribas to be sharing this event with her friend. A group of five young women arrive late. Time is given to their story of losing keys, running late, and the unreliable transport options of youth. The performance next transports us to China and a moment of conflict for a traveler who is in this remote and beautiful place and has no one with whom she can share it. The next few stories expand on some of the earlier themes. A young woman recalls playing truant with her friends and strolling through the forest to discover a lake. They have no purpose in being there and are startled by a man who emerges from what seemed like no-where with his dog. Shockingly, the dog urinates on the teller's bag. They run back to school laughing with uncertainty.

<sup>44</sup> For more specific detail about the performances hosted as part of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company's annual program see the tabulated details for the March Public Performance on page 139.

There is a story about a chance meeting in a nightclub. The woman takes a risk and offers a stranger a ride home. On the three-hour car trip she runs out of petrol. Five years later they are still married and have a child. Hitchhiking in Turkey was the subject of the next story. A woman tells of how she experienced incredible fear when three Muslim men who speak no English offer them a ride - they accept! Crouching in the back of the car she and her girlfriend concoct an escape plan that includes abandoning their luggage and running. They are astounded when the men pull over and excitedly gesture to them. The young Australian women's fear turns to bewilderment and embarrassment when they realise the men are urging them to witness a herd of deer grazing by the roadside. Italy is evoked in another story. As a young Australian artist of Italian descent, the teller lives for a short time in Italy to pursue her art. She meets another young Australian woman there, and describes the friendship as wild and crazy, two girls far from home in a strange land. They listen to English-speaking radio programs, phone up and request songs by Australian bands. In hindsight, she becomes aware of how homesick she was during that time.

*Post Performance*

A group of ten people join the formal discussion group I have organised for research purposes. Others remain seated, speaking with the people in adjacent chairs for some time. The young women who arrived late are gathered outside for over thirty minutes. There is a particularly social feel to the after show period. An hour and a half later the final stragglers reluctantly leave as Company members bump out and clean up.

***Performance 6: September Public Performance<sup>45</sup>***

<i>Wider Context</i>	<i>Another of the five bi-monthly public performances hosted by The Brisbane Playback Theatre Company.</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Theme of the performance — Change.</i>
<i>Place and Space</i>	<i>The performance occurred in the same non-theatre venue described previously.</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>See details listed for March &amp; July Public Performance above.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>There are 33 participants; 20 women, 13 men. The age range includes: under 25 (15), over 55 (7) More than half the audience is new to Playback Theatre. There is a large group from a Youth Drug &amp; Alcohol Rehabilitation service. There are some regulars in the audience.</i>

<sup>45</sup> For more specific detail about the performances hosted as part of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company's annual program see the tabulated details for the March Public Performance on page 139.



*The Stories- Performance 6*

This is an unusual show in that it features a large group of young people (12) from a drug and alcohol rehabilitation unit, almost half the audience. While there is a selection of tellers very early in the show, the younger people have such hunger to tell<sup>46</sup> that their contributions predominate in this performance. There are two stories by young men. Both stories evoke the world of the drug addict and how little awareness the addict has. Significant in both stories is the casting of others. In one story, it is the boy's mother, and in the other, a sister, who have been instrumental in supporting the young men despite their often-bad behaviour toward them. A young woman tells of a cherished reunion with her family despite the shame she feels about how she has previously behaved.

*Post Performance*

The large group of young people leave together after about 30 minutes. The other audience members remain seated, speaking with others nearby before moving to get tea and coffee, and continue talking. The crowd disperses within 45 minutes.

***Performance 7: Mental Health Week Performance***

<i>Wider Context</i>	<i>Annual Mental Health week is chosen as the date for the Launch of a community resource folder - The Recovery Kit - developed by people with mental illness to assist with daily living and coping. Part of a broader program of events raising awareness about mental health.</i>
<i>The Purpose</i>	<i>To celebrate the launch of The Recovery Kit and acknowledge the contributions of people in the local area to the mental health agenda.</i>
<i>Place and Space</i>	<i>Local community centre. Large contemporary building with polished wooden floor. 'Home' to many community groups and events in the area including the 'music group' for people with mental illness.</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>People with mental illness and carers. Representatives of government and non-government services supporting the mental health agenda.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>As above. There are 68 audience members (13 of who were outside during the performance); 45 women, 23 men. More than three-quarters of the audience have no prior experience of Playback Theatre. The position of the event at the launch of both Mental Health Week and the Recovery Kit meant that the audience is diverse and composed of the regular attendees of meetings, forums and events within the district. Many of the people with a mental illness who use the venue weekly for their music group end up outside talking to each other due to their lack of interest in the politician's speeches that preceded the Playback Theatre performance.</i>

<sup>46</sup> I later learned that part of the rehabilitation program requires the recovering drug and alcohol user to "confess" and to "apologise." When the young people brought this mandate into the ritual space of the playback theatre performance, they felt compelled to own up to both their addictions and how their addictions had affected people they loved.

*The Stories – Performance 7*

This performance is preceded by a politician's speech that goes well over-time. In the transition that follows we hear how people are keen to see what is next, keen to be part of it, hoping that it recognises the contributions of the community in the work of the mental health sector. As the conductor, I join the community by acknowledging my own response to the Recovery Kit. I speak about wanting to give it to my sister and the uncertainty I feel about raising the subject of mental illness with her. I do not want her to feel labeled, yet I do want her to feel validated and not ignored or silenced because I am not courageous enough to connect with her truthfully. There are many stories from carers and family members<sup>47</sup>.

A woman remembers how her 11-year-old brother is institutionalised due to his schizophrenia. Her mother is told "he'll get over it". Over many, many years, this "promise of hope" destroys her mother spirit. A father tells of his son's mismanagement in the medical system and how poor treatment and misdiagnosis wreak havoc in the family: "who do we trust if the doctors keep getting it wrong?" A professional admits to feeling powerless in her job at the prison - "people with mental illness do not belong in gaol". A man pays homage to his wife, who travels the state telling her story about living with a mental illness. He is very proud. A professional tells about her conflict of having "distance" yet feeling deeply when the stories she hears connect with her own personal experience. A woman urges that we all remain positive. In her experience good things came out of the struggle.

Next, a woman comes to the stage and tells of her "struggle". She recounts a time in her life where she is caring for her brother with mental illness. Her (much older) husband appears supportive in public but at night in their bedroom complains about having the brother around. Eventually, the husband becomes ill and the woman is stretched to care for both men. When her husband passes away, the woman feels conflicted about her husband's "two-faces" and her moral dilemma about the lack of openness between the two men. Stories stating the reality of living with a family member with mental illness follow: one mother tells how she feels about her 19-year-old son being in a locked ward, "they tell me to go and get on with my life. They don't understand that my son is my life".

<sup>47</sup> It is significant to note that there was no specific story from someone living with mental illness in this performance.

In the final story a mother recalls the ups and downs of her son's violent episodes. She is reflective and acknowledges her realisation that he has been her greatest teacher, "he has taught me to be myself."

*Post Performance*

People have been formally invited to after show refreshments for the purposes of ongoing exchange of stories and the strengthening of links that are fostered in the formal performance. A local band play and lunch is provided. There is a high level of interaction amongst audience members. People are telling stories and sharing their opinions about the performance. Many audience members fill in the feedback page and make efforts to speak to members of The Company giving feedback and suggestions.

***Performance & Refugee Week Performance***

<i>Wider Context</i>	<i>A local Multicultural Development Organisation representative responsible for organising an event during Refugee Week saw Playback Theatre at the Reconciliation performance and approaches me about being involved. Due to the funding source for the performance it is conceived as a broad community event but promoted through refugee and asylum seeker support organisations.</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	<i>The stated purpose is to celebrate Brisbane as a Colourful Community. Other purposes include providing a 'good experience' for the refugee and asylum seeker populations and associated agencies.</i>
<i>Place and Space</i>	<i>Local performing space - an old cinema converted for theatre. Poor lighting, difficult stage area.</i>
<i>Target Audience</i>	<i>Those in the multicultural development organisation 'catchment' - promoted through all agencies working with refugees, asylum seekers and newly-arrived migrants, and the "ethnic community" agencies.</i>
<i>Actual Audience</i>	<i>As above. There was 57 audience members, 35 women, 22 men and three children. Almost all audience members have no prior experience of Playback Theatre. Refugee and asylum seeker audience members are admitted free, as guests of the host organisation. Local community sector and government sector workers pay. Some audience members are general public but these audience members are connected to Brisbane Playback Theatre Network in some way.</i>

*The Stories- Performance 8*

This performance commences with a social atmosphere where the actors and conductor introduce themselves and the invitation is made to the audience to introduce themselves to each other. Early contributions speak about the performance itself with a teller stating that it is nice to be invited to something outside of what she

would normally choose. Another states that it is interesting to see something different. A woman highlights the theme when she announces that she is "keen to get involved in celebrating our colourful community." Audience contributions turn to stories about belonging: someone has recently moved back to Brisbane after living away, "it's home but it's not really home too."

A man shares about migrating from England: "this is my new home". A woman who has migrated from Korea expresses her feelings that "it doesn't feel like home yet". A Japanese woman speaks of how she feels more at home now but is homesick. A young woman from El Salvador reflects on the opportunities she has here and wonders what it would be like for her if she had stayed in El Salvador. Coming onto the stage, a young woman recounts her childhood expedition to Amman. Living there for a year with her family, she remembers feeling very white and conspicuous. The story ends this night with her and her sister witnessing the humiliation of a Pakistani man at the airport. After her family are admitted with minimal scrutiny, the Pakistani man is searched mercilessly, his possessions spread all over the counter. Eventually a well-bound package is ripped open scattering nuts all over the floor. She remembers him on his hands and knees recovering the nuts.

The next story is told by a girl of 11 years. She shares her experience of leaving Iraq; her family is split in three with her brothers sent to The Netherlands, her father remaining in Iraq and her mother, sister and herself on a journey through Pakistan, eventually to Indonesia and Christmas Island. She recalls how her mother almost fell in the water as she boarded one of the boats during the marathon journey. The absence of her father had been unbearable. The story ends with her memory of arriving where they are welcomed with open arms. This story strongly evokes the war in Iraq and the consequences of war in the world. Audience members share a variety of responses that are enacted in brief fluid sculptures. One feels awkward, another is angry, she calls out, "these are not stories these are people's lives," another shares her feelings about missing her own father. The little girl's father says, "We suffered, we still suffer." The transition after this is slow and deliberate with me as conductor inviting a story from a man in a wheelchair. He declines. Another man comes quickly from the back of the room. He is missing Hong Kong. His Australian-born teenage son is not treating him the way sons treat their fathers in Hong Kong. He feels a loss of connection to his son, and grief about not being in Hong Kong at this time. After

this enactment, the Ethiopian man in the wheelchair that I had invited earlier signals to tell. It is near the close of the ritual and I chose to speak to him from his place in the audience. He reveals his experiences at the hands of Australian officials. Due to his disability, he is not considered a worthwhile resident. This has resulted in his being in pain for long periods because he cannot access services and appropriate treatment for his back. His pleas for a fair hearing have been futile. He feels very unwelcome.

#### *Post Performance*

People have been formally invited to supper as a way to wrap up the event. English is the second language for about half of the audience participants, which leads to people gathering in language groups. I observe that a great proportion of the after-show conversation is on the value and the dangers of the form rather than the telling of more stories. Audience members are keen to speak to members of the Company, some want details of how to organise Playback Theatre for another audience. More than half the audience completes a feedback form.

### **5.3 Summary**

This section has documented the contexts and stories from the eight performance events that have been drawn upon to construct this thesis. Each event has been reported with particular care given to situating it in the broader context. The placement of each event as a one-off community-based activity is a defining feature and has directed the focus of the research project. Each performance has been a unique experience regardless of whether it has been designed specifically for communities associated with marginal social identities, e.g. disability, mental health, and refugee, or for generic audiences hosted by the Company. A discussion about the way in which the context and the purpose of a performance has influenced audience members occurs in the next chapter. Meanwhile, in the following section I present information about the composition of the audiences who have attended the various performances.

#### **5.4 Audience Composition**

Integrated into the performance summaries is information about the composition of audiences at the performances featured in the study. It is outside the scope and purpose of the study to undertake an empirical analysis of audience composition, however the observational data reveal some interesting trends about the Playback Theatre audiences during the study period. As suggested above, audience members at Playback Theatre are predominantly female. While earlier performances reveal an audience composition where age tends to be over 25, this is challenged by the composition of the July and September public performance audiences which show an increase in attendance by those under 25 years. A large proportion of these young people are affiliated with a service for drug and alcohol rehabilitation and have come on the recommendation of their arts worker. It is unusual to have a large group (>10) come together. Another trend in the performances in the study is the predominance of audience members who have no previous experience of Playback Theatre. This information is possibly related to the one-off community-based performance focus of the study. The reasons individual audience members choose to attend the Playback Theatre performance is explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Crossing the Threshold: Initial Engagement and Participation**

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.

Martha Graham (1951)<sup>48</sup>

In the spirit of Martha Graham, Chapters Six and Seven represent my particular reading of the data. Through consultations with informants I have learned that each of them has their own unique experience of the Playback Theatre performance. Audience members' experiences of the Playback Theatre performance arise from two identifiable and interactive positions, the familiar spectator position, and that of the less familiar role in the context of a theatrical event, participant. Audience members readily accept their place as theatre spectators at Playback Theatre finding it familiar and recognisable. The role of participant, however, is not automatic or straightforward for all people. Despite Playback Theatre being promoted as an interactive experience, some audience members are often surprised by the degree to which their involvement can influence the content and spirit of the show. Nevertheless, audience members generally embrace the possibility of participating.

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<sup>48</sup> In Nachmanovitch (1990, p.25).

The two chapters are organised following the chronological progression of a Playback Theatre performance: pre-performance, performance, and post-performance. Chapter 6 presents the collection of findings and discussion on audience members' experiences of participating in the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance. I cover the initial engagement in the event and the experience of reflective distance for audience members as they separate from the mundane to the heightened world of the performance. The findings associated with spectating are presented in the next chapter. Chapter 7 also reports on audience members' experiences of the after-show period where they go through various levels of integration as they move from the ritual performance space to that of the ordinary everyday world.

As reported in the Methodology chapter, the findings have been consolidated through an iterative process of interviewing and observing, transcribing and analysing, and interpreting and writing. The themes that I identified early in the process had been influenced by the frequency of certain experiences in the data. These have been extended through written reflection and reflective dialogues and the search for audience experiences that contravene the early dominant themes. Additional reflection has focused on interrogating the way in which my biases and assumptions have perhaps influenced the organisation of the data. A number of singularities have been noted and included. The findings are composed as an inter-textual account weaving selections from the data with my interpretation, and samples from the literature.

### **6.1 Initial Engagement**

The way in which audience members approach their preliminary engagement at the Playback Theatre performance is influenced by a number of factors. In this section I discuss those factors that impact on audience members' initial engagement and introduce the reader to the notion of reflective distance. I establish how this informs and directs the way in which audience members participate and spectate throughout the performance. Interspersed



throughout the findings that are reported in the chapter is reference to the way in which the various factors affecting initial engagement and reflective distance might continue to impact on audience members at the Playback Theatre performance.

### **6.1.1 Factors Affecting Initial Engagement**

Interviews and observations<sup>49</sup> suggest that audience members arrive at Playback Theatre with certain expectations. These expectations arise in relation to the reasons they have for coming to the event. Initial engagement appears to be shaped by audience members' prior knowledge of Playback Theatre and their affiliation with the context informing the event. On arrival, the venue, audience size, and audience composition each or all impact in various ways to influence the initial engagement of individuals at the performance.

#### *Reason for coming*

Audience members have attributed their primary reasons for attending to their affiliation with the context, their interest in the Playback Theatre form, or their association with another. Audience members familiar with Playback Theatre have suggested that their attendance at a particular show has been equally influenced by their affiliation with the context and their interest in the form.

#### *Affiliation with the Context*

Audience members come to Playback Theatre because of an affiliation to the broader context or with the broader community within which the performance is placed<sup>50</sup>. For example, the

<sup>49</sup> Dawn identified that audience members' expectations seemed to play a significant role in how people initially engaged.

<sup>50</sup> In the previous chapter, I have documented the performances in the study, showing that five of them were situated in specific contexts or what could be called communities of interest. The promotional material for these performances alluded to the generic purpose of the community event as a forum for personal stories that was contained, creative, and celebratory. It introduced the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company and gave a brief explanation of the Playback Theatre method. (See Appendix 3 for examples of promotional material for DAW performance). The other three performances were part of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company's Public Performance Program 2002. Themes for these events were not publicised. Promotional material claimed that the performance would "bring together people from all walks of life for an evening that honours stories from the community" (BPTC, 2002).

performance staged during Mental Health Week in a provincial centre north of Brisbane was promoted in the context of an extended program of Mental Health Week activities. This ensured a wide reach through the relevant networks. The performance was commissioned for the launch of a rehabilitation package, The Recovery Kit, developed especially for mental health clients by others who have made a successful transition to living in the community and managing their mental health. Audience members' relationship to the broader Mental Health context, as discrete from the Playback Theatre form, was intrinsic to their attendance. After the show one woman has admitted that she 'didn't know [Playback Theatre] was going to be there so I didn't know what to expect' (Alice, MHW01, L22). There were similar comments made in relation to performances conducted during other *Weeks* due to a practice of attending community functions to support awareness raising. For example, a woman has stated that the occurrence of the performance during Disability Action Week provided sufficient motivation for her to attend. She added, 'I didn't have a clue what it was about' (Carly, DAW06, L100). At times, the surprise audience members experience when they discover Playback Theatre impedes their engagement. This is explored later in the chapter.

#### *Familiarity with Playback Theatre*

There have been audience members at each performance that have attended because they felt a particular affinity with the Playback Theatre method or community. This is expressed as a particular interest in the aesthetic of Playback Theatre and a desire to witness the form in action. These audience members often have previous experience of Playback Theatre and express the belief that it could be a good way to explore the stated theme or engage with others in the specific context (see for example: DAW07, MHW04, Rec05, L283, Rec07, L180). Others may have been unfamiliar with Playback Theatre but came because it was publicised as "theatre", "stories" and/or "interactive" in the promotional material, or by others.

Alternatively, audience members may have been urged to see the form because of how it aligned to their other interests (see for example, Rec10, Rec12, Jul01, Jul04).

*Combined reason - context and form*

Audience members who have come with an interest in the form and some affiliation with the context can experience a strong initial engagement due to 'consciously' bringing 'all the stuff [they] have about the topic' (Helen, Rec08, L328). In the example below, Jude expresses that she was motivated to come because of reconciliation and because of Playback Theatre. Unlike others her interest in Playback Theatre equates to an evaluative purpose, and in many ways provided a third reason for coming. She says:

I had two reasons really for coming. One was to look at the form with a view of, 'Is this a suitable thing for what we are planning for refugee week', and the other thing was that I was involved in a reconciliation learning circle and we did great things together, and it petered out. I thought it's about time I relooked at what does reconciliation mean to me, so that's the second reason I went (Jude, Rec04, L14)

While her desire to reconnect with some element of activism in her past has motivated her to come to the performance she concludes that the way in which Playback Theatre has facilitated the exploration of the reconciliation has been limited.

*Affiliation with an individual*

Some audience members have attended a performance because of their relationship with another. In some cases this has been a husband coming with his wife (see for example, Rec10, L79, Jul02, L4), people coming with friends or work colleagues (Pride02, Rec14, MDA12, 14, Jul01, 04) and mothers coming with daughters (Rec13). There were also people present because of their relationship with a performer in The Company (see for example, Rec06, Pride03).

In conclusion, a number of tensions emerge directly from why people come to the Playback Theatre performance, particularly when their reasons extended beyond their personal

commitment to the theme or the form. What has emerged is that it is likely that an individual's reasons for coming lead to certain expectations. The way in which these expectations are met, not met, and in some cases exceeded, often determines how the individual engages in the process and their subsequent experiences of the performance. These experiences are discussed as they appear throughout this chapter.

### **6.1.2 *Reading the Audience and Venue***

Bennett (1990) reports that on arrival audience members engage in a reading of the venue and the audience as they integrate into the social environment. The reasons people come to a performance contributes to a multifaceted audience composition. Some audience members have reported their analysis of the audience composition in interviews. For example, one suggests that:

[T]here were two distinct groups - people that know Playback Theatre and people who come because of the theme or because they belong to the organisation. ... The more mixed [the audience is] the harder it is to (find a) focus that resonates with the whole audience (Otto, MDA05, L5).

Observation data alludes to Playback Theatre audiences as 'a group of many groups' (Rea, OD03, L96) and as 'individuals, groups and couples' (Craig, OD01, L224). Bea reports that the audience at the Reconciliation performance was 'disparate' and remarks that 'it held together better than I thought it was going to' (Pride02, L404). Sarah assesses the same crowd suggesting that the 'holding together' that Bea alludes to was an unexpected and mysterious part of the ritual experience. She says:

[What] I find amazing is how quickly the trust builds in the group. It's not like a workshop you've just paid for and you've said, 'Ok these are the rules of engagement here: nobody is to interrupt anyone else, etc.' It's not like you've stated them, but its kind of an unspoken thing. It's interesting at the Reconciliation one actually, because that was such a mixed group and it still happened. There were men there, a lot more men than there is usually, there were straight people there as well as gay, and all different classes of people. It quickly became this intimate space where it was safe to tell your stories (Sarah, referring back to Reconciliation performance during interview about Pride performance, Pride02, L62).

These readings of the audiences at the Refugee and Reconciliation performances indicate that who is there has some bearing on audience members' initial engagement. Informants suggest

that at times it is actual composition, i.e. accurate or known information about others in the audience that has influenced their initial engagement. Assumed information about the audience also impacts on initial engagement. Conversely, who is missing or whom people came to the performance with could influence initial engagement.

Reading of the venue is also implicated as influencing initial engagement. Previously, I state that the venues for these eight events have been chosen on the basis of size, accessibility and appropriateness to the interactive needs of Playback Theatre. Availability and affordability were also factors. Data suggest that the venue has not been a neutral element for audience members' initial engagement.

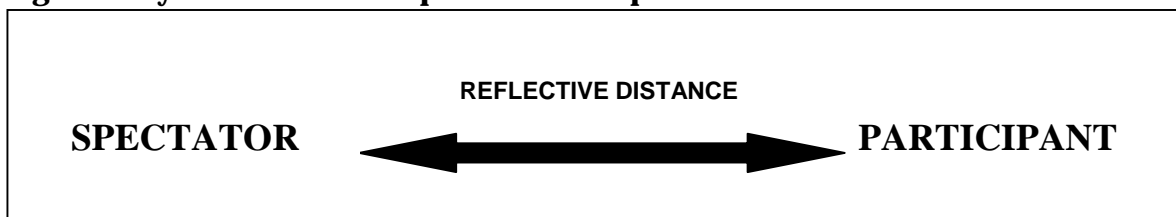
The tensions arising from what is unexpected and the adjustment audience members make in response to this is not limited to their initial engagement at the event. Later in the chapter I discuss how these factors contribute to helping or hindering an individual audience member's capacity and desire to participate, to experience flow, and to enter the collective experience of *communitas* in the ritual process. Next, I introduce the concept of reflective distance and report various examples to illustrate audience members' engagement in reflective distance during the Playback Theatre performance.

### **6.1.3      *Reflective Distance***

Regardless of their expectations of the event, what they encounter on arriving at the venue and at the commencement of the performance, audience members move toward what is familiar and work to try to make sense of what is strange or unusual as they engage in the Playback Theatre event. This results in a participative (or anticipative) tension due to the interactive requirements of the form. This tension arises from the dynamic nature of the spectator-participant relationship (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 depicts the dynamic spectator-participant relationship linked by a bi-directional arrow. I have added *reflective distance* above the bi-directional arrow to capture what I have identified as a third dimension to audience engagement. This third dimension occurs in response to the spectator-participant dynamic and is intrinsic to audience members' engagement during the performance.

**Figure 5: Dynamic Nature of Spectator-Participant Roles**



Reflective distance refers to audience members' movement between the familiar role of spectator and the (less traditional) role of participant. Shifting between the two roles, audience members undertake a process of momentary distancing with the intention of re-engaging. While this has been more prevalent for those with no prior experience of Playback Theatre, the research found that most audience members experience reflective distancing at some stage during the performance. In an early reflective dialogue I comment:

It seems to me that they are constantly sitting there wondering if they'll say what's in their minds now. In this method we ask them to continually notice their responses. Every time they notice their response they have to make a decision about whether they're going to bring it out or not (OD07, L479).

This move to reflexive awareness could be understood in Turner's (1982) parlance. He proposes that during reflexive activity participants will experience an interruption to flow or a flow-break. The data drawn from the Playback Theatre performances featured herein suggest that reflective distance has elements of flow and, in fact, is intrinsic to audience members establishing flow. This is an important element of reflective distance and distinguishes it from those moments when an audience member might totally disengage. This notion of reflective distance aligns with Myerhoff's (1990) idea that audience members can experience flow while

being simultaneously aware. The findings indicate that the ritual frames of Playback Theatre are more likely to induce flow experiences for audience members rather than the traditional trance-state often associated with ritual events and happenings. The experience of reflective distance is activated as audience members progress through what van Gennep (in Guss, 2001, Turner, 1969) names the "period of separation" where they move in time and space from the ordinary domestic domain to the heightened ritual domain (p.161). Next, I elaborate on the shift between the roles of spectator and participant into reflective distance during this period of initial engagement. Further exploration of the audience members' engagement in reflective distance is woven throughout the chapter.

Informants' responses suggest that reflective distance is linked to the expectations people have of the event. As suggested previously, audience members could have very little idea about what to expect at Playback Theatre performances (see DAW07, L120, for example). This immediately places those audience members in the position of needing to work out what is required as the performance progresses. In reflective distance, audience members gather information about what they are observing and experiencing particularly if it appears unfamiliar or unexpected. They then assess or weigh-up what they discover and come to some conclusion. This enables them to renegotiate their level of engagement in the Playback Theatre ritual in line with their new knowledge. This dynamic process occurs repeatedly and at all stages of the performance. It is like a metaphorical moment of moving away from the action when there are surprises or shifts in the form. This movement away accommodates the individual's thoughtful or reflective activity and acts to shift their attention away from the performative moment. Lack of certainty about the process and what is expected of them serves to distance audience members as they attempt to make sense of what is happening and work out how they can join in. The transcripts suggest that reflective distance could be ignited by an intuitive response to some incongruity in the shape of the performance or the integrity

of the form (see for example, MDA14, L40). Surprises about the performers and a contradiction of the values implicit in the form could also activate reflective distance (see for example, Rec10, L12 & MDA14, L40 respectively).

In the initial stages, reflective distance is sparked by the degree to which the Playback Theatre performance has deviated from what the audience member has expected. Expectations may have been linked to the notion of the event as theatre, its purpose or context, and/or previous experiences of Playback Theatre. What audience members see and experience when they arrive at the performance immediately affects them. The following passage from Craig's observation notes evokes one description of what audience members have encountered on arriving at the Reconciliation performance.

There was a wonderful sense of community. There were people walking up, shaking hands, and introducing themselves. People felt very comfortable to do this. It wasn't contrived and it wasn't forced. That old guy, I noticed him all the time. He was 'who are you?' and he'd shake their hand and say this is who I am. ... There was individuals, groups, couples ... It reminded me of an old town public meeting, 'let's gather' let's we - the community - gather, and let's talk about what's on. ... There was a sense of event, but not in a traditional (theatre) sense. It even has its own rituals. It's not like we're going to see play [at] 'the theatre' [yet] there is a set of rituals that take place. [People created] their own set of rituals - introducing and getting coffee, sitting back, ... almost like they were at home ... and when the performance began, there was immediate silence when the actors entered (Craig, OD01, 224).

Craig's description and interpretation suggests that audience members' behaviour could influence what was perceived to be occurring. Here, the 'old guy' is seen shaking people's hands, welcoming them, perhaps evoking 'a wonderful sense of community' for Craig. The sense of community' and 'town meeting' ambience may have been equally derived from the welcoming and hosting done by the front of house<sup>51</sup> personnel.

<sup>51</sup> At this performance I organised an extra person to help out at front-of-house. This was partly so that the audience members would be well hosted and facilitated to complete the preliminary feedback page I was trialing for the research. Company member Rebecca and her friend Marion have a natural rapport with each other and this created a warm and welcoming feel at the door. They welcomed people and proceeded to explain various aspects of the event including an invitation to 'help themselves' to tea and coffee. It is my belief that these two women strongly influenced the opening ambience Craig described.



Informants have revealed that their initial engagement in the Playback Theatre ritual can initiate a process of making comparison between the (non-traditional) Playback Theatre event and what they have expected of a theatre experience. The following comment makes a particular comparison:

[U]nlike Playback I have to get a few drinks before I go and my colleague had to bully me into going ... it was hideous, but it was hideously entertaining on a Friday night after a bottle of wine. Now I don't have to do that for Playback. You have to keep me away, I don't have to drink a bottle of wine to be engaged, but I'm not 'entertained', I'm 'engaged.' ... There's something that nourishes the soul in this method, and it nourishes the communal soul of the group that's there for the evening, with the recognition and respect of a fundamental human process and that is, that you are *feeling* life. So it's like poetry and art. [My] feeling life is touched. In the other kind of performance [my] feeling life can be touched too, but it's in a very caricatured, contrived way (Asha, Mar03, L125).

In this excerpt, Asha (an experienced Playback Theatre audience member) makes a comparison between Playback Theatre and a night at a specific kind of conventional theatre. She states that, for her, conventional theatre lacks what she requires or desires for 'engagement'. Playback Theatre offers nourishment for both her's and the communal soul. This act of comparing or analysing the performance by an audience member aligns with Coppieters' (in Bennett, 1990) finding regarding audiences at nontraditional theatre events. He claims that audiences engage in a meta-process as they participate and tend to be particularly aware of how the nontraditional event differs from what they had come to expect of a traditional theatre event. Interview data suggests that this is particularly so for first time audience members.

The deviation of Playback Theatre from a conventional theatre experience has presented various challenges for audience members depending on their expectations, and their previous experiences of non-traditional or interactive theatre performances. For some it has been confronting, as the following comment shows:

I wasn't used to that kind of theatre. I found it quite confronting that this was on an emotional level ... I was watching, looking back to see whose story it was, seeing if they were reacting in the right way, the traditional way, and that was good. I was trying to understand what was going on. I got more involved, got more

carried away, with some of the longer stories at the end where they developed a diverse look at the issues (Eloise, Rec01, L35).

In this comment made immediately after the reconciliation performance, Eloise explains the process she undertook to neutralise some of her discomfort while becoming familiar with the form. She states that she was 'watching, looking back' at the storyteller. She acknowledges that she was 'trying to understand what was going on' and that eventually she has been 'carried away'. Observation data suggest that audience members are constantly engaged in watching,

As soon as a person speaks, that's where the focus of the audience goes. [They] turn around and look. [They] don't just sit out front and hear the story, they turn around and make that connection with who is speaking (Craig, OD01, L512).

Eloise's experience early in the performance could signal the separation phase that ritual theory reports, where participants move toward the heightened world of the ritual performance away from the ordinary or the everyday, or in this case familiar theatre experience (see for example, Guss, 2001, Turner, 1969, 1982). It is when audience members cross this threshold Schechner (1985) claims, that the performance comes to life and succeeds. Eloise's comment shows her movement to reflective distance. She does this by way of observing the process and assessing the consequences of participation on others. In her reflective role she is able to look 'at the people' and ascertain that after their stories are enacted they look 'really relieved' (Rec01, L245). This comment suggests that Eloise is gathering information about the unfamiliar form. She has then been able to surrender or renegotiate her expectations of this theatre event and her idea about what constitutes performance or public gatherings and move toward being more involved. In the excerpt Eloise describes her entry into the liminal zone. She states that at some point she is carried away. She has been able to overcome her sense of repulsion from or caution with what is different about this event. She has become free to enter the liminal space of the theatre event as an engaged spectator. Further discussion of audience members' experience of the liminal dimension of Playback Theatre occurs later in the chapter.

Another adjustment or comparison for audience members as they engage in the Playback Theatre form for the first time concerns the way in which their behavior differs from how they might behave in other public forums. For instance,

[It was] challenging for me, overcoming stage fright. [I found] myself thinking about whether I would participate. I am not a shy person either, I am usually comfortable talking with audiences ... that's part of my role (Ariel, MDA01, L10).

Ariel's comment suggests that Playback Theatre is a contradictory public social environment.

Observing the reconciliation performance, Craig proposes that the ambience is suggestive of a private social environment. During a co-observer dialogue he refers to the ambience and structure of the event as being like an 'animated dinner party conversation' (OD01, L230).

This aggregation of various social environments is confusing and challenging for some invoking a reflective response.

The process of reflective distancing continues as the performance progresses. Audience members engage in analysis about the production of the enactment (Jul05, L218), the position and use of stories (DAW07, L15), the tellers (DAW06, L235), the performers (Rec03, L169), the use of theatrical devices such as music, props, space and style (Rec09a, L67, MHW04, L1033), and the magical or mystical dimension (Pride04, L86). Engagement in reflective distance is central to the way in which the audience moves toward or away from participating in the ritual process. The tension within individuals as they undertake the shift from the recognisable spectator role to the possible participant role provides something extra in the performance. In the next section, I present the data on audience members' experience of the Playback Theatre ritual as a potential forum for participation.

## **6.2 Participating**

The possibility of participating in the Playback Theatre ritual presents a significant focus for audience members. As I suggest above the interactive nature of Playback Theatre is often a surprise for them. This results in audience members undergoing a process of preparing to

participate. Interview and reflective data suggest that various elements influence the individual audience member's capacity and desire to participate. In this section, I present what I have discovered about the primary way in which audience members participate at the Playback Theatre event through the telling of their personal story. I consider the experiences of audience members when they are deciding whether to tell a story, the experiences of audience members who choose to tell and the experiences of audience members who choose not to tell. I discuss those elements that assist audience members to participate and those things that impede participation. I also report on the other ways audience members participate in the performances that are featured in the study.

### ***6.2.1 Preparing to participate***

Interview transcripts suggest that audience members undertake a process of consenting to participate or finding a preparedness to tell. This process enables audience members to occupy the second stage of van Gennep's (in Turner, 1969) ritual framework, and enter the liminal activity of Playback Theatre more fully. The most obvious position from which to participate in the Playback Theatre ritual is as a storyteller. In the Playback Theatre literature there is a good deal of interest in the audience participant who tells. This individual speaks aloud from the group, either seated amongst them or on stage alongside the conductor. Both sites of telling require the audience participant to assume a more direct performative role in the event. They step out, into the private/public threshold, bringing with them the content that will form the basis of the next dramatic display. This performative role involves audience-player<sup>52</sup> interaction in the production of the theatre event. While this transition and subsequent participation in the performance is somewhat central to the Playback Theatre method, it is in no way unique in storytelling theatre traditions (Denzin, 1989). There is an invitation implicit in the form and the invitation is also made repeatedly by the conductor during the

<sup>52</sup> Player in this context refers to the playback theatre performer on-stage in the event.

performance. Over the course of the study, I have discovered that there are a number of possible responses to the invitation to tell a story at Playback Theatre.

One response to the invitation to tell a story is for audience members to simply decide to join in. Informants who have made a conscious decision suggest that they felt a certain amount of ease with what they observed and experienced early in the ritual and came to understand that participation is a fundamental element of the form. For instance,

I really felt that if I was at Playback and this was how it was that I should participate because it depends on people's stories (Vickie, Jul04, L12).

Rather than this being a decision to tell a story it suggests a decision to participate or a personal commitment to accepting what is being offered through the form. Karp (1994) would say that participants who readily adapt to participating like this have a high degree of spontaneity. That is, it is likely that what they observe and experience does not create anxiety or fear in the participant, and thus, they are open to saying, 'Yes' to the invitations implicit in the form.

Some informants' responses indicate a lack of ease with the values they have observed or experienced as implicit in the Playback Theatre performance. This can lead to a high level of discomfort with the requirements of participation, particularly with respect to the centrality of personal story and the risks implicit in self-disclosure in a public setting. One informant cites her experiences as a writer as the reason she felt strongly resistant to participating in the performance she attended. She states that her belief as a writer is that she *owns* the story and that the personal story in Playback Theatre is the same as her authored work. As such, she claims that the teller should have both artistic license and self-responsibility. She states that she felt that the teller is abdicating their responsibility for dealing with their issues by telling their story in public (Elizabeth, Rec10, L31), a view that contradicts what Denzin (1989)

claims. He asserts that when one reveals their past to others they are taking "responsibility for their actions" (p.132).

In the two examples above, it is the way in which the participants' values interact with the values implicit in the Playback Theatre process that determines whether they moved toward (Vickie) or away (Elizabeth) from participating. Using Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) framework, it is likely that Elizabeth has been aroused by the challenges present in the Playback Theatre ritual, however the values conflict she has experienced is too great an obstacle for her to overcome and therefore has acted to impede or limit her capacity or desire to participate. Her continued lack of engagement is a consequence of this dynamic and has acted as a barrier to the flow experience for her. She states, 'I could never do that'. Further, Elizabeth does not appear to be invested in the success of the performance. Interactive and participatory theatre audience often enjoy the authority they have to direct the action. This confers on them an ownership over the process or a particular closeness to the process (O'Toole & Lepp, 2000) that was not evident in Elizabeth's comments. Later in the section I explore barriers to participation further. Meanwhile I present data from audience members who did experience a desire or in some cases a compulsion to participate.

### ***6.2.2 Feeling compelled to participate***

Beyond the barrier that Elizabeth has encountered, informants' experiences of Playback Theatre seem to make some logical sense to them and appear congruent with their values. Individual and discussion group interviews indicate that participants have commonly experienced their memories and stories surfacing during the Playback Theatre performance. In this way, participating could be considered a 'response' to the ritual structure inherent in the Playback Theatre form. The persistent invitation to tell a story by the conductor coupled with what is depicted through the stories and enactments draws audience members into the ritual in such a way that some have felt compelled to tell, as the following example demonstrates.

Helen reveals that she was strongly engaged by the first words of the night, 'I don't believe I have to say sorry. I've not done anything wrong' (RecVT, L39). During my after-show conversation with her, she reflects on how this statement affected her and resulted in her sharing her response during the performance. She says:

I thought 'oh it'll go away' [laugh] but then it was too insistent, I could feel it, I can't remember how, but I was connecting with other responses. I thought 'I *have* to say something.' ... I couldn't hold it anymore (Helen, Rec07, L38).

Helen's experience of an insistent desire to speak has compelled her to share her feeling early in the performance. This experience can be aligned with what Schechner suggests occurs between the audience and the performer. He states that audience members play an integral part in the performance and that this relationship generates a level of intensity that enables participants to enter the liminal zone. Not all audience participants have the opportunity to share their experience each time it arises in a Playback Theatre performance. The transcripts reveal numerous references to participants experiencing a repeated urge to tell during a performance. Some of these participants admit that they tried to resist the urge. For example:

I could have shared constantly, but I thought I shouldn't. Just about the travels through life, a million stories came into my head (Maxine, Jul01, L42, see also Jul03, L42, MHW01, L27).

The reasons individuals give for not telling at this point is again aligned with their specific values. Many of the reasons are linked to the way in which they see the performance as a forum for self-expression, promoting diversity and inclusion – values that underpin the contexts in which the performances feature, for example, mental health sector, disability advocacy, refugee and asylum seeker empowerment. Participants have engaged in reflective distancing to manage their desire to tell. Similarly, at the Reconciliation performance potential storytellers have engaged in the assessment of the context and the audience as they negotiated whether to tell their story. For instance, 'My story didn't fit ... it had nothing to do with reconciliation' (Jude, Rec04, L59). In another example prospective storyteller, Phoebe,

questions whether she had a right to tell in what she saw as a time-limited and theme-specific forum dedicated to Australian Aboriginal reconciliation (Phoebe, Rec06, L203).

The constant negotiation of whether to tell or not to tell acts to move participants in and out of reflective distance. Often the urge to tell dissipates as the audience member concerned watches the next story. However, audience members also discuss the experience of the ongoing awakening of images or glimpses of stories as the ritual has proceeded. The repeated recalling of stories and desire to tell them can be explained using Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of flow. At any given moment, audience members feel that they are capable of meeting the challenge (or of responding to the invitation) to participate. This sustained engagement in the process through awakening stories and a desire to tell them can also be understood in terms of Spolin's (1999) theory of improvised performance. She states that when performers or those preparing to perform (or tell their stories) are open to the moment, they become free to relate and to act. As the performer feels this freedom, the desire to relate and act is further enhanced. It is as if the openness of the stage and the presence of the actors transform the invitation to tell into an irresistible desire to act.

The urge to tell continues to build as the performance progresses for some audience members. One example of this is Kylie's experience. The final teller at the Reconciliation performance, Kylie has waited through the entire show with a growing desire to tell her story. She acknowledges that as the performance proceeded, what she has seen and heard has influenced her and changed her story somewhat. However, her urge to tell did not abate. Speaking with me later, she recounts the process leading up to her decision to tell her story/ies. 'In the first 5 minutes I had a lot of emotional responses. Some of the things got me angry. It was a real gamut of responses' (Kylie, Rec09a, L29). She lists the stories that came before hers and speaks about the ways in which each one added to her growing desire to tell. This has resulted in Kylie experiencing a number of moves across her threshold toward flow and back again.



The momentum that built as she chose not to act on her urge to speak out was finally expressed in what I have experienced as a somewhat detailed but confused telling of her story toward the end of the performance (RecVT, L486). A number of audience members' responses to this telling are reported later in the chapter.

Audience members' experiences of oscillating toward and away from telling appear to manifest as unexpressed tension in the early part of the performance. One audience member describes the move beyond this tension in the following way:

I was sitting there thinking that everyone was really uptight and then it reaches a critical point and 'woosh!' the audience opened up (Eloise, Rec01, L50).

This 'woosh' moment may point to a time in the process where newcomers to the form begin to make sense of the ritual process, and begin to determine the way in which they will engage or 'open up' as suggested above. During an observation dialogue, Craig spoke of this moment as the audience loosening up. He remarks, 'It's like the pressure has been lifted' (OD01, L576). The inference of mutuality and collectivity in the 'woosh' moment can be interpreted in terms of *communitas* (Turner, 1982) for the group. At this point, it appears that there is a collective move into the liminal zone of the ritual. A discussion among reflective partners (OD01, L848) raises concerns about the way teller autonomy or agency could be muted at this point. Craig deems it unlikely that a storyteller would feel comfortable renegeing on their offer to tell once they are on stage during the Playback Theatre performance. On Louella's suggestion that tellers would self regulate, Craig counters that the desire to renege may coincide with the enactment rather than the telling. He questions whether there is 'permission' in the form to interrupt the enactment. Individual audience interviews from the Refugee Week performance raise a similar concern suggesting instead that tellers are or become vulnerable on stage, or could feel pressured to tell. This is discussed later in the chapter.

### ***6.2.3 From audience to stage: deciding to tell***

Participants who speak about the gradual building of the urge to tell reveal a complex inner dialogue about whether or not to do more with the dynamic internal experience of the story that has been awoken. Different words are used to describe the process of a story emerging: stories 'percolated' (Darren, Rec05, L416), 'bubbled' (Sebastian, Jul05, L271), and 'were triggered' (Bea, Rec01, L193), stories 'came up', 'came forward,' and 'burst' out. Informants who have told stories during the performances have discussed their experience of deciding that they would share the story that had bubbled to the surface. This process appears to require the teller to rally a number of reasons as to why they would act on their desire to tell. These reasons may not necessarily be conscious at the time but are made conscious through the reflective process that has emerged in response to the research.

One view expressed suggests that some tellers feel at ease once they have identified that they want to tell a story. For example, "There was a point when the other woman spoke her story out I started to feel firm that there was a story for me and I wanted to tell it' (Anthony, Rec11, L11). Another view suggests that the decision is a conscious act to claim their right to tell. For example, Kylie says she thought, 'I can experience that. While I might only be young I do have a story to tell' (Kylie, Rec03, L159). During an interview, one audience member reveals that she became aware during the show that she had been sitting there thinking who she would cast to play her if she volunteered to tell her story (OD06, L456). While another view indicates that tellers engage in an elaborate internal dialogue before they feel able to act on the persistence of their desire to tell their story. What emerges from the interviews with tellers is that their decision to tell come after they have identified sufficient reasons to justify their action. Next, I recount Hillary's process of electing to come on stage to tell a story that was about to burst forth from her.

It is likely that Hillary arrived at the Mental Health Week performance with her stories somewhat present due to her high level of engagement in the context<sup>53</sup>. She claims that she became aware of a story she could tell early in the performance and as the performance got more underway, she has *decided* to tell. Hillary speaks about her motivation to tell being linked to what she would gain, and what it would do for others. She has wanted to 'grab the opportunity' for herself and on behalf of others. She says:

When you used the Playback Theatre as a way of verbalising and showing, wow! [I thought], this is going to do a lot for me. I was going to grab the opportunity, if nobody else is. If they didn't have the courage to do so. ... There are so many other people in a similar position as myself that care for someone who's mentally ill and I thought, 'I have got that courage to speak up, and they too get heard.' That's where the carers on Consumer Advisory Group<sup>54</sup> can get involved. That's why I'm here (Hillary, DAW04, L138).

While these reasons enable her to move toward telling her story, she later admits to another motive for telling. She says, 'In the back of mind I was thinking this is the safest place it will ever be for Nathaniel<sup>55</sup> to hear this' (Hillary, MHW06, L386).

Hillary's experience could be discussed in terms of Heidegger's (in Denzin, 1989) thesis. He reminds us that we are talking beings and as such we tell our stories to become who we are. In her experience of telling, Hillary doubles herself. She becomes a second self who while lodged in the past is telling in the present. Denzin suggests that at this point there are multiple selves of the teller speaking (Denzin, 1989). From these active and activated selves Hillary sat in the audience. The following excerpts recount her process of preparing to tell her story:

I was very overwhelmed to begin with. I was thinking 'how can you possibly reflect this story that we (I) have so heartfelt, inside our bellies (my belly) that makes us (me) feel the way we (I) do, and express it, like that, in all these little stories.' [So at that moment] I was thinking 'they can do this (the little stories), can they do that (my heartfelt-inside-my-belly-story)?' In a way, those first few stories were weaving the test of you. [As I watched] I thought, 'OK, they got part of it right, pretty well - and I had doubted you would get it right - [it was] close enough. You were touching (on) everything. That was great.

<sup>53</sup> The relationship between participation and context is discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>54</sup> The Consumer Advisory Group was the name given to the group of people who "advised" Community Health bodies and the State Health Authority on the points of views of consumers with respect to mental health policy. Consumers in this group included both individuals with mental illness and carers.

<sup>55</sup> Nathaniel is the storyteller's brother. His experience of this is reported later in the chapter.

[And as I sat there, I was thinking,] 'There are a huge amount of carers here. They're all very, very tired, because we've dealt with things, we're dealing with things, it's ongoing.' Then I thought, 'It's going well. Now, what's going to happen next?'

You had that space for people to decide whether or not they wanted their story to be out there. I had heavy legs, and inside was about the burst, whether I was going to run away or run up to you [laughs]. It was a pretty shaky moment. But once I got up, I could feel the strength of others, especially the CAG<sup>56</sup> group, they have a lot of faith in me, and I thought, 'Go for it Hillary!' And then comes telling the story (Hillary, MHW04, L212).

In order to cross the threshold into the liminal activity of the performance, Hillary rallies her various selves. Gathering herself together as she does is a step toward flow. She becomes, in Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) words, "master" of her own "fate" (p.3). As she announces, she decided to 'go for it!' Hillary 's decision to tell her story has been mediated by the conditions present at the time. It is not clear however whether the performance ritual has *created* the conditions that enable her to tell or whether the performance has *met* the conditions that she intuitively knows are necessary if she is to tell her personal story in public. When the performance does not meet these conditions, persistently urgent stories can remain untold, as is explored in the following section.

#### **6.2.4 A story left untold**

As illustrated by Hillary 's experience participants can engage in a complex inner process in and out of reflective distance – in and out of flow – about whether or not to tell their story. 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. The following account of Darren's

<sup>56</sup> CAG is the acronym for the Consumer Advisory Group. Hillary and Nathaniel are members and were involved in the compilation of the Recovery Kit that was launched at the Mental Health Week performance.

experience encompasses the way in which these factors have interacted to influence his decision about whether he would tell his story. When Darren 's story is triggered it is totally unexpected and surprises him considerably. He says:

I entered with the idea that I didn't have any experiences that related to the theme. Then had a whole lot of things go 'Bop! Bop! Bop!' (a sound representing each story). That really struck me about the night, we were telling stories like when a bunch of people sits around a table. It was a dynamic process. ... I had a bunch of things come up - personal stories - and I didn't really know there were issues there (Darren, Rec05, L355, L372).

Darren suggests that the liminal intensity sparked his stories. While the emergence of his story has been a surprise Darren reports that a number of other dimensions of the event were not as he expected. For instance,

The thing that struck me was that, there were three women on stage, or four women on stage, and two of them were older women, and I was quite surprised by that ... I was expecting a different venue. Some place more neutral. [When] I came in and realised that it was a community ... I felt really apart from that, and that worked against me feeling at home because a lot of people seemed to know each other and I didn't know anyone. I found myself doing some social-environmental (analysis), who are these people? I felt quite outside. And I was expecting to see Hanna<sup>57</sup> there, and she wasn't (Darren, Rec05, L297).

Darren admits that he met with a series of surprises: neither the venue and the ensemble were what he had expected, the audience appeared to know one another, he felt excluded, the familiar face he had expected to see in Hanna's, was not there. In a reflective discussion, Craig comments on the audience in a similar way, he notes that some appeared unusually familiar, like 'guests', where others appeared less at ease, like 'roll ups' (OD01, L146). It is likely that the number of surprises Darren encounters results in his being unable to respond adequately to the repetitive presentation of new situations as they came to light. This could be interpreted as what Karp (1994) calls low spontaneity or a loss of spontaneity. Indeed the uncertainty and possible anxiety Darren experiences as he encounters repeated surprises could have acted to immediately lower his spontaneity and lower the potential for him to enter the liminal activity.

<sup>57</sup> Hanna is a Brisbane Playback Theatre Company member. She personally invited Darren to the performance and part of his motivation to come was linked to seeing her perform. She had withdrawn from the performance due to illness.

Under these conditions there has been little likelihood of him having a flow experience. While I was unaware of Darren's dis-ease during the performance, some weeks later in the course of my reflective writing, I have become aware of the recurrent appearance of children in the stories at the reconciliation performance. It is probable that the final two stories have coincided approximately with the time Darren's story became persistent. The storytellers both began their stories from a childhood memory, however the focus of both was their adult experience. As such, the actors have done little with the material featuring them as children. Instead, they have focused on the details of the adult in the enactment. Darren's story featured him as a child. The increasing persistence of his story could be explained by the lack of attention to what Zánkay (1999) calls the "contravening forces" present in the two other stories (p.192). It is possible that Darren may have felt some easing of his inner conflict if the child-specific content of these stories had been evoked symbolically in relation to the adult content. Embodying the childhood dimension in the enactment could result in Darren releasing some of the intensity that was building around his story. The inclusion of this content in the dramatisation would succeed only if the enactment has captured the symbolic link that has caused the tellers to bring their childhood into the story in the first place. Alternatively, as conductor I could have acknowledged that children or childhood has emerged in both stories yet has not been prominent and specifically invited a story about childhood to bring this less emphasised perspective onto stage.

There are many factors impinging on Darren's capacity to relax and be involved. His experience suggests that when a story is activated and the conditions to tell that story have not been established the participant may engage in an assessment of the factors in the environment. Darren's experience of continually discovering elements that were not as he had expected: the venue, the composition of the audience, the composition of the performing

ensemble (including his expectation that his friend would be performing), and the style of acting has hindered Darren's capacity and desire to participate. Nevertheless, he has experienced his story as persistent and continued in his internal process of deciding whether to tell it in this context. When describing the experience, Darren says that his 'story was confusing' and contained complicated subject matter. In addition he decided that 'it might be too long' (Darren, Rec03, L188). As the performance has progressed, he has continued to resist the urge to tell his story. When speaking with him later, he recounts how he felt disappointed that he did not tell his story and admits that his resistance had remained strong throughout the show. His intense inner turmoil eases when he shares his experience with others in the after-show discussion group. He speaks of this experience:

Our discussion really helped me balance it, to collect other people's impressions, and to compare with mine. There were really strong recurring things, we were all full of stories and to express them was helpful (Darren, Rec05, L368)

Darren was still integrating the incongruity he had experienced between what he expected and what he encountered. His continual shifting in and out of reflective distance equates to repeated flow-breaks and has dominated his experience of the performance. His comment suggests that the period immediately following the performance has contained him in some ritualised way. This after-show period is a regular part of the Playback Theatre ritual. The discussion group interviews that have been facilitated and audio-taped immediately after the performances reveal that during this period people tell the stories they did not or could not tell during the performance. This is explored further in the next chapter as *Post-Performance*.

Darren's experience demonstrates how the simultaneous occurrence of a number of factors compounds to reinforce his resistance to telling and inhibit his participation and his experiences of flow. As suggested earlier, other informants also report *choosing* not to tell their stories. Interview transcripts reveal that audience members might regulate their involvement due to social protocols they recognise as intrinsic to the ritual. For example:

I was aware that my-age of white women were keen to speak up. I didn't have anything new to add [to what they had said]. I was hoping to hear diverse voices (Katie, MDA10, L25).

This comment suggests that people choose not to tell because their personal values direct them to 'leave space' for others (Maxine, Jul03, L42). Audience members admit to having a story they could have told if it had been required (Gerard, MHW04, L897). These audience members found themselves 'sitting back' because they 'could see there were others who were *trying* to say something' (Leda, MDA03, L74, my emphasis) or who *needed* to tell their story more than they did (Joss, MHW04, L827, my emphasis).

Thus, this action of leaving spaces for others is often linked to individual's rationalising that 'others' are more deserving of the opportunity to tell. However, a number of informant interviews reveal that there has been anti-oppressive values guiding the choice to resist telling. This is particularly evident in the Mental Health Week and Refugee Week performances. It also emerges in the reconciliation performance in terms of wanting to honour the space as a discussion for the 'Australian aborigine' story. One teller has revealed her reluctance to tell her story about her Cherokee heritage because she wanted to respect the intention of the performance and not 'usurp the Aboriginal story.' She says she found herself asking, 'is it appropriate' for me to tell my story (Phoebe, Rec06, L203).

### ***6.2.5 Barriers to participation***

Through Darren's story above, I have explored various elements that conspired to impede his participation. Other blocks to spontaneity are linked to audience members' familiarity with the ritual process. As was suggested earlier in the chapter, audience members who are new to Playback Theatre often find that a greater part of their initial engagement is dedicated to 'getting it' (Clare, DAW06, L854). Observation notes report how audience members watch early storytellers with a curiosity (OD01, L83). Clare's experience is presented below and



suggests that being unfamiliar with the form can inhibit participation and enjoyment and that a growing familiarity brings ease:

At first we didn't know what to expect. We watched and tried to catch on. I really started to get into the last part of it. The beginning was confusing. We didn't know what to expect or what to think. We had to wait and see. We started getting into it more toward the end ... After a while, when I realised that I wasn't going to have to speak, or be made to, and that I could watch other people's stories I was OK. But for quite a while I was worried I would be picked out (Clare, DAW05, L7, L38).

This correlates to what Johnstone (1981) claims with respect to freeing people to participate in improvised performance. He suggests that knowing the rules helps people to relax and join in. The ambivalence around participating expressed in Clare's and Darren's comments aligns with what Coppieters (in Bennett, 1990) discusses about audience members at non-traditional theatre events. The ritual rhythm of the performance works to destabilise the social structures and impel audience members to enter the liminal activity. The unexpected momentum of this can trigger strong resistance in some.

Through the course of the study, I have noticed that feeling unfamiliar with the ritual process or rules of engagement coupled with anxiety about performing has acted to inhibit audience members' participation. This has been particularly true for those attending the Mental Health Week performance. Effort had been invested in ensuring that the event would be well supported by the wider context. The timing and placement of the event was such that it enhanced the access of many people with an interest in mental health issues<sup>58</sup>. Before the scheduled start of the performance, the MC introduced a guest from the government. This is in keeping with the protocol expected for community events funded by government bodies. For the audience, this has signaled the start of the event. Joss best articulates the way in which those with a mental illness received the opening address. She says:

<sup>58</sup> Mental Health Week is promoted through a national awareness campaign and supported through designated funding programs. The regional mental health network responsible for this performance generated significant interest in the event.

You know, as someone who works with consumers (people living with mental illness) all week, I could see they were thinking, 'What *is* this crock of shit?' Who are all these people, and where are they on (other) Tuesdays? Most of the consumers are sitting on the cement out there, and the others are standing around or walking around and looking down on the consumers. I just found the experience so patronising toward the consumers and completely unconnected to the people it was supposed to be all about (Joss, MHW04, L688).

Here Joss is suggesting that the challenge presented by the forum was simply too hard for audience members with mental illness. The factors inhibiting their participation have extended to the complete exclusion of them through the alienating performance of the politicians. Rather than sit in the audience and worry or become anxious or bored they have excluded themselves altogether from the activity. My own experience of this has been equally alienating. The government official went well overtime. Backstage, the actors and I were waiting to go on. We had little clue as to why there was a delay and could not hear what was being said. As conductor, I have responded to my own feelings of isolation due to the delayed start by commencing the Playback Theatre session with a story from my own life that is relevant to the context. Some audience members comment that this has helped them to move toward participation<sup>59</sup>. But for the consumers, already outside on the pavement, it has made no difference.

Transcripts from a number of interviews reveal that unexpected elements within the performance can hinder audience members' desire to participate. For example, Bea found that she and her partner have been hampered by the presence of a distressed baby when they tried to engage at the Pride performance. She says:

We were sitting where the baby and all the family were sitting. The noise was very loud for us, because we were right behind them. My anxiety was associated with a concern that they (the performers) can't hear, they're not going to get it and ... they're not going to create the environment for that depth that's needed for sharing (Bea, Pride02, L195).

Co-observation data also notes the impact of the baby. Dawn's observation notes report that one of the baby's parents 'actually went out, shut the door and tried to settle him'. However,

<sup>59</sup> Further discussion about the influence of the conductor is incorporated in section on *Seeing Others*.

people were still looking around to see 'what are they doing now?' (Dawn, OD2, L594). As conductor I have also been very aware of the baby and have eventually invited one of his mothers, who by now is walking him back and forward at the end of the room, to share her experience. My intention has been to transform the surreptitious efforts of his mother to quieten him by facilitating a public acknowledgement of his presence. While this may have assisted his mother to participate, it did not seem to assist those audience members alienated by the presence of the baby to overcome their distance.

Another barrier to participation is linked to audience members' fear of being exposed. Jackie speaks of the presence of her ex-partner in the audience and indicates that her fear of being exposed has inhibited her participation. She has come to the performance with a number of friends. When she has arrived she has discovered other friends and her ex-partner there. She becomes concerned that her ex-partner could undermine her privacy and tell a story that features her (Pride04, L15). Her concern about being exposed by her ex-partner has distracted her for the early part of the show and limited her capacity to be involved. She reports that she became aware of 'sitting on myself [and] when someone got up to tell a story I realised that I wouldn't tell a story (Jackie, Pride 04, L28).

An alternative view expressed about exposure concerns the risk or possibility of an audience member telling too much. This is demonstrated in Louella's comments:

With someone like me, sometimes stuff might come out [laughs nervously] that I didn't actually mean to come out. If I was sitting there with you and I had a connection with you, I might say a little bit more than I would usually and it might come out. Then afterwards I might think, 'maybe I shouldn't have said all that' but then maybe, I know it sounds mixed, but maybe subconsciously we self regulate (Louella, OD01, L882).

Louella's comment suggests that sitting adjacent to the conductor could lead to a teller saying more than they are comfortable with. There is no data from these performances to suggest any of the storytellers thought that they said too much. Helen acknowledges that seeing the

intensity of her emotion expressed on stage was a little unsettling and Vickie speaks of her embarrassment. She says:

It was an accurate portrayal of my story, embarrassingly so. That's what I was like and I thought, 'oh my God, I was like that!' It was great though, it was like looking at a photo album that moves, you know, seeing yourself again and remembering what you were like (Vickie, Jul04, L15).

Vickie has been struck by seeing what she might have been like as a teenager. She does not appear to be concerned about what others are seeing or that she might have told too much. As conductor there have been occasions when I have been aware that a teller might be unable to self-regulate as they told their story. This has occurred at the Mental Health Week performance when Hillary came to the stage. In this instance, I have noticed that she was already teary and in conducting her, I created a rhythm that made spaces for her to feel the emotion that was embedded in the memories she was recalling as she relayed her story. Hillary's response to telling her story is reported later in the thesis.

The conscious effort by audience members to avoid exposure has led several people to actively suppress their stories. For instance:

I found myself trying not to think of a story, because I knew as soon as I started thinking about something I'd want to stick my hand up and then I'd have to say something. The (idea of) exposure was too much (Sebastian, Jul05, L262)

As the ritual continued Sebastian's strong resistance softened and as he became more comfortable he dared to notice his story:

I did actually have a story in the end, the person who was facilitating talked about that bubbling up and I did actually get that and I was about to put my hand up (Sebastian, Jul05, L265)

Sebastian is reluctant to be noticed. Other audience members have invested time in deciding where they would sit to minimise the likelihood of being invited and possibly exposed. Co-observers notice the arrival of a group of women. 'One woman suggested to sit in the second row but her friends were very reluctant to sit that close ... It was like they didn't want to be

seen, they wanted to hide' (Craig, OD01, L261). Other audience members express their relief at not being chosen, or when someone nearby has made a contribution. Eloise said:

It seemed like stories were coming from all around the place, so that made me feel comfortable, especially when Sarah spoke I thought OK we've done our bit (Eloise, Rec01, L281)

Fear of exposure has been taken to another level at the Refugee Week performance. Some time into the performance I have expressed my intention to include a range of voices. I have been particularly aware that there are a number of people with refugee and asylum seeker experience in the audience. A number of comments are made in relation to the fact that I have specifically invited a man from the audience to tell his story. Initially he has declined. After the next story, he has signaled to me that he would now like to tell his story. He has spoken of his treatment at the hands of the Australian government due in part to his physical disability. A number of workers in the refugee sector have later criticised me for putting him at risk explaining the complexity of speaking in public for refugee and asylum seeker audience members. For example:

Asylum seekers are so vulnerable. [This man] is disabled, a refugee and African. He is very vulnerable. He doesn't know the audience, he doesn't have any feeling of trust in his life yet, doesn't know how he can entrust his story. I am his caseworker and it still takes time. There is the language problems, and his anxiety. Refugees all have disempowered status whether they have a visa, or are temporary protection visa holders, they are under consideration, and everything you say in public could go back in weird and wonderful ways to the powers-to-be. They don't even know what to say, or when to keep quiet ... They have no voice, or they are not heard - the government doesn't listen, the community doesn't hear, the media misinterpret, and misunderstand. You are familiar with expressing yourself. You've gone through the rigours of how to speak out or how to be heard. From where asylum seekers come from they were punished for using their voice, by the government, the media, their neighbours (Ariel, MDA01, L35).

This perspective is strongly influenced by Ariel's values and experience in this context. This coincides with Wolff's (in Bennett, 1990) proposal that audience members engage with the theatre experience from their unique perspective frameworks and that socially formed values and personal ideas influence their perception. Holding these views in the ritual space offered by the Playback Theatre performance has created a tension between (the socially formed value that encouraged) the protection of refugees and (the value implicit in Playback Theatre that

advocated) participation by refugees. Turner would suggest that the ritual frame is inviting the audience to undermine tradition, and in Carlson's (1996) view, enable them to explore fresh and alternative structures for behaviour with respect to interactions among the various audience members. This concern about and subsequent desire to block (protect) refugee tellers led to professionals at this performance being preoccupied with maintaining the social order. This has resulted in continuing and ongoing flow breaks for them and thus, the blocking of their own participation.

Ariel expresses the vulnerability of the man I invited using a series of labels: disabled, refugee, African. Other comments made after the Refugee Week performance reinforce to me the extent to which he may have been vulnerable. Most notably the experience refugees have of repeatedly telling their story, where they come to understand this act as a kind of currency. Each telling promises a move along the continuum from refugee to resident (Nina, MDA13, L21). Ariel suggests that the public and creative dimensions in the event introduced additional issues for refugee. She states that the refugee teller's story 'may not come out how they want' due to English-as-a-second language and performance anxiety. Perhaps more difficult is the likelihood that the telling would be heard out of context, and the refugee teller would be unable to provide adequate context (because it is too hard/complex/painful to elaborate on). This complexity may then lead to something 'very integral' missing from the tale and increase the risk of the refugee-teller being misrepresented (Ariel, MDA01, L16).

Fear of exposing another has inhibited participation. For example, concern for how the story she wanted to tell would compromise her husband's public image inhibited Clare telling a story at the Disability Action Week performance where there were a number of his colleagues in the audience. She explains:

My husband works at (the local rail authority), he has quadriplegia and he was involved in the disability committee there. So, we came along. ... I did think of telling about us meeting, but I was worried about how far to go. I was worried that

my partner might feel embarrassed or threatened (exposed) having me talk about our private life. I spoke to him about it later and he said he would have been OK with it, but was glad that I didn't because he might have gotten worried about what his colleagues would think (Clare, DAW05, L3, L20).

This level of self-regulation interferes with a participant's capacity to enter the liminal zone and achieve flow. Rather than it being the degree of difficulty of the task, social protocol factors have conspired to inhibit Clare. Despite the public ritual invoking her domestic tale, she has felt reluctant to breach her established public protocols for fear it would impact on her husband's public realm and her (and his) domestic realm. Fear or uncertainty of the possible consequences inhibited Clare's spontaneous involvement and has created a tension between her intuitive responses and her usual responses. Self-regulation such as Clare demonstrates occurs to minimise the likelihood of exposure. The fear of exposing another has hindered her capacity to participate. This finding concurs with what Johnstone (1981) writes about the importance of coming to know the rules that frame the activity. In the repetition of the Playback Theatre ritual process Clare is able to come to know the rules and enter the ritual. While Clare chooses not to share her story, she does, as Turner (1981) and Schechner (1985) state, begin to move beyond the domestic constraints of her roles and consider engaging in new ways with herself, her husband and the social environment.

It could be argued that Clare's social role (as wife) has constrained her capacity to participate. Observation data reveal that one's professional role could pose as a barrier to participation. One example of this has occurred at the Mental Health Week performance. In recounting her experience of the performance Arlene speaks about the conflict between her professional self and her private concern as she sat in the audience. She states,

In my job, I am in a distant role, helping people with practical things. I feel such empathy, and people's stories touch my life but I don't feel like I can show it or act on it (Arlene, MHW09, L41).

The next day Arlene expresses how much she has enjoyed the performance saying she 'found it very powerful'. She also expresses her awareness of how difficult she has found it to have

her personal-self drawn into an event she had expected to attend from her public-personae. 'It was quite a shock ... other service-providers there found it similarly [shocking], the way it touched our own lives ... was unexpected' (Arlene, MHW09, L28). This dilemma is not unusual in the helping professions where boundaries are highly valued, and there is a duty of care. The Playback Theatre ritual does not contract to observe these boundaries. Rather it approaches all audience members with equal interest and with equal commitment to including them. This does not necessarily lead to an easy relaxing of the boundaries for people present in their professional roles alongside their customers, clients or subordinates. A similar distancing due to roles has been observed at the Disability Action Week performance (Brett, DAW07, L41).

### ***6.2.6 Nothing to tell***

So far in this chapter I have reported various examples of audience members recalling memories, experiences and stories that they could share if the conditions conspired. However, there are audience members who claim that they could not 'think of anything' during performances. This could be explained by what Spolin (1999) argues about participation in improvised performance: that it does not emerge from a place of reason, but rather is an intuitive act, in the moment. Thus, it is not likely that 'thinking of something' to tell will necessarily engage the participant in the ritual frame. Bea (Rec01, L193) describes her experience of not summoning a story as not being 'triggered'. Other informants indicated that the desire to tell could not be manufactured. For example, participants report 'trying to think of something' and 'racking their brains' for something to tell (Asha, Mar03, L324) without result.

### ***6.2.7 The Teller's Performance***

As was illustrated earlier in Hillary's story, some audience members participate in the Playback Theatre ritual by telling a story from the stage. The conductor collaborates with this teller.



Together they work to produce the telling performance. After they have crafted the telling of the story, the teller remains alongside the conductor on stage and watches as the actors and musician play the story back. Carly has experienced this during the Disability Action week performance. Onstage, her wheelchair has been pulled up alongside me. She is playful and confident. I have observed that she appears comfortable with the attention she is getting from the audience and from me. She recounts a recent experience about a Wheelchair Basketball event for Disability Action Week. In her story, elite wheelchair basketballers compete with elite basketballers who are unused to using wheelchairs. The story ends with Carly stating she feels delighted with the way in which the audience and participants of the game co-operated to make the basketball game a success. It was hilarious and a good time (for the full story see Appendix 8). Similarly, the playing back has been a co-operative success. Carly speaks with me about her experience of watching her story:

I loved the touch of humour. Humour is very important to me. It's such an important part of life, and they were able to do that, even though it was something sensitive.

I thought the girls did a fantastic job with it. It's not easy. I was thinking to myself, 'Sorry about this.' I think it must be good for you guys to do things that are different, that challenge you ... It was interesting watching the actors, [laughing] they didn't know what to do. They were put on the spot, then getting more comfortable ... Then what that does in turn though is make the audience more open about sharing. They watch that and see, 'oh maybe it's a bit vulnerable, but so what.' I applauded their willingness to give it a go. It was such a positive thing. I probably didn't even initially think about how hard it would be for them to act it ... It was just a great story, (then) I thought, 'oh you poor bastards' [laughing]. They did a great job (Carly, DAW06, L277).

This excerpt highlights Carly's appreciation for humour. Humour has been identified regularly by audience members as an engaging aspect of the performance. While audience members and tellers acknowledge catharsis as a significant response, transcripts (see for example Pride05, L31, Jul05, L71) and observation data (OD0b, L294) reveal that having both laughter and tears is most favoured. Rebecca makes the following comment in a reflective dialogue:

It feels as though the community is much stronger after one or the other has happened, and there seems to be great permission to look around, and connect with people (OD0b, L456).

After the Mental Health Week show, audience members express relief and gratitude at having the opportunity to express 'deep seated sadness' (MHW02, L37). A few informants couple this gratitude with words like feeling 'wrecked', 'ragged', and 'drained'. The text transcript reveals that there was little humour in the Mental Health Week show. However, in other performances dealing with potentially serious subject matter, like Reconciliation, Refugee Week, and the Disability Action Week performance from which Carly's experience is drawn, moments of laughter and moments of tears, have been acknowledged and appreciated equally. One audience member states, 'There was a sense of humour to it, which I hadn't see before and I liked that. I tend to lose my sense of humour' (Jude, Rec04, L36). Yet, laughter for laughter's sake has been seen to undermine the integrity of the performance (Pride07, L348).

Carly's comments suggest that she has engaged in reflective distancing in order to make sense of or analyse what was going on as she told her story. Informant interviews and observation notes indicate that telling a story and watching the enactment of that story can be two quite different experiences. One example of this is Darcy, whose experience of telling has been exhilarating. She attended the July Public Performance with three of her girlfriends where she told a story from long ago about traveling in Europe. I have noticed that she seemed to enjoy sharing about this fond time. She describes her experience of watching her story enacted as humbling. She reports:

The kind of honesty that it invites is interesting. When I told my story, to actually have to admit to feeling the fear in seeing the black men was a thing where I felt ashamed, if I think about it. But that was there, that was me, that was what I was like. So that comes up in the story. I wouldn't feel like that now, but I did then. Looking at that and experiencing the kind of shame that comes from admitting that. I thought, 'I wonder if they all think I'm a racist' (Darcy, Jul05, L151).

This example shows Darcy's reflection on her younger self. In sharing this story, she undertakes what Frank (1995) calls "an ethics of recollection". This is when "one who recollects and shares memories of past action, [displays their] past to others," and takes responsibility for their actions (p.132).

Coming to the stage to tell a story within the ritual frame of Playback Theatre does not always result in the audience member having control over the story that they have told. In Chapter 2 I have written about the storytelling performance being a duet with the conductor and storyteller working together to produce the storytelling performance. During this duet, the conductor assists the teller and the resulting story can hold a surprise for the storyteller. This relationship demands attentive listening by the conductor while simultaneously attending the production values of the performance and the large group connection. There is every possibility that the conductor could veer the story off into a direction that is more comfortable for them, or intervene in a way that leads the teller to forget what they wanted to tell. This relationship is an improvised performance, so it adds to the overall theatre of the event if it is fresh and alive, however, not to the extent that the conductor's rather than the teller's needs are central. One teller recounts the experience of forgetting her story as she walked to the stage. Phoebe remarks, 'When I got up there and sat next to you, I went completely blank' (Rec06, L181). Another speaks about being unable to determine whether her story has made sense. She says, 'I thought hopefully everyone will see (in the enactment) what I'm rambling on about, and they obviously did because the (actors) knew exactly what I was feeling' (Pride02, L702).

In this section I have reported on the ways in which audience members participate in the Playback Theatre ritual event. I have compiled a number of examples to illustrate the way in which people might enter the liminal zone (evoked by the ritual framework of Playback Theatre) and share their story. I have presented details about why people chose not to tell and why they might resist telling. This has informed the discussion on what might get in the way of people sharing their stories during the Playback Theatre performance. Next I suggest that while there are a number of barriers to participation and there are also factors that enable participation.

### ***6.2.8 Enabling Participation: Audience-audience interaction***

Co-observers have confirmed my observations that people's ease at participating increases during times of audience-audience interaction. These are the times during the performance when, as conductor, I direct people to one-on-one or small group sharing of stories they have remembered, or responses they have had to the stories they have seen and heard. The value of these interactions is illustrated in the following comment:

It was really nice to meet other people. It's quite rare to chat to the person sitting next to you, for example and I probably wouldn't have done except that you're directed to do so by the people on stage (Sebastian, Jul05, L106).

This participatory device creates a kind of in-between space at the Playback Theatre performance enabling audience members to move toward participating and enjoy some success in participation. Good (1986) suggests that this notion of introducing strangers could build interpersonal and group connections. These in-between spaces facilitate the experience of flow for some audience members who would otherwise have been preoccupied with negotiating the ambivalent private-public threshold. Perhaps the relaxed or less performative nature of this way of participating means that audience members feel a greater ease with the idea of telling a story and are therefore enabled to experience flow<sup>60</sup>. One audience member comments, 'It's really good how Rea got us to talk amongst ourselves. It lightened everything so much. I actually felt a lot more comfortable to tell my story' (Gigi, Pride07, L179). This aligns with Csikszentmihalyi (1992) notion that participants will feel more inclined to join in if they have a sense that they will succeed. Johnstone (1981) also speaks of the likelihood of participation increasing if people can make sense of the rules or social requirements. This

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<sup>60</sup> Additional opportunities for group participation occurred when I, in my role as conductor, invited audience members to take on dramatic roles. This occurred in the Reconciliation performance where the audience was invited to play the role of Anthony's extended family in a story about learning a family secret. It also occurred in the Disability Action Week performance where audience members were asked to play the role of the crowd watching the basketball game. In both instances audience members remained in their seats and acted as group, making sounds of disapproval or sounds of a cheering crowd respectively.

could build confidence in audience members and possibly reduce anxiety about the more challenging task of sharing in the larger group.

Sharing stories in small groups acts as a kind of rehearsal for participants who are feeling anxious about the degree to which they might reveal themselves. Karp (1994) suggests that lowering anxiety liberates spontaneity and enables a greater degree of play and risk taking. Group and individual interviews reveal that the interaction between audience members is often a time when they 'practiced' telling their story (Rec01, L216). This occurred at the March Public performance where Liam has broached the idea of telling his story with his friends (March03, L114). For some audience members the brief airing of their story has boosted their confidence in it and enabled them to see the relevance of telling it for themselves and the audience. Anthony claimed to have come to the Reconciliation show without a story. He says:

I really thought I came here not having stories about reconciliation, and there was [a woman] sitting next to me and we started chatting. All of a sudden [she] said something that actually brought a tear to [her] eye, it might have been something that happened up on stage and it brought a tear to [her] eye. I turned around and I got that, and then all of a sudden there was some sort of a connection to [her], and then when we started chatting my story came out. It just clicked there, I didn't have a story but I did (Anthony, Rec03, L136).

Anthony's experience shows how telling stories is a way of remembering (Schank in Frank, 1995). His initial experience of being unable to recall a story could be attributed to the ritual context creating conditions for people to have flow experiences, rather than cogent-driven experiences. Turner (1982) suggests that trying to think can inhibit flow. Perhaps the opportunity to speak to someone in the audience has acted like a break in flow for Anthony and he has then been able to recall an experience that he felt he wanted to share. Alternatively, the activity may have provided sufficient challenge for Anthony enabling flow and the subsequent recollection of his story.

While the opportunity to participate in what could be considered a semi-public way has been useful to many this still proved too challenging for some. Alice admits that she 'felt

embarrassed' by the suggestion to chat to the person nearby. She says, 'It made me feel more exposed - I wanted to pull myself together' (MHW03, L62). Sebastian reveals that his response has been one of uncertainty about those audience members sitting nearby. He states, 'I felt inhibited talking to those around me. That was a bit to do with fear of difference, people of different races, and there was a man with a disability' (MDA11, L25). Conversely, observational data suggest that this interactive time could lead to a breach in the ritual, whereby, audience members choose to continue speaking to those nearby, ignoring the invitation of the conductor to return their focus to the stage action (OD0a, L616). To mediate this the conductor must assert their authority as master-of-ceremonies. This breach in the ritual could arise when using the audience-audience interaction technique. At the July Public Performance, three of the tellers belonged to the same friendship group and encouraged each other to volunteer. At other times, friends and acquaintances have used this less formal time for non-specific catch-up discussions, although at times this has also led to an individual realising they had a story to tell (DAW, L380).

### **6.3 Summary**

For some audience members the removal of the conventional boundary between stage and auditorium and the enticement to participate is threatening and confusing. The interactive style of Playback Theatre raises questions about what is expected of the audience. Unlike, the orientation of a Brechtian audience toward distanced judgement, the ritual performance event intends the audience "to be swept up into the performance" (Schechner, 1985, p.10), and to be active participants. Indeed, the findings indicate that participation in the Playback Theatre performance could occur at any point along this distanced-to-swept up continuum, with the ritual framing of the form making it hard for audiences to resist engagement. This chapter has discussed the tension that arises for audience members due to the interactive nature of Playback Theatre. It has established that audience members' capacity to engage is influenced

by their expectations and their initial impressions of the event, the venue, the Company, and others that are present. In order to transform their initial expectations and overcome any resistance to participation audience members undergo moments of reflective distance. This enables them to move toward flow and a greater experience of the liminal spaces evoked in the Playback Theatre ritual.

The move in and out of the liminal or flow experience in the Playback Theatre performance in order to reflect and re-negotiate their level of engagement can be prompted by a number of tension-inducing elements for audience members. Perhaps they have been involved in the ongoing assessment and integration of things like the tension between the fictive and the real; the tension between what they heard in the story and what they saw in the enactment; the tension between their own story, and the story of the other/s; and the tension between whether to participate, and when, or whether to watch. These tensions can meld synergistically with the liminal effect of the ritual frame and produce a performance experience that is complex, and induce in the participant a heightened sense of the collective risk-taking involved, and a desire to reflect on the experience. In this chapter I have discussed the various complexities that audience members experience when they engage as a participant and suggest why some people will experience significant barriers to participation. There are pointers to a number of conditions that need to be established in order to maximise the opportunities to participate for all people.

The way in which audience members are enabled to participate in and influence the course of the show is stimulating and rewarding. The performance progresses through a dynamic rhythm that shifts and builds throughout the performance: from the invitation to participate, to listening to the storyteller, transferring attention to the actors, then back to conductor, the next teller, and the next enactment. My written reflections reveal this shifting focus. For example:

People don't see the transitions. They are in them. If we take our time, they wait for us. It is part of the ritual process. It's the picture that they're waiting for. We're up there to make pictures that capture the story. ... There's quite a lot required of them as the energy flow gets handed around from the conductor, to the teller, to the performers. It's a true collaboration (Rea, OD05, L59 and OD01, L1731).

Once the storytelling performance commences, audience members move their attention away from their response to the invitation to participate and become fixed on the storyteller. This involves a shift to a different role at the commencement of the enactment, where audience members listen and want to connect in some way. In their role as spectator audience members watch the actors' efforts, keep an eye on the teller and others in the audience, and sit back and enjoy the 'play'. This is explored in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **"Let's Watch!": Spectating and Integration**

The act of seeing can transform the person who sees and cause us to see differently for the rest of our lives.

Rachel Naomi Remen (2000, p.88)

The shift to the more traditional audience role of spectator occurs at that time in the ritual when it becomes clear who the volunteer storyteller will be. At this stage, the audience members prepare to watch and listen to the storytelling performance and the improvised enactment. In the transition to reception as a spectator, audience members experience a different form of engagement. The distance afforded the audience members in this role enables them to receive and respond, and in some cases reflect, in the moment. The experiences of listening and watching are dialectical with each informing the other. The opportunity to watch the action, without the pressure of performing, enables audience members to engage more fully in the event and experience elements of connection to themselves and to others within a collective; experiences similar to what Turner (1969) terms *communitas*. Individuals' personal values and perceptions inform this connection. Scholars have written about this in terms of the way in which theatre audiences' engagement is influenced and informed by their unique world views (see for example Bharucha, 1993, Carlson, 1996, Bennett, 1990). This is similar to claims made about experiences of ritual

performance (see for example, Mock, 2000, Schechner, 1985, 1990, Turner 1969, 1982), and narrative (see Denzin, 1989, Frank, 1995, Bruner, 1986). Common across these social activities is that people receive, perceive and respond to what they see, hear and feel from their unique social, cultural, political and spiritual values and knowledge. These experiences are influenced by the immediacy or what Mock (2000) calls the "liveness" of the event (p.2) and by the centrality of personal story. In this chapter I present audience members' experiences of the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance from their perspectives as spectator. I revisit reflective distance and discuss how these integrative moments are expanded when audience members are free to sit back. I explore the various experiences of connection as identified by audience members and include specific experiences where audience members witness themselves in a story that is told and enacted by others. The dynamics and value of the after-show period as a time for integration is reported.

### **7.1 Connections made through Spectating**

When speaking about their experiences as spectators, a word that spectators have consistently used is *connection*. Audience members have used this word to refer to a number of different experiences that could also be described as feelings of empathy, identification, and/or catharsis as they have watched and listened. The interview and observational data show that in the dynamic spectator-participation relationship audience members experience connection to themselves and to others through the ideas expressed in the stories and through the 'humanity' embodied in the form. The idea of feeling or making a connection with another has emerged as audience members have spoken about their experiences of listening to particular stories and watching particular enactments. Audience members have also acknowledged little or no connection to a teller or their story. Data generally indicate that these experiences are not necessarily specific to listening to the performance of the teller or to watching the enactment of the story. Rather, they appeared to occur randomly and are dependent on what people have

heard and felt during the telling of the story and what people have seen, heard or felt during the enactment.

### ***7.1.1 Revisiting Reflective Distance: The critical observer***

When the conductor signals that the volunteer teller for the next story has been identified, audience members experience a shift to spectator. This moves audience members to the more familiar audience role of (critical) observer. Unlike conventional theatre, spectators appear to have a stake in the success of the production of the story at Playback Theatre; first in the telling, then in the enactment. This finding concurs with what O'Toole & Lepp (2000) report about audiences of interactive theatre. In the previous chapter, I suggest that the activation of the reflective distance function is contingent on the idea that audience members may participate and therefore need to understand what is required of them. This may be intuitive but may also include emotional and cognitive understanding. When searching the transcripts for patterns with respect to reflective distance from the spectator role, it has become clear that audience members are constantly engaged in some form of critical activity in this role. For most, this is no longer fraught with tension of the reflective activity that has been prompted by the prospect of participation. It is a more phlegmatic process perhaps contained by the knowledge that their thinking will not be exposed. Another possibility is that they will not be required to make public their judgements, their thinking or the way in which they are engaging. As a spectator, audience members are freer to manage the unexpected responses often triggered by the way in which the ritual elements of the form have acted to undermine social protocols of the context.

### ***7.1.2 Connection through Shared Humanity***

A number of people have pointed to the ordinariness of human stories in the Playback Theatre form as central in evoking strong feelings in them. It is this focus on local or personal stories, claims van Erven (2001) that transforms community-based events into avenues for the

"sociocultural empowerment" of the participants (p.3). Informants have spoken about the Playback Theatre performance being 'real' in a way that suggests that it is novel and inspiring. One view is that the Playback Theatre performance provides a place where real people tell 'real stories'. For instance:

It's the real stories, and meeting those people, that makes it a powerful experience. We are not just case studies, we are living emotional experiences. If the person themselves can tell their story, it's going to have far more reaching effects than a CEO or a therapist! (Brett, DAW, L120).

Brett has attended the Disability Week performance. His comment highlights how Playback Theatre facilitates the movement of the personal story from the domain of the professional, in this case 'the therapist'. Frank (1995) claims that such a shift involves a "profound assumption of personal responsibility" (p.13). The rise of personal story has paralleled the post-modern move toward promoting self-responsibility. Brett's comment points to how counter cultural it is for personal stories to be shared between professionals and clients in public, a view that can again be explained using ritual theory (see for example Schechner, 1985, 1993, Turner, 1969, 1982, 1990). Brett suggests that the dominant paradigm, where professional distance is in relationship to client disclosure, has been subverted by the way in which social norms are upended by the ritual context of Playback Theatre.

The idea that Playback Theatre is about 'real people and real data' (MDA03, L25) has been discussed by audience members. The following comment infers that daring to show and tell 'the difficult' in life is part of what makes Playback Theatre potent:

There was a sense of relief in looking back. I could see people who were telling their stories, looking at that and they had the smile on their face, and I thought that was the most amazing part of that, that people could see the life in that too, in the difficult [side]. That was what was important for me. And the fact that it was real, people there were seeing their life being played in front of their eyes (Leda, MDA03, L25).

Leda speaks of daring to focus on what is hard or what is felt. Implicit in her comment is that these are aspects of life that are not often shown or acknowledged. Theatre is a place to show what is difficult and what is felt. The way Playback Theatre holds a place for the expression of

these often shunned or hidden dimensions of life contravenes the distancing that theatre provides through the fictional frame and the fourth wall. Instead Playback Theatre privileges personal story and through the maintenance of what Turner (1982) calls the ritual process frees people up to take risks and express these often overlooked aspects of human endeavour. Audience members suggest that placing emotional response at the forefront of the discussion about an issue has resulted in their feeling connected and has led to their acknowledgement of each other's humanity. For instance:

The beauty of Playback Theatre - or that which I saw - was that it focused on feelings. [People don't understand] the refugee life experiences, because the refugee experience is so different to many Australian's life experience. People remain detached and simply can't understand or see relevance in terms of their own lives. The great thing about your Playback Theatre was that it really focussed on emotion – sitting in the audience it was impossible for me not to feel moved. Yes, my life journey and story is different – but I have experienced at one time or another all of the emotions that came out of people's stories – anxiety, fear, loneliness, disbelief, happiness, sense of security, political awakening – thus I felt really connected and better able to understand (Mercy, MDA11, L12).

Speaking about the Refugee Week performance, Mercy acknowledges her appreciation of privileging feelings in an event for people who work with feelings all day long. The Refugee Week audience identifies as a community of interest or what Checkoway (1995) calls a community of collective action. Mercy is perhaps suggesting that the Playback Theatre performance has provided an experience for collective emotional expression, something that Giddens (1990) proposes is an experience of community. Her comment infers that this is important; a view that supports claims made by Hoggett and Miller (in Burkett, 2003) who demand that emotions be recognised as central to any work within human communities. Mercy's comment is an example of how audience members may distance themselves in the Playback Theatre performance to assess or sum up what they feel is happening for the collective. She describes the way in which she has identified with many of the emotions presented throughout the Refugee Week performance, and extrapolates this to conclude that it has been a good thing. For her, she has felt 'better able to understand' and acknowledges a shift in her perspective. Bundy (2003) argues that it is through emotional engagement that

audience members experience a change in their understanding. In her comment Mercy implies that others have also had their perspectives changed. Other interview data confirm this (see for example MDA 03, 04, 09,10, 12, 13, 14, & 15). Gaylord (in Bennett, 1990) identifies that it is the ritual frame in the theatre event that generates the conditions for this kind of collective reflexivity.

### ***7.1.3 Connection through the Ideas Expressed in a Story***

Informants readily discussed the idea that the enactment represents the actors' interpretation, a finding that aligns with Nicholson and Taylor (1998) who assert that such interpretation is informed by personal experiences. Audience members suggest that the interpretive enactment provides a different perspective to that of the teller. This concurs with Brook's (1989) claim about theatre's potential to replace "a single point of view by a multitude of different visions" (p.115). This could be further understood in terms of what Coppieters (in Bennett, 1990) proffers when he suggests that perceptual processes in the theatre are a form of social interaction. Just as actors play stories back based on their interpretation of what they heard, audience members watch and listen to the enactment from their unique interpretive frame. This means that the enactment represents an alternative telling to the one they have already heard. Using the example of Liam's story, this section proposes that Playback Theatre has facilitated connection through identification with the teller, identification with other characters in the story, empathy with the teller or empathy with others in the story.

It was Liam's first night at a Playback Theatre performance (Mar03, L104). He has come to the stage as the final teller during the March Public Performance. His story recounts a time when he was away overseas, earning money in an apple orchard in order to provide for his expectant child. He was called home early, when at just 20 weeks gestation the baby was to be born. She did not survive. I have watched from the stage, cast in the role of his girlfriend's mother. He leaned forward and told of his experience of naming his daughter and preparing

for her funeral. He wished for her to be placed in the forest, somewhere beautiful and natural. His girlfriend's mother challenged this. He insisted and eventually his baby was buried as he wished. The enactment has ended with me, in role, drawing the actor playing Liam forward. Standing downstage centre, facing each other he said, 'This is how I want it to be'. As his mother-in-law, I have stepped aside. This has signaled the completion of the enactment. The music swells and we freeze the scene and look toward Liam in the ritual acknowledgement of the teller. Seated downstage right, Liam has looked toward us for some moments, nodding.

Co-observer, Rebecca has watched from the audience. As the telling and enactment proceeded, she has juggled her memories about birth and death. Her response to Liam's has been captured in a fluid sculpture - admiration and awe at his graciousness. Later she reports:

I really felt a strong connection with Liam through hearing his story ... I felt compelled to talk to him after the performance ... I was affected by Liam's acceptance of it and I found myself thinking, 'you came to accept this a whole lot sooner than I did (my sister's death).' And the baby bit, that's sort of where we're (my husband and I are) at with things at the moment, and seeing how fatherhood affected him (Liam) was of interest to me, to see this man with such courage sharing such a deeply emotional story (Rebecca, OD0b, L69).

From role as an actor and participant observer, I have felt that it was the conflict over the burial that brought Liam to the teller's chair. Rebecca's focus has been on what she saw as Liam's coming to terms with the death of the baby and with the idea of what having a baby can mean for a man - her husband. From her position in the audience, Dawn's<sup>61</sup> response is different again. The following excerpt suggests that she has transformed the idea of an actual baby to represent her 'dream of a baby'.

During Liam's telling, I thought about us<sup>62</sup> trying to have a baby and that it never happened. How our dream of having a baby had to be put to rest. It affected me and I thought, 'I don't really want to go there' ... I felt like it (Liam's experience) was similar to what we've had to do. I've had to put this (dream) to bed, to bury it (Dawn, OD0b, L237)

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<sup>61</sup> Dawn was also co-observing at this performance. We had agreed that she would focus on the audience responses as much as possible as this was early in the research and we were still establishing the strengths and limitations of participant observation at Playback Theatre. She had not anticipated being so affected by the stories.

<sup>62</sup> Dawn is referring to her and my efforts to have children.

In this example, the audience members express that the connection occurred as they witnessed the telling of the story, with both Rebecca and Dawn stating that their experience of the enactment was overshadowed by their experience of witnessing Liam in his telling. As Sayre (1989) argues, the storytelling ritual unites teller and audience in a cognitive, as opposed to social way. As listeners, Rebecca and Dawn have invested Liam's story with significance that makes sense to them. In Shuman's (1986) terms, Liam's story has assisted them to categorise their experiences. In light of what Frank (1995) writes Liam's stepping forward could be described as an ethical act that engenders communion. In witnessing Liam's act, Dawn and Rebecca have each had a momentary or spontaneous connection. Turner (1969) suggests that spontaneous *communitas* occurs outside the domain of the societal structure. Liam's story broaches the often taboo subject of death, but perhaps more counter-cultural is the fact that he is a man speaking about his values in relation to the disposal of his tiny infant daughter's body. The 'death' has been a moment of connection for Rebecca. It has enabled her to express her feelings about the death, more than ten years ago, of her 15-year-old sister. She admits that seeing Liam in his graciousness has assisted her to acknowledge that she felt much less gracious than he. Meanwhile for Dawn it is the 'burial' of a 'baby' that has resonated with her experience. This moment enables her to speak of her recent acceptance of not having children, again a subject that is often overlooked in light of the more joyous topic of having them.

Later in the chapter I examine a storytelling episode in which audience members did not experience a connection while listening and where a spontaneous and surprising connection came as a result of watching the enactment. Next, I report on audience members' perceptions about the enactments that are produced by the actors and musician in response to tellers' personal stories.



#### ***7.1.4 Enactment: Truth or dare***

Informants' comments suggest that Playback Theatre's participatory interactive style acts to facilitate an experience of performance that is fresh and surprising for many audience members. A consistently surprising experience for audience members has been the transformation of the verbal narrative to dramatic form. After storytellers recount their personal tales, the conductor invokes the ritual phrase 'Let's watch.' This phrase, when delivered, signals to the audience that a heightened state of theatrical performance will follow and covertly requests that audience members suspend reality and join the actors in creating theatre. Observation data captures the shift in the following comment. 'They were looking at [the teller]. Once it was finished and you said, 'Lets watch' everyone was intent on looking at the stage' (Dawn, OD01, L224). On this cue, the musician's task is to enlarge the ritual space of the stage, using music to charm and mystify in the ritual beginning of the stylised action. Informants have made little comment about the place and power of music in the enactment, suggesting that they are engaged beyond it or took it and its function in altering the ritual space for granted. Beyond the telling and the story content, the enactment is the other significant way in which audience members engage in the Playback Theatre performances. Audience engagement is related to both what and how the actors produced the story they had just heard. Data suggest that at some point in the enactment, audience members find themselves in a suspended state of reality, as if watching (or hearing) the story for the first time. Informants suggest that the enactment is necessarily interpretive, gives breath and depth to the verbal narratives and provides a different perspective.

Participants have expressed the view that the enactment 'caught the essence' (Rec03, L162) and has made stories 'real' (MHW03, L10). In some instances, the enactment has been seen to make something out of nothing, rendering a teller's experience more 'alive' on stage. One audience member states:

You made the story come alive and it was about 'nothing' it seems, but it made me recall the times when I was a teenager talking on the phone for ages about nothing! (Tamara, Jul01, L71).

Tamara's comment suggests that while she has felt little connection to the story or storyteller the enactment has contained meaning for her. She says that in recalling her own memory, the performance became meaningful or 'alive'. This finding aligns with what Hosking proposes is the purpose of the Playback Theatre enactment (Hosking & Penny, 2002, 2003). Perhaps it is Tamara that comes 'alive' as she watches the enactment. A number of audience members have made comments that suggest they have experienced the enactment as giving substance to stories that they had initially found difficult to engage with as listeners. This is explored further in the section entitled *Lack of Connection*.

Various views have been expressed that indicate that the enactment expands the audience members' and the tellers' experience of the storytelling performance. One view is that the enactment illuminates aspects of the story and broadens it (Rec01, L23). Another view is that the enactment offers a different perspective to that which the listener has initially formed about the story (Jul05, L62). The enactment is seen as an interpretation, not exactly word-for-word but where the actors bring their own personal perspective to the stage (Jul05, L344). Another view positions the enactment as a reflection where the 'actors capture something the teller may not have realised' and the tellers see this and add it to their understanding of the experience (DAW07, 07). This function of the enactment to provide multiple perspectives is contained in the way it has been produced. Each enactment represents a convergence of what four or five actors have heard and reproduced in the context of the performance. This aligns with Brook's (1989) assertion that theatre can accomplish a hologram of interacting perspectives. It concurs with Denzin's (1989) claim that no story is an individual production. He asserts that it is in the action of the listener interpreting that the story exists. Following his suggestion, it is probable that as each actor listens, they undergo a dynamic process of

unpacking the relationship between what they hear in the story: the incidents, the context, the characters and the teller's interpretations implicit in the narrative performance. They then undergo a process of storing and recalling the details in the story that will make sense as a piece of theatre: where the story took place, who was there, what happened. They then work in an improvised way with an ensemble of actors who have each simultaneously undergone the same process of listening, interpreting and re-producing. Thus, while Bauman (1986) claims that stories embody the tellers' points-of-view, the Playback Theatre enactment embodies a conglomerate of the different interpretations of the actors from their various points-of-view. On watching the enactment the audience members overlay what they witness with the interpretation they made as they have listened to the story.

Audience members suggest that the Playback Theatre enactment does not require accuracy.

For instance:

They tuned into what was important ... It didn't matter that it wasn't exactly the narrative, it was an authentic recreation of the mood or the emotion, very authentic ... The actor did [my friend] a bit different but still got her, if he did her more outrageous it would have been more satisfying for me but it was OK, I loved it, I saw something new (Tamara, Jul05, L218, L361 & Jul01, L16).

Tamara's generosity in accepting the best effort of the actor is not unusual in theatre. During a reflective dialogue I comment on the way audience members appear to 'take the players on board as one of them. They seem concerned that they won't fail and that they'll be able to pull it off' (OD02, L38). Masterson (2004) suggests that audience members want the actors to succeed. Hosking & Penny (2003) remind us that part of the theatre of Playback Theatre is that it is somewhat imperfect. Despite the lack of accuracy, Tamara has engaged as a spectator enjoyed the theatre and has seen her story in a new light. For Helen, it has been the accuracy in the pitch of her emotional experience that has rendered the Playback Theatre enactment potent. She says:

I remember [the actor] talking about 'wringing his neck'. And that was right. It was like, 'ooo! Yes!' That's not what I said but that's how I felt. It sort of got it (Helen, Rec07, L78).

Tamara and Helen highlight the ways in which the enactments have missed the mark with their stories. This suggests that audience members are seeing the actors in a certain light: as fellow human beings doing their best, perhaps. This generosity can be considered within Turner's (1969) conception of *communitas* as an embodied experience. He suggests that *communitas* arises in instant mutuality, involving the whole person in relation to others – the complete actor in relation to the complete spectator, for example – "when each person fully experiences being the other" (p.136). Audience members like Tamara and Helen *see* the human actor, and in so doing *see* the human effort and perhaps, *see* themselves. Supporting data for this emerged from the numerous times audience members have inquired about how to join the Playback Theatre Company or where they could do Playback Theatre suggesting that they have been reversing roles with the actors, and imagining themselves on stage.

While the tellers and the audience have appeared to be very accepting of the actors' interpretive efforts there were times when the actors' socio-cultural lenses or prior knowledge skewed the enactment. I will illustrate this with Liam's story from the March Public performance. As reported earlier Liam's story encompassed the passing of his infant daughter and his determination to effect the ritual of her burial. While the baby's birth and death are closely linked, the period leading up to the baby's birth seemed to dominate the staging of the story with the actor cast as Liam seeming non-existent. After being on stage as an actor, I experienced residual concerns about the dominant focus in the enactment, yet felt resolved that we had captured the essential moment where Liam had asserted himself with his mother-in-law. Observation data suggest that the birthing scene had been dominant and that Liam's 'angst' had not been well represented. Rebecca identifies what she has felt is missing for her. She says:

He made some comment about 'she was only here for an hour' I had this yearning to see something about the connection from the afterlife or the sense that she was still with him (OD01b, L146).

Dawn agrees that the relationship between Liam and the baby had not been adequately evoked on stage. She adds, 'Even though she (the baby) was there for such a short time, his memory of her is something that he will keep with him forever' (OD01b, L177). Four women had created the enactment. One actor had prior knowledge of the story due to her friendship with the young couple. The other two actors had heard the story of the pregnancy at a Playback Theatre performance twelve months earlier. It is likely that these elements have converged on stage to obscure what Rebecca and Dawn have nominated as the essential elements in the story based on listening to Liam. It is also possible that in constructing the enactment the actors may have veered away from the difficult subject of death. I discuss the way in which enactments can fail to represent essential emotional aspects of a story later in the chapter through Lorraine's story at the Reconciliation performance.

Some audience members have claimed that the verbal narrative can be hard to follow or inaccessible. The following comment suggests that the enactment can make the verbal narrative more accessible.

Sometimes people don't communicate their story very well, and when you see it on stage you can see what was going on for the person, even though you didn't quite get it from what they had said (Sarah, Pride02, L20).

It is likely that the teller that Sarah is referring to is similar to the one Frank (1995) writes about when he says that tellers can tell around stories. Whereas, Shuman (1986) discusses the nature of stories as an account of a personal experience, a bounded unit with a beginning middle and end. Either way, data from the study indicate that there are times in the Playback Theatre ritual when audience members have found that they do not connect with a teller or with the story, or in some cases can not make sense of the story as they listen to the teller. This has sometimes led to audience members making inaccurate judgements about the teller, and perhaps turning away from them. Yet the same audience members report that they have felt a connection to the ideas expressed in the story when they have watched the enactment.

Thus while the verbal telling performance has initiated the potential alienation of the teller, the enactment has then facilitated a bridge across the perceived difference. This phenomenon is discussed in the following section.

### ***7.1.5 Lack of Connection or Connection Regained through Witnessing Enactment***

Shuman (1986) discusses the role of the listener in the storytelling ritual. She claims that the listener is required to "unpack" the details in the tale (p.21). From my observations, audience members at the Playback Theatre performances have made a conscious and deliberate effort to listen, as if, in Razack (1993) terms, people feel a moral obligation to do so. As demonstrated above, Dawn and Rebecca have shared what Frank (1995) calls a mutual moment of witness as they have listened to Liam. There are also times during the Playback Theatre performance when audience members find listening a challenge and feel no connection with the teller. This is explored here using Kylie's story.

Kylie came to the stage to tell the final story at the Reconciliation performance. As she has approached the stage, I assumed by her behaviour that she was nervous. Later she reports that her stories had been building all through the show and that she had so much to say. Her story evoked the neighbourhood of her childhood: the 'wrong-side of the tracks' where she played freely with aboriginal children. As she grew older she became conscious of a contradiction in values in her family with regard to aborigines; a situation she has come to understand as racism. Toward what I thought was the end of her telling, I have asked her to nominate a family member. She chose to cast her grandfather. Her story ends with a difficult confrontation with him. On the night she revealed, 'I wanted to challenge him but I wanted to respect my elders' (Rec TV1, LL487-580). In my role as conductor I have sensed that this is an end to her story. I have also sensed that she is still bubbling with a need to speak. I have chosen to pause while she has made a number of statements about her conviction to challenge herself and others about prejudice and racism toward indigenous Australians. A passion or

force has imbued her delivery. In a reflective dialogue I state that it was as if she was 'interrupting her own story to make comments about other stories from the evening' (OD06, L1478).

The style and length of Kylie's telling has drawn a number of responses from the audience. As I state above, during the telling I am committed to facilitating Kylie's full expression of the passion she clearly felt. During her telling, I have become aware of what I perceived as restlessness in the audience. Both co-observers confirm this observation. I include Craig's description below:

[D]uring the telling of the story there was movement in the audience because it went on for so long and the momentum was lost. She didn't make a connection with the audience. She was too wound up in her own story, and I thought she was too self-indulgent. I don't think it was about the length of time they've had to sit there because I thought we could have gone on for another hour in the performance. So it wasn't, 'it's time to go, it's been an hour and a half and I've got to do other things', because I think the audience were there to do more, and to have more. I think they got bored of her (Craig, OD01, L618).

This restlessness in the audience has been generalised and there have been comments made about being 'confused' by the telling (Rec13, L14) and annoyed by the teller (OD01, L687).

Others have expressed that they have felt some impatience with her. Of note is the way in which audience participants have transformed their responses to her as they found ways to connect with the ideas in her story through the enactment. Interestingly, all the audience participants who have voluntarily commented on this story are young women of a similar age.

The following excerpt is from Louella:

At the beginning, I was thinking, 'Get on with it!' But when the story was done (enacted), for me personally, I went 'yes! I can relate to that.' But I didn't even know what the story was about when she was telling it. The playback made it clear to me, and then it had total connection to me. I remember feeling like that when I was a lot younger. I remember thinking 'what am I supposed to think.' I didn't relate to her as a person, but once that playback (happened) I could (relate). I was thinking, 'I used to feel like that; am I suppose to think what Mum thinks or what Dad thinks?' It was about finding a sense of who I was. When I watch the playback it showed: 'I'll think how *I* feel.' Afterwards, I was thinking that I felt exactly like what they played up there (on stage) when I was leaving home – and when I was forming thoughts about what I did and didn't think – being stuck in the middle between what my family thought and what I felt really deep down (Louella, OD01, L649).

Louella has been able to connect with the ideas presented in the story through the dramatic enactment of the relationship between the young woman and her grandfather. Even though she has difficulty initially she has *wanted* to listen to Kylie. This act of "listening for the other", Frank (1995) claims, stimulates us to "listen for ourself." He suggests that in this "moment of witness," the story "crystallizes a mutuality of need, when each is for the other" (p.25). In her effort to listen Louella has re-encountered her own experience. Eloise similarly has found herself becoming disinterested as Kylie told her story. Her disinterest has been transformed toward the end of enactment. Eloise has been struck by the encounter between the younger woman and the older man brought to life on stage, at this point the story has become more vivid for her. It has intersected with her own, particularly 'the racism of the older man'. She explains:

My father's Italian and one time we got into a huge fight on public transport (laughs). Basically, he was making a lot of racist comments, and I asked him to shut up and he didn't take it too well. I tried to explain that I wouldn't stand for racism because he's my father and he's Italian (laughs) and he couldn't understand that (.) (teary). I think my story came up just before the last story about the girl and her grandfather (Eloise, Rec01.L139).

Co-observing and seated behind Eloise and her friends, Dawn has noticed her response. In the proceeding reflective discussion she makes the following comment:

I think [Eloise] identified with the story, because she was shedding a few tears and I remember looking there and thinking, 'what is she crying about?' The story had nothing for me, and at that point I was surprised that she was upset (Dawn, OD01, L677).

Dawn's observation of Eloise has expanded her own experience and led her to consider the different ways people connect to stories.

This set of findings demonstrates the way in which audience members have been engaged in a collective effort to listen to the storyteller, and in wanting to *hear* her. This is a fundamental expectation of theatre: that audience members and performers listen. Carter (1992) suggests that listening requires us to move beyond our ears, and look beyond our eyes to listen with our whole body. He writes of the body as "a trembling flame, a vibrating surface ... [that]



does not photograph the world, but filters it across permeable membranes" (p.129). The examples above suggest that this level of listening could be facilitated via the enactment in Playback Theatre. Thus, the difficulty these selected audience members have in listening to Kylie's verbal performance may be understood using Waitzen's (in Frank, 1995) idea that we tend to interrupt stories when we become uncomfortable. In this way we are able to silence the telling or turn stories away from their truths. In the excerpts above, the young women have admitted that the story embodied something of their truth, and so they may have found it too hard to hear. Interrupting the Playback Theatre ritual might present too great a breach of the collective contract. Instead, they interrupt metaphorically through withdrawing and experiencing a break in flow. The interpretation of Kylie's story by the actors could be said to be a fictive retelling, providing some distance from the truth. This has enabled the young women who are initially distanced by the telling to turn back toward both the truth in the story and to the teller herself. In some ways, watching the enactment has facilitated the stories of Eloise and Louella to become present to them by "invading their consciousness from the outside" (Sayre, 1989, p.209). Then, as Gaylord (in Bennett, 1990) suggests, the performance has become a site of reflexivity where together, performers, spectators and teller have found meaning and significance in the events on stage.

During the course of the study there have been audience members who have failed to find a point of connection, or perhaps have found that they could not hear the content of the story through either the telling-performance or the enactment. Helen explains away her lack of connection by suggesting that there might have been a generation gap.

I was kind of a bit disappointed. I can't remember all the stories now and I'm not being critical because each story is important but it wasn't as satisfying to me. ... I was conscious that there were more the young people there and the stories seemed kind of lighter, not deeper. So I thought, 'there's a generation gap here. There could be depth in those stories that I just can't see because I'm from a different generation (Helen, Rec08, L150).

Helen admits to no sense of connection to what she has perceived as stories about being young, she nevertheless engages in reflection about what is missing for her. This suggests that rather than there being no connection at all, Helen does not experience the emotional connection that Bundy (2003) proposes is central to audience engagement in theatre. Emotional engagement occurs along a continuum from complete sympathetic identification to complete detachment. Bundy claims that emotional engagement is necessary if a new understanding or awareness is to develop for spectators. Lack of emotional engagement can inhibit the audience member entering more fully into the aesthetic frame (Bundy, 2003). This has been spoken about as a lack of connection, with audience members concluding that a lack or paucity in the form or in the theatricality of the event has been to blame. For instance:

It was also dull. I expected a more polished production. I wanted a more colourful production. I wanted to see a variety of things (styles), there are many things you can draw on to make polished theatre (Rhys, Rec12, L08).

In my observation notes I have written that I was particularly keen to interview audience members whose comments have focused on critical feedback about the artistry of the performance. For the greater part audience members have been particularly positive about the skills of the performers and appreciative of the performance as theatre. For instance:

I was aware that there is much more at play than you realise. You have all the senses. What the actors hear, they hear more than words. ... [I] reflected on the wonder of it. ... It's magic before your eyes, like seeing a spirit or an essence in front of you (Jackie, Pride04, L76, 81).

This aligns with what Masterson (2004) suggests, that audience members are actively invested in the performers succeeding. O'Toole and Lepp (2000) suggest that this is natural in participative forms of theatre where audience members have a pivotal role in what happens next. In fact, I have observed that audience members who are unhappy or disappointed by the level of artistry have offered a number of recommendations on ways to create a more polished production, as Rhys does above (see also, Rec05, L427). However, unlike Rhys, others have added a statement of qualification that has inferred that they are not displeased with their experience of the performance, they just want the theatre to be better somehow. For example:

I thought, 'How can someone within 10 minutes of listening to someone's tragic story reinterpret it? The acting really annoyed me. It was repetitive, all very literal. The characters were the same, the ideas were repeated, but the heart was there. I found myself cringing a bit at the similarities: like the use of scarves, this was so predictable, I knew they were going to grab the scarves. ... The gentleman actor always had the same role – hand on shoulder. At the same time I think it's a great idea, it has good intention. Something positive. I am glad I went, it made me stop and think how good my life is and how good Australia is (Sharon, MDA15, L14).

Sharon's comments demonstrate how she has taken up the offer implicit in the Playback Theatre form to become what Bennett (1990) names "a tangible creator of the theatrical event" (p.10). Her comment reveals that the experience has engaged her beyond the artistic criticism where she has felt a connection with the content of the stories that has made her 'think how good my life is'. Identifying this pattern in the transcripts where audience members have maintained reflective (critical) distance as their main position of engagement has led me to question whether these audience members actually enter the liminal activity at all. I argue earlier that while Turner (1982) suggests that a reflective stance can block an experience of flow, Meyerhoff (1990) asserts that the audience member can simultaneously experience (reflective) awareness while engaged in the flow experience. For audience members like Sharon, it appears that their experience of the Playback Theatre event is mostly from this distanced place. This is not dissimilar to Clare's experience discussed in the previous chapter which presents Clare's process of working out what is required of her in order for her to participate. However, Sharon adds her knowledge, expertise and expectations of an artistic event to the list of things she has to reconcile before she is free to enter the liminal zone. For Rhys, it appears unlikely that he has had an experience of flow or *communitas*.

In this section I have focused on the enactment as a point of connection for audience members if they have experienced confusion in listening to the teller. I have presented an example that revealed that the enactment might also fail to engage audience members, particularly those who are critical of the artistic dimension of Playback Theatre in the performance. Next, I illustrate the experience of audience members who experience a

connection to the ideas that are present in the telling of the story with a heightened or strengthened connection gained through watching the enactment.

### ***7.1.6 Heightened Connection***

Here I draw on excerpts and comments made after the Mental Health Week performance to discuss the way in which audience members who have experienced a connection to a story have that experience heightened when watching the enactment. The excerpts and comments relate to Hillary and the story that she has told during the performance. Hillary came to the stage to share a story about her experience of juggling her commitment to care for her brother who has schizophrenia with that of her marriage relationship to Larry. She recounted the tension she had felt each night when her husband's very public support of her care of her brother turned into private complaints and condemnation of him, behaviour she termed 'pillow talk'. Her husband then fell ill, at which point her inner conflict about the pillow talk escalated. As the story progressed, she has expressed how she had remained committed to her relationship with her brother as she cared for her sick husband.

Hillary's story is what Frank (1995) calls a "self/other" story (p.131). In a post-show interview, she says that she elected to tell this particular story so that she could speak about her experience of Larry and the 'pillow talk' (MHW06, L55). This specific idea – 'pillow talk' – has resonated with many people in the audience. After the performance a number of people have approached her. Some have identified with her experience of caring and feeling overburdened. Others have identified with Larry's behaviour, and his treatment or lack of support of her as primary carer. She describes the after-show interactions:

I had so much feedback on that 'pillow talk' and from the partner too. They were saying, 'I didn't know I gave her such a hard time about being a carer. I will think more about pillowtalk in the future'.

Women carers were saying yeah, 'I know what you mean about the 'pillowtalk' and sometimes it really hurts, and you can't discuss it because they don't want to have any part of it. And (they were saying) what do you do for yourself, with the things that you want to talk about? (Hillary, MHW04, L290).

Embedded in Hillary's story are what Wolff (in Bennett, 1990) terms socially formed cultural values and personal ideas. As Bruner (1986) reports, these values and ideas acted to influence the experience of many audience members. The story and enactment has made explicit various aspects of the social system of the mental health community who had gathered at the Playback Theatre event (Bruner, 1986). The widespread nature of the responses to Hillary's story indicate that it may have been a close representation of their social system (Handelman, 1990).

The way in which Hillary's role of care provider has been positioned between the needs of the two men resonated strongly with Alice. She reports that as she has listened to Hillary's story she has experienced a connection to Hillary around the lifestyle the story explicated and she became interested in connecting to others that might have similar experiences. She says:

That was exactly my story. I didn't know her story, and I thought, 'oh my god! Somebody else had two people in her life too - the tug of war, the relationship, the ill person.' It was amazing. If Hil's been through it and I've been through it, there must be others. It's like it became real, not just a discussion (Alice, MHW03, L4)

In the excerpt below Alice refers to an image that had been created on stage where the actor who had been portraying Hillary was entwined by the two actors playing her husband and brother, and was being pulled back and forward between them. In the role of Hillary, the actor has said, 'if only I could care *enough*'. She speaks about watching the enactment:

Seeing the actors pulling different ways, that was me. It gave a real extra dimension that you can't see just from talking ... Another thing someone said, 'if only I could care enough, they'll get better,' I haven't forgotten that - that was really important, really powerful for me that sentence. I couldn't say it but I thought, 'that's me.' I overburden myself with caring, trying to make it all better (MHW03, L39, L51).

This comment suggests that Alice has identified with the idea of being pulled by opposite forces and the idea that it was in her capacity to 'care' that could create a change for the better.

Seeing the image of herself represented on stage through Hillary's story has enabled Alice to acknowledge her situation and accept something about how she behaves in that situation.

Images that are captured during performances create a strong link for some (OD0b, L313).

Frank (1995) suggests that those who tell their personal stories are witnesses for others who

may not have the voice or the courage to tell. Alice's strong identification suggests that she has felt as if she has told *her* story. This phenomenon of feeling as if someone's story is your own in some way has also emerged in situations where there has been almost no similarity in the content and context of the story being told to that of the story of the audience member who has felt connected. One example of this (for other examples see Rec04, L83, Jul01, L57) has occurred during the Refugee Week performance where a young girl came to the stage to tell her story. She has recounted how her family had been separated in preparation for fleeing Iraq. She has spoken about her journey with her mother and sister out of Iraq, through Bangladesh to Indonesia, and finally to Christmas Island. Her story has ended with being 'welcomed' by Australia. While the separation of the girl from her father has been given little attention in the telling and in the enactment, one audience member has been strongly affected by this part of the story. After watching the enactment, she has recalled her relationship with her father and has expressed sadness about being separated from him as an adult (MDA07, L39).

After-show discussion groups have generated various conversations that indicate audience members' experience some connection in response to the actors' improvising on stage. For instance:

For me, on each re-enactment I just felt amazed by the linkages that they created. I felt great confidence, each person (the actors), I thought just picked up beautifully, and I loved the way that they just blended and obviously had so much confidence in each other. It was just a terrific connection of people and certainly for me in the audience I felt tremendously connected to them (Patty, Rec03, L168).

Witnessing the actors working together to create theatre has engaged Patty. Salas (1993, 1999) writes about the potency of Playback Theatre being contingent on the actors' commitment to standing on stage and being present as people share their stories. Patty's experience appears to be linked strongly to her witnessing of the actors' teamwork when improvising the scenes. This links with what Wolff (in Bennett, 1990) asserts regarding the complex connection and interaction between the theatre audience and the social systems (implicit here in the Playback

Theatre form) as they relate to contemporary culture. The idea that audience members get to see the Playback Theatre actors create the work is somewhat counter cultural in terms of what might be expected at a theatre event. Observation data suggest that the breaking of conventional theatre norms contributes to the theatricality of the event. Craig comments that 'the simplicity of [the conductor] walking down into the audience had a profound effect' (Craig, OD1, L53). This is too much for some. While Patty has enjoyed seeing through the fourth wall as the actors collaborate with each other, the teller and the audience, some audience members have been far from appreciative of what they have seen and have wanted more 'polish' (Rec12, L08).

In this section I have presented various findings, illustrated by a selection of data, of ways audience members have made connections to each other, to themselves, and to the social and broader context during the Playback Theatre performance. I now discuss audience members' collective experiences of feeling connected and making connections in Playback Theatre.

## **7.2 Collective Experience**

One informant states that 'you can make all these connections with people, just being at a Playback Theatre together' (Brett, DAW, L53). The community-based situated-ness of the Playback Theatre performances in this study has enabled a collective experience for audiences that identify as a community of interest. Some audience members have spoken about the benefits of sharing in the Playback Theatre experience. One claims that this sharing has added to what Rapaport (2000) calls the shared narrative of the community. Attending the Playback Theatre performance has been seen as a significant experience in collective connection for Lynette who initiated the Mental Health Week performance. She states:

The really important part of what playback does is to create the shared experience, that connects people, and I think one of the really valuable things is when a community of people are concerned about what's happened. ... So [in being together at the Playback Theatre performance] already something's happened (Lynette, MHW04, L1164).

Lynette is suggesting that the shared experience in her community has acted to develop what Marra James (in Bellah et al. 1985) calls a community of memory. Further, Lynette nominates a specific outcome for the community through the sharing of this experience. She suggests that hearing Hillary's particular story<sup>63</sup> 'gave people permission' to approach her and the other community member implicated in the story, Hillary's brother, Nathaniel. Lynette proposes that this permission has liberated people in their social responsibility and has enabled them to challenge social protocols that usually persuade them to look the other way. She says:

It's a little opening for a community and people who were there are the people who were there, like [they can say to each other] 'were you at the opening?' 'Did you see the playback performance?' There's this shared history, [through] the stories that were there (Lynette, MHW, L1139).

The layering effect of the experience of hearing and seeing the story and of acting on the permission evoked by the story in approaching Hillary can be understood in terms of Kershaw's idea. He suggests that when a group of people share an experience of theatre ripples of the performance are "multiplied by more than the audience number" within the broader community (in Elam, 1996, p.30). Elam (1996) commends the application of theatre in the community for this very reason when he says that it serves to build connections into the wider cultural and social community through shared individual responses.

This idea of collective experience has been slightly different for audience members at the Pride performance, some of whom have repeatedly attended the event over the previous eight years. Jackie comments on the presence of a baby and his family as an example of this:

It was lovely continuity that [couple with the children] were there. I remember when [their first child] was a baby and now [the second baby has] come along - it was full circle ... It made me look at us, look at what we're all doing now ... It's very special - it's a great Pride event, we get nothing else like it. I love introducing other women to it too. How uplifting it is to spend time with women like that, and that given the space something always comes. [For me,] this (Playback Theatre) is a way of making family outside the traditional (Jackie, Pride04, L45).

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<sup>63</sup> This is discussed in more detail earlier in the chapter.



Jackie's experience relates to a specific experience of Playback Theatre in a specific context. While the shared experience has particular meaning because of this specificity, interviews suggest that audience members can feel less ease due to over familiarity and lack of anonymity. The impact of self-revelation in audiences where there are previous relationships has also emerged at events where people are present with work colleagues, and when people are present in work personae alongside their clients and the general public.

### **7.3 Watching Self**

As discussed earlier in the chapter, for some audience members listening to and watching enactments of stories by others is like seeing a version of their own story. From the interviews I have discovered that the experience of watching yourself actually occurs in two specific ways. One is when the storyteller watches the enactment in which they have cast themselves. The second is when someone in the audience has been featured in a story that has been told and cast by another person. It is the various experiences arising from these two situations that are discussed here.

#### ***7.3.1 Watching self: stories told by self***

Carlson (1996) proposes that in the performative moment we are able to witness ourselves in the living and gain insight and connection. Tellers have spoke freely about their experiences of watching the enactment of their story. Just as other audience members have acknowledged how the enactment has offered them a different perspective, so too did tellers (Jul05, L3). Seeing the story played-back has enabled tellers to 'pull it apart and see different aspects of it' (Rec01, L1148). This equates with Guss's (2001) suggestion that the reflective properties of performance enables us to show ourselves to ourselves with the chance that we will become more conscious "as we see ourselves" (p.158). Tamara describes it as offering her an opportunity to see her experience anew:

I saw something new. They pulled out the homesickness, and that was why I had requested Australian music. I had not realised I was so homesick - and Paula also -

that's why we connected so strongly. They (the actors) could see that in the story without me actually saying it, and I hadn't seen that [I was homesick] so that was something new, and they added in the painting, and gave it more sense, some of the missing pieces. That's probably what made us click, Paula and me, we really clicked because we were really homesick (Tamara, Jul01, L18).

For Tamara, the story has represented her life and experience. The experience of seeing the enactment has revealed to her that which had been previously "covered up." This experience aligns with what Denzin (1989) says about telling stories: that it is like painting over pictures "and, when the paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible ...

Something new is always coming into sight, displacing what was previously seen and certain" (Denzin, 1989, p.81). A different view that has been expressed about watching self incorporates a claiming of the self that has been represented in the story. For instance:

I love my story, seeing it played out by other people, my response was, 'You guys rock' but then later I thought, 'Hey that was me, I rock' (Kylie, Rec09a, L47).

Kylie also speaks of the potency of telling 'a group of strangers without all the background' (Rec01, L15) her story. From this perspective, she has seen that the actors have the 'freedom' (Rec09, L143) to say what she has felt she could not say, things that have felt too risky to say: the 'hurtful bits'. She is pleased that the actors expressed these aspects of her story. She states:

Seeing emotions that were my emotions was very powerful. The experience of seeing it. I didn't go into that detail but they picked up and ran with it. They were the exact kind of things, messages that I had received from society or from family, things that were so horrible that I didn't want to say those things (in public). But then when you have the experience of the actors telling that stuff – they don't have those restraints, they have what they heard and they have an audience to highlight it too (Kylie, Rec09, L137).

This notion of risking is a fundamental element in the making of improvised theatre. Brook (1989) reports that it maximises the potential of the work to be simultaneously influenced by those present – audience and performers alike. Penny (2002) suggests that it is the job of the Playback Theatre actor to risk in the way Kylie describes and meet or match the risk the audience member took in telling the story. Kylie's comment also emphasises the performative context: 'they have an audience to highlight it too'. Theory suggests that this dialectic between performer and audience can evoke open dialogue where people turn toward one another

(Howard 2003). The risk and daring implicit in theatrical performance combined with the deconstruction of societal protocols through ritual enables individuals at Playback Theatre to reach beyond the limits of language to include other forms of expression in the dialogue (Brook, 1968, Grotowski, 1968, Howard, 2003). As such, the Playback Theatre performance could be likened to Brook's (1989) description of community performance as a way to overcome loneliness and reduce the distance between people, outcomes van Erven (2001) and Cohen (in Amit, 2002) suggest constitute an experience of community for those present.

The storytellers' responses to the enactment have been varied with a number of views being expressed. One view is that the enactment has evoked the feeling from that time (Jul03, L191). Some tellers express the view that watching the enactment has been 'powerful'. Overall, their responses to the enactment have tended to be generous. Observation and reflective data suggest that the enactment could sometimes misrepresent or skew the story. This has been the case in Lorraine's story. Lorraine told her story at the Reconciliation performance. In the following excerpt she is describing her experience of a workshop she has attended to learn the ancient aboriginal craft of weaving flax-fibres. She speaks about learning:

When they instructed us, well they didn't, they weren't teaching at all. They didn't explain anything and then you'd sort of have to work it out. I was real uncomfortable with them. If you asked them a question, they might or might not answer you. If they didn't feel like answering they just wouldn't. It was as if you hadn't spoken. ... I didn't know how to handle the situation. ... I felt there was a gap that I didn't think I could bridge. ... It was difficult and uncomfortable (RecVT, L253).

The enactment has highlighted Lorraine's attempts to communicate with the women. It has shown that each overture she made was seemingly ignored or missed. The aboriginal women continued to focus on the weaving task. In the enactment, the two worlds were brought to life through music and action: the eager white women, asking questions, preparing food, feeling hurt and the industrious black women, certain in their weaving, uncertain in their social role. Telling a story in the midst of her uncertainty about the experience, as Lorraine has done, is not uncommon (Boje, 1991). Lorraine's unresolved confusion and discomfort have brought

her forward to tell. Unlike Boje's finding that the story in uncertain times helps people "make sense of equivocal situations" (1991, p.106), Lorraine has continued to feel the tension of her unmet expectation about how the intercultural meeting would be. Later, in a discussion group, she says:

I'd had this experience only a couple of weeks back, and it was really fresh, and it had been bothering me ... its something I have been unable to resolve. ... I'm not one of these people that easily bridge the gap, with different people. I can be fearful of doing that ... Lots of good things happened, I had a great time. It was probably just the relationship that I had very mixed feelings about. I have guilty feelings too (Lorraine, Rec03, L78).

Her admission of guilt has expanded what had been told and replayed on stage. Yet, this expression of guilt does not seem to alter her relationship with the experience. Perhaps she does not see herself or her experience represented in what the actors have created on stage. My observation notes suggest that this is the case. The enactment does not sufficiently represent the disappointment she has felt at the missed meeting, and confusion she has felt about why she missed it. Zánkay (1999) asserts that this is the job of the enactment. Fox (1999b) proposes that when tellers or audience do not see on stage what was embodied in the story, or at the pitch at which it had been present in the story, they will tell a similar story until the actors get it. The story that was told after Lorraine's has contained this theme about confusion over how to embrace indigenous culture, among other things. Lorraine revealed that she has remained conflicted about the incident at the workshop when I contacted her more than a year later. She has confided in me that she still felt some confusion and disappointment and has continued to try to make sense of the experience (Rec16).

### ***7.3.2 Watching self: stories told by another***

Another way an audience member may encounter himself or herself on stage is when they feature in a story told by another. The telling of personal stories during the Playback Theatre ritual signifies a convergence in the tellers' private and public spaces. Observational and interview transcripts indicate that many people attend the Playback Theatre performances with

one or more others. As I allude too earlier, while Playback Theatre is a participative form, there are many people at each show who do not get the chance to tell their story publicly. Next (through the stories of both Nathaniel and Asha), I explore the experiences of those audience members who are featured in stories told during a Playback Theatre performance but who are not the tellers of these stories.

Nathaniel has been in the audience of the Mental Health Week performance when his sister has come to the stage to tell a story. The story has featured Nathaniel and Larry, his brother-in-law<sup>64</sup>. In discussion with him some days after the performance I ask him to share his experience. When he recounts the incident, he speaks of the public telling as if Hillary had been speaking directly to him from the stage. He says, 'I was told that Larry didn't want me anymore' (MHW06, L26). He expresses his deep hurt at what he had heard:

I remember Hillary saying that Larry didn't want me around anymore. That was a bombshell. I thought I had been getting on with Larry pretty well. I was devastated (Nathaniel, MHW06, L7).

During this conversation with Nathaniel, he is quick to add that he has been pleased to know the truth and he suggests that he might never have known if Hillary had not told a story during the Playback Theatre performance. It's as if the public forum has provided a contained yet expansive space to hold the two of them while Hillary confesses her secret. Perhaps more importantly, it has been at a place where both can be supported individually, as the following comment from Nathaniel suggests:

I'm glad it came out, and I'm glad I had support there when it did come out. If we had been at home it would have hit me like a ton of bricks, which it did do at the play thing, but I had support there. That helped a lot, and other people that were there, who couldn't give me support at that time, gave me support later on (Nathaniel, MHW06, L400).

Hillary's act of telling could be interpreted as a way of reaching out and has opened the way for others in the community to reach back. Ahmed (2000) asserts that the act of reaching out

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<sup>64</sup> This story is first introduced in the previous chapter, in the section *Heightened Connection*.

could mediate estrangement in the limbo that exists between family and society. Nathaniel has used the somewhat public space of the interview with me as an opportunity to speak further about what has previously been too risky in the private realm. In front of me, he admits to Hillary that he has found it difficult to raise issues that might place her under emotional pressure. The following is an excerpt of the conversation:

N: Hil was grieving and I think she still is grieving, so maybe I didn't go into it as deeply as I wanted.

H: What else did you want to say?

N: I think if we talked about it (what was revealed in the story), emotions would come up and I may not be able to express it. Off the top of my head I can't think of a particular thing I wanted to say, but I'm thinking you're still grieving a bit (MHW06 L200).

Nathaniel appears pragmatic about the way the details of his private life, of which he had otherwise been unaware, have been illuminated in the Playback Theatre performance. He expresses his appreciation of what Hillary has done and acknowledges that he has struggled with the fact he could not confront Larry now because he is deceased. As the interview progresses Hillary and Nathaniel engage in a conversation about other family members and their responses to living with Nathaniel and the reality of his mental illness. The ritual containment of the Playback Theatre performance has enabled the story to be shared among more than the two family members and thus has overcome what Ahmed (2000) identifies as the potential estrangement they might have experienced from one another and the community. As reported earlier, the audience members' responses to Hillary and Nathaniel suggest a collective transformation of the estrangement. Nathaniel claims that the number of people who have approached him after the telling has been instrumental in him coming to terms with his feelings of shame and betrayal (MHW06). Hillary had not been prepared for the extra attention she has received after telling her story. Either way, this brother and sister have embraced the consequences of the experience and have seen each other in a new light, and have been seen by their community in a new light.

There had been no formal acknowledgement of Nathaniel's presence at the performance. No time was made for him to respond in the public forum. He later claimed he had wanted to 'get up and talk' at the performance (MHW05, L13). It is my observation that the performance ended abruptly due to time constraints. Ideally, the form would address Nathaniel's right of reply or response by naming or inquiring about the links from the teller and her story to the audience and their stories. While this is sophisticated conducting and a rudimentary element to my practice, the abbreviated ending has resulted in this breach in the ritual. My journal entry implicates the loss of time due to the politician as a likely cause. Yet this is overly simplistic and negates the influence of the broader social process on the performance. The enabling of Hillary's telling was not solely mediated by the Playback Theatre ritual, but rather was a response to the highly organised context, her relationship to the context, and her immediate understanding of what the Playback Theatre process could facilitate for both her and the group (MHW01). Nathaniel's response has eventually been facilitated in an elongated incorporation of the experience made possible by the research process.

As a non-telling participant, the placement of the performance in the Mental Health community during the specially nominated week has contributed to an extended context for Nathaniel. He has been able to keep talking about his experience with people who have been there with him. This extension of the Playback Theatre ritual does not occur in all cases. The next story is an example of this.

A non-telling participant who features in another's story can have a complex mix of responses that have long lasting resonances. In Nathaniel's experience, there is some resolution after the initial shock of learning that Larry had felt antagonistic about Nathaniel needing support. The public airing of the family secret has enabled he and his sister to discuss a difficult topic. Stories told by audience members that have featured another audience member are not always 'secrets', or 'news' to the non-telling participant. Yet, the new light shed by a public telling, or

through the dramatisation of the story, can induce unexpected feelings of vulnerability and confusion. This has been Asha's experience as her prospective son-in-law told a story that has featured her, the young couple and their unborn child (the story is summarised previously in *Connection*).

As Liam tells his story at the March Public Performance, Asha listens experiencing conflicting emotions. She states:

[The story] involved members of my family and me, and was highly charged for me. ... I am a participant in the story but it's not my version of what we shared. ... I was a little bit astounded that that was the issue that Liam presented as the bone of contention between him and me. It reminded me of how incredibly vulnerable and raw they were on that morning (Asha, March03, L31, L95, L210).

While watching the dramatic enactment, Asha experiences a 're-running' of the event:

The feelings of the time - the experience - came up for me. There was visual imagery and connections, and embroidering of the story with my reality. My version of the story was running for me, not Liam's version for him, not my version of Liam's, but my version of mine. Afterwards I felt like a lot of soil dug over, from having relived my version of me again. In addition to having lived Liam's version of me and him. That was new soil. New soil turned and old soil turned again (Asha, Mar03, L641).

Speaking with her later, Asha admits that she *knew* what Liam was going to tell because he had spoken with her and his friends about it during a short intercession in the performance. Yet she found herself being surprised by the content of the story and by her response. When I first approach her to discuss the performance her response to the experience is:

I *feel* I own that story, I didn't tell it but I feel extremely territorial around that story. In the light of looking at it in a public, or Ph.D. context, my threat levels go extremely high (Asha, Mar03, L11).

Shuman (1986) writes of the sense of ownership that tellers can feel over their own story. In expressing ownership over the story Asha explains that it had more to do with her feelings of exposure and her surprise over the emphasis in Liam's version of the story. In a second interview she explains that she felt the story has put her in a bad light. This has made her feel vulnerable to criticism from the audience. She expresses ongoing surprise about the focus of Liam's version of the story. She states:



I was surprised that (the funeral) was the issue of conflict for Liam, with him and me, all year, I thought the area of conflict was somewhere else (Asha, Mar03, L223).

Asha's reference to an alternative area of conflict concerned domestic and social issues she and Liam have periodically clashed on in the eighteen months since the premature delivery and subsequent passing of the baby. The public exposure of the issue has assisted her to see Liam in a new light. She says:

[When] it was time to talk about the funeral and we had our different views about how it should happen, it was very intense. It was quite clear, that there were differences. Only in retrospect (after seeing the story), do I realise that the [decision] was more traumatic for them. It was their issue and perhaps they should have had autonomy over it (Asha, Rec03, L212).

As in Nathaniel's experience, Asha has come to understand more through the dialogic treatment of the family story within the (public) ritual process of Playback Theatre. Liam's representation of Asha in the telling and the interpretation of this by the actors has provided Asha with a mirror depicting some of Liam's perspective of her at that time. This perspective has not equated immediately with her perspective of herself. By engaging with what she saw and heard in Liam's telling and the enactment she has at first been critical of herself, which has led to her becoming more open to Liam's experience of the event. She has eventually become less critical of herself as she has come to see the context within which the interaction occurred. Asha's experience shows that when we share a personal experience in public there is scope for a new kind of self-consciousness about our own and others' feelings. The liminal space of the Playback Theatre performance destabilises the threshold between what is public space and what is private space, and who has authority over what is told. The dynamics of both Nathaniel's and Asha's experiences could be understood in terms of Sennett's (1977) claim that the idealised refuge of the family is limited and individualising. Through Hillary and Liam sharing tragic experiences with others, they have reached beyond the estrangement that had begun in the family and beyond the post-modern malaise of self-sufficiency, to a place of communal or collective experience and a plurality of points-of-view (Delanty, 2003).

#### 7.4 Seeing Others

As spectators, audience members witness the stories of others. One informant speaks about feeling privileged in witnessing a story. He states, 'It was a real privilege, the little girl telling her story of this ordeal and having her mum and dad in the audience' (MDA04, L15, see also MDA14, L12). Here I describe audience members' experience of overcoming estrangement when they have an experience of *seeing* another. This may be someone they already know or someone who is otherwise unknown to them. This has occurred at the performances where people are in the audience with other people with whom they work. Observation and interview data suggest that in this situation, the Playback Theatre ritual facilitates new meetings among people beyond the usual small talk of 'what we eat for lunch, and ... what we wear' (DAW06, L70). This phenomenon has been particularly apparent at the Disability Action Week, Mental Health Week and Refugee Week performances where people have attended in their professional roles. The story form offers an alternative way of disclosing personal information. Informants express positive responses to co-workers or colleagues who have shared a story. For instance:

Seeing people actually open up, people come up with things that I would never have thought people would've brought up originally, personal experiences that they just would not have talked about possibly, was really stimulating (Victoria, DAW06, L805).

Another view is that disclosure by a co-worker or colleague within the collective Playback Theatre experience builds or extends previous connections. This has occurred at the Refugee Week performance where people are familiar with each other due to their involvement in the refugee and asylum seeker support sector. Ariel, a leader in the field, has been particularly attentive when another prominent leader in the sector has come to the stage to tell his story. She comments, 'I have known [colleague] for over six years and never knew his personal life. And his staff didn't know any of it. It was really great' (Ariel, MDA01, L21.). In another instance, the public disclosure has led co-workers to build on the new intimacy as the following quote suggests:

I came with Gerard (a male colleague). He was really in there. I saw another side of him. It took our friendship to another level. [After the performance] he opened up and spoke about his daughter and how he missed her, and broke down (Shelly, MHW01, L37).

Shelly's statement suggests that she has been able to continue to build on the shared experience after the performance. This opportunity to act again on what has been heard within the performance is also addressed in a previous section when I report on the way in which audience members approached Hillary and Nathaniel after the Mental Health Week performance.

As is alluded to in Victoria's experience above, watching the enactment can illuminate others' perspectives on the world. Previously, I have reported Asha's surprise at what Liam had focused on in the telling of his story. On hearing his version of the story, she has gained a new perspective and could see how vulnerable he was at the time. Transcripts from the discussion groups reveal that the Playback Theatre experience is a way for audience members to see the human side of people and enable them to expand their view of the world and their response to others (Pride02, L1132). The following excerpts demonstrate this:

You're only ever going to see an issue from your own perspective. That night it was a very powerful presentation of a number of other quite different perspectives, and so I don't think I can walk away from something like that and not have my own position broadened. I am seeing it from more angles than what I did before. ... I believe that those stories have come into my repertoire and enable me to see reconciliation in a more nuance-d kind of way (Helen, Rec08, L393).

At times this new perspective is highly specific as the following comment reveals:

It broadened my understanding of what it's like to be a person from a non-english speaking background and it broadened my understanding of relocation issues (Sharon, MDA14, L33).

The chance to gain another perspective is not unusual in theatre (Brook, 1989). Theatre provokes consciousness and seeks to transform attitudes and perceptions. Within the Playback Theatre ritual it is not a script that actors are bringing to life, it is a real life story, in the presence of the (real life) teller. Perhaps this juxtaposition of reality and fiction enlarges the impact of seeing another's point of view, of seeing The Other. Perhaps in seeing the other in

this forum renders audience members more open to the possibility of transformation of their preconceived attitudes. Another possibility is that it might be too risky to depict stories of the other on the public Playback Theatre stage. This has emerged in the Refugee week performance where professionals have been concerned that if refugees speak in public they might jeopardise their chances of securing temporary residency. Some of the informants from this show have applauded the possibility that a more vulnerable person's story can be told indirectly when they feature in someone else's story. In this way, the more vulnerable person can be present in the enactment as opposed to having to tell a story themselves. They claim that the enactment provides a place for more vulnerable people to be seen without there being any pressure on them to tell. One informant makes this point by referring to a story that a woman told about living in Amman as a teenager. In the story, the woman recalls her experiences of living there with her family for a year, and her memories of feeling very white and conspicuous. The story ends with a scene at the airport: after her family have been admitted with minimal scrutiny, a Pakistani man has been searched mercilessly, his possessions spread all over the counter and eventually a precious, well-bound package filled with nuts has been ripped open. The nuts scatter to every corner of the room, all over the floor. She remembers him on his knees recovering his nuts. Of this story, Ariel says:

The [story about the] woman at the airport. That was powerful. We all knew. We all could see. It was just as powerful as having a Pakistani man tell the story but without risk of him being further humiliated (Ariel, MDA01, 177).

Sensitivity about tellers' vulnerability has emerged regularly in the interviews with informants generally admitting that they have not been sure how they feel about people exposing themselves through their stories. This is explored in more depth later in the chapter when I present audience members opinions about follow-up and debrief in Playback Theatre.

During a conversation with reflective partners Craig queries my influence as conductor stating, 'In a way, you actually manipulate the action. I wonder whether what you say can take the

whole evening in a certain direction?' (OD01, L84). This is a genuine concern. In addition to the stories that have been told by audience members and the text that has been presented in the enactment, audience members have found themselves connecting with what I say as conductor. One example of this has occurred at Mental Health Week show. Here I have told a story from my own life as a way to move the performance from the didactic non-interactive space left by the politician to one that would bring the audience toward the open interactive Playback Theatre space. One audience member suggests that this has been a key moment:

I think the trueness of your sharing and the authority with which you could lead the show, really added another layer to the trust (Lynette, MHW04, L113).

Reflective data suggest that The Company's opening sequences appear to be echoed in the stories told during performances. What I, as conductor, emphasise throughout the performance could influence the stories that are told. Perhaps more significantly, what I say, notice, and act on could result in silencing a prospective teller (OD01, L1076). It is as if, when the ensemble joins with the audience we are equally affected and affecting.

So far in the chapter, I have reported on audience members' experiences of the Playback Theatre performance. To accomplish this I have presented audience members voices as they reflect on their experience *after* the performance. In the post-performance period audience members continue to respond to the performance. This period is considered part of the formal ritual event and will be discussed in the following section.

### 7.5 Post-performance

Guss (2001) and Turner (1969) both write about van Gennep's third stage of the ritual experience, that of incorporation. Incorporation occurs as the audience exits the liminal and involves re-integrating any new perspectives they may have gained as they resume their social roles in society (Guss, 2001). Cabral (2001) asserts that audience members might experience transformation at this time due to the way in which the ritual structure enables them to

explore situations that would otherwise be "tense" (p.56). For the purposes of this next data set I align the incorporation phase Turner speaks of with the cool down and aftermath stages in Schechner's (1985) schema<sup>65</sup> of the performance process. The cool down correlates to the post-performance time when audience members are engaged in discussion groups and incidental conversations at the venue and during the period immediately after this. Aftermath refers to those experiences that occur after cool down or persist beyond the cool down phase. The patterns that have emerged from the transcripts indicate that the after-show period could be an intense time for audience members. This section organises these experiences into three categories. These are stories, reflection and action, and debrief.

### ***7.5.1 Stories***

As discussed in the section on participation, audience members' experience their stories and memories surfacing during the Playback Theatre performance. The interview and after-show discussion group transcripts reveal that a regular post-performance experience has been telling the stories that audience members do not get to tell during the performance. One way in which this has occurred has been for people to engage in a spontaneous session of telling stories as they have remained seated in the audience or while they stood around in the foyer. The research process has facilitated this activity further through the organisation of discussion groups after some events (see for examples Rec01, 02 & 03, and MHW04).

The sharing of stories has continued after the show as people found themselves telling those stories left untold during the performance. At times, people have been further reminded of stories they had not recalled during the performance as is illustrated in Appendix 9. Another way people shared stories that have been awoken during the performance came in the form of admitting to me during interviews that they have felt it would not have been appropriate to tell

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<sup>65</sup> Schechner's (1985, p.16) schema named seven stages of the performance process: training, workshops, rehearsal, warm-up, performance, cool down and aftermath.

them, and then proceeding to tell me (see Rec05, L426, Pride04, L88, DAW03, L83). One woman announces 'my story might have been too crass' (Rec15, L22). Another reflects on whether the group would have accepted her story, as it was different to other stories. She says,

I felt bad that I don't feel angry about the aboriginal situation. I felt badly that I couldn't claim that. I was unsure about where I was at with it all (Nancy, Rec14, L27).

This post-performance experience has extended beyond the immediate cool down to include encounters with me two and three weeks after the performance (see for example MHW01, 03, 04, 05, DAW05, 07, MDA01, 10, 11). For many of these audience members re-engaging with me had the effect of reminding them of the stories they may have told during performance. When this has occurred it appeared to me that people felt some compulsion to tell me what they have recalled.

This after-show process of telling stories can be understood in terms of the way in which the ritual experience evokes reflection (Turner 1982). In telling their stories after the show, it is possible that audience members were reflecting through narrative (Bruner, 1986) by thinking in stories (Frank, 1995). What is most notable about the stories that have been told outside the formal ritual performance is that they often introduced new content about the social worlds and values of the collective audience. The story below has been told after the reconciliation performance. It was a very recent experience for the person unlike the other stories told that evening. It introduces new themes of social responsibility and casual interaction with respect to indigenous Australians.

I had a story (that happened to me) this evening. I was cruising down the street and there's this guy playing the tin whistle and he had a hat out. Usually we give some money but I stayed and listened for a bit. Then, I walked along a bit further and there was this group of aboriginal people. There were three guys, and one man came up and I shook his hand and then they said, hey, have you got \$2 to spare and normally I think in the past I've given them money, and this time I didn't. I was working on this idea that if you, people never become dependent, independent and by giving people money to buy beer, booze, you basically keeping them in that particular situation. For me, I felt when I walked away, that I should've given something. That's a paradox for me. It was like an anti-reconciliation act. My memory is still there, and right here and now the question is what can we do?

What will be most effective? Anyway, I thought I'd just share something that happened tonight that was really quite a difficult experience for me (Jake, Rec02, L56).

Jake's story is integrated with his reflection about the incident. He says 'my memory is still there' and indicates it was difficult. In my observation notes I speculate again about the dilemma in this story regarding a missed connection across cultures. Is it another story that possesses the same kind of angst that was present in Lorraine's story? The content and sentiment in this story indicate that the after-show storytelling ritual may have been reserved for stories people may have felt unable to tell because of fear of being politically incorrect, or revealing too much. This aligns with Burkett's (2003) notion that political correctness is "a barrier for truthful storytelling" and inhibits people sharing their real stories for fear they will not be "socially acceptable" (p.13). The telling of these stories in the less formal arena may also represent the teller's effort to rehearse the telling of an experience they were, as yet, unable to bring into a larger public arena. As such, the teller may be able to begin to reflect. However, denying these stories in the collective space could serve to limit the potential for societal and personal reform that Bruner (1986) suggests emerges when intimate interactions occur in a public forum.

Another way stories have featured in the post-performance period has been when audience members have engaged in telling stories about telling stories (Boje, 1991) and telling stories about hearing stories. A number of informants report telling stories about their experience of the Playback Theatre event. One claims to use the Playback Theatre experience as a way to gain perspective on the original experience (MHW03, L59) or as an extension to the re-telling of the original story (Pride05). In the latter example, the informant explains that she now tells the story, and 'adds the Playback Theatre bit' (L43). Another informant claims to have told people about the experience of telling her story. She suggests that this has been a way to keep talking about the story and about her experience at Playback Theatre (Rec09, L30). She states:



'I was ringing people the week after and telling them ... my friends wanted to know what my story was and how it was acted out' (Rec09a, L2). Others have told about telling and have told about the Playback Theatre experience so that they could encourage friends and family to come to the next show (Jul04, L71). This practice of telling stories about telling, and telling about the experience of the performance in general could be considered in Frank's (1995) terms as thinking (or reflecting) in story. The next section considers the way in which the Playback Theatre experience influences or activates reflection in audience members after the performance.

### ***7.5.2 Reflection and Action***

Audience members at the Playback Theatre performances speak about coming away from the show 'with a lot going on in my head' (Rec14, L51) and needing 'time to process how I was affected ... [and] time to take it in' (DAW08, L25). This experience of delayed reflection could be linked to an experience of flow for audience members who may have been in-the-moment during the performance and not necessarily engaged in cognition (Bundy 2001). Turner (1982) suggests that reflection and reflexivity hinder flow. However, the thoughtfulness of audience members at the end of the performance could be a continuation of the reflection they have undertaken within the performance. The various foci that have emerged as central to the reflective efforts of audience members include: the form, emotional and cognitive responses to the content, context, and audience, debate about values and/or questions raised in the show, and personal reflection.

As reported early in the chapter, audience members have engaged in parallel processes whereby they have been simultaneously active spectators and distanced reflectors. Reflection on and about the form has continued after the event with particular emphasis on audience members' engagement with the form or what the form delivered. One spectator claims that she was walking away with a sense of hope after witnessing the way in which others engaged

in the invitation to tell and listen to stories (Rec07, L166). Another reflects on how the form offers what she saw as an alternative to therapy. She says:

You can reveal your humanity, whereas if you go to a therapy group it's, well there can be competition around who's unfixable, but it's also a bit, for me, always a bit focussed on how do we solve the problem. Who needs a kick up the arse? The generosity, for me, doesn't come out. Its like we can all whine together and that's acceptable. Whereas this somehow walks away from that in terms of saying: 'you can be safe with feeling here' and I can look at a person and feel for them, without them having to deal with me in any way, shape, or form later. It touches our humanity, and its easy, it is much easier to be generous because there's not that responsibility (Bea, Pride02, L1188).

The idea expressed here is similar to the arguments about what a new conception of community might be like (see for example, Ahmed, 2000, Amit, 2002, Delanty, 2003). Rather than the individualised and perhaps pathologising experience of therapy (Sennett, 1977), Bea's comment suggests Playback Theatre offers an alternative for people wanting to overcome isolation and estrangement. Other reflections have been on what was not gained or what the form does not achieve in given contexts. One audience member states, 'It showed we are concerned but I don't know what we've done for reconciliation. I certainly don't think we had any argument from this group' (Rec02, L36).

Audience members have reflected on what they see as the values implicit in the form including some discussion about the way in which the form is accessible and promoted voluntary participation (MDA03, Jul01, MHW04). Discussions have revealed that Playback Theatre addresses diversity and equity (Jul05, L373, Rec01, L281) and promotes the importance of sharing stories in our culture (Rec07, L48). Alternatively, there has been reflection on the limitations of the form. One limitation that has been highlighted emerged at the Mental Health show. Here the audience mainly comprised carers and service providers in the mental health sector. The after-show discussion group transcript indicates that many of those present with a mental illness had removed themselves during the politician's opening speech. The stories told in the performance came from mothers, wives, workers, and others who live with

people with mental illness. One audience member criticises Playback Theatre for silencing people with mental illness through not including their stories. He states:

[It needed to have] a variety of stories, about paranoia, anxiety, psychosis, manic depression, melancholia, multiple personality disorder, that's misunderstood, people get schizophrenia and MPD mixed up. ... [It needed] more points of view: carer, consumer, mental health professionals, [the] general community. [The] point of view of friends or maybe the enemy. Even on the same topic, you can have different acting, different perspectives from different people. This would give insight into the way that other people think. For example, some health professionals are very stigmatizing and disempowering towards consumers, it could help if they saw different perspectives (Nathaniel, MHW05, L28).

An opposing view has emerged from the Refugee Week performance. Here an audience member expresses concern that people representing minority identities have felt pressured to tell to serve the performance or have been 'used' for the purposes of making theatre (MDA14, L37). A different view been expressed at the Pride performance suggests that the act of telling is a powerful position (Pride04, L86). Interestingly, at the Refugee Week performance an informant has commended the invitation to volunteer that she has seen as implicit in the form. She says that she felt that there had been 'no pressure' to tell and perhaps more importantly, that people could 'choose' and that they could tell their own versions of their stories (MDA03, L11). Perhaps the 'pressure' was coming from others in the audience, one informant at the same performance reports that she was 'sitting next to a man from Bosnia and there was a [woman] encouraging him to speak up but he wasn't ready' (MDA10, L29). The discussion about diversity is extended by what an audience member has said when reflecting on the Disability Action Week performance. He suggests that it is not only important for people to be telling their stories, there must be diversity in those listening and watching, as the following excerpt reveals.

I've met with the [organising committee and told them] that next time [they] need to include members of the general public - it's about Disability *Action*. I'm happy to tell people about it ... if it is going to be truly inclusive, it's important to have the audience members with disability who want to contribute a story ... [and] people (from the general public) to see the other side of life for people with disability (Brett, DAW, L35).

Brett's comment is aligned with what Jakubowicz & Meekosha (2001) argue. They claim that society is constituted by "constantly reinforced networks of reciprocal recognition of social presence, and thereby of the right to participate in the defining of social agendas and cultural directions" (p.88). Hence the importance of ensuring diversity among tellers, and on the Playback Theatre stage. The importance of inclusion and diversity is further highlighted at this event when one participant suggests that people with disabilities should be on stage as actors. This idea of matching the diversity on stage with that of the audience, especially at performances for particular populations, has been broached by an informant at the Refugee Week performance, as the following comment demonstrates:

You were so skilled but you remained 'anglo' or white and the stories weren't. This is not a criticism, but an observation (Leeanne, MDA12, L1).

Another audience member reports:

Someone behind me took offence to the show, these white people doing this but they didn't understand. Half way through he started to get it, but then made some more grumpy comments. I thought it was brave to stand up as a white person to tell others' stories. Maybe it did need to be black people or people of different cultures. There seemed to be an alienation of the actor which was (mirrored by) what was happening in the stories (Sebastian, MDA04, L16).

There have been a number of references to the use of an all-women ensemble (excluding the Pride performance, where there is a contract with the community to provide a 'women-only' space<sup>66</sup>) suggesting that gender diversity is also necessary when endeavouring to create an inclusive space. One male participant states, 'the thing that struck me was that there were three women on stage, or four women on stage, and two of them were older women, and I was quite surprised by that because basically it wasn't balanced' (Darren, Rec05, L293). A younger woman in the audience has similar feelings of exclusion based on her reading of the ensemble. She states she saw 'a bunch of white middle-class (aged) women' (Rec10, L12).

<sup>66</sup> While, after nine years the women still want to preserve this space as women-only, there have been comments in recent years of conducting a second performance that would be open to all queer-identified people. Further, we have recently inducted our first gay male into the Company, so there is also scope to offer a 'men-only' space in the next few years.

The limitations identified by these audience members are similar to those things that narrative scholars (see Bruner, 1986, Frank, 1995, Razack, 1993) propose are oppressive, and that they claim can be overcome through the promotion of personal story. Rappaport (1995) critiques the place of personal story and cautions against the indiscriminate use of narratives as resources, alluding to the risk of social control and oppression that Nathaniel and Brett refer to above. Nathaniel states that 'he wanted to talk' after Hillary told her story. As I report earlier, I had ended the show without recourse to him and in doing so, acted to silence him. While Frank (1995) suggests that the telling of one story can liberate many voices, when we stage Playback Theatre with ensembles that lack diversity, as suggested above are we silencing voices through their lack of representation and our limited social and cultural knowledge? Shuman (1986) suggests that such value judgements are dependent on the purpose of the telling, or the way in which stories are used. Rappaport (1995) however argues that whether we like it or not, some stories actively devalue people, while others are not recognised as valuable at all. Who dares judge? Regardless of whether judgement is intended, in the fields of scholarship drawn together in this thesis: performance, ritual, theatre and narrative, it is argued that we can only listen, read, respond and act from within our social, cultural and political framework. Further discussion about the limitations of the Playback Theatre ritual, this time in terms of follow-up and debriefing processes, occurs later in the chapter.

The after-performance period reflection process also includes what audience members have referred to as reflective discussions. Some informants comment that the discussion groups that I have organised for the purposes of the research have facilitated a reflection in dialogue. This has been particularly appreciated after performances within contexts that generated difficult issues, for example reconciliation and mental health (Rec08, L379, DAW03, L72). I now present some examples of reflective conversations or discussion by audience members.

Melanie had invited her mother to accompany her to the performance. She admits that her main purpose in bringing her mum was so she was not on her own. She speaks about how the shared experience has led to a significant conversation:

What was really great was that it (the performance) generated discussion with my mother I'd never had before. I learned things about my mum I never knew and it led to a very deep discussion. I love her, and feel like she's my best friend, she's so gentle and caring and I didn't think she felt so strongly about things. She told me how she felt about the aboriginal stuff, 'they're not the only race or people whom suffered.' She's pretty angry that they (the aborigines) are still caught up in the anger. I haven't heard her talk about this stuff before, so I sat back and listened to her (Melanie, Rec13, L7).

While Melanie was reserved about expanding on her conversation with her mother, her tone of voice and manner indicate that she has been appreciative of the opportunity the performance has afforded her.

For others the experience of sharing a reflective conversation such as this is not new but the influence of the performance has made it so. In the following excerpt an audience member reflects aloud with his partner. On the eve of the birth of their first babies (twins) Craig and Louella recount the conversation they had after the Reconciliation performance. They are referring to a story told by a young woman about her experience of prejudice in a corner store.

This is an edited version of their discussion:

C: That was the most powerful story that I found all night. It was about what I hold dear: it was about treating people with humanity... I look at everything with 'parent hat' on now, that's a different perspective for me. I want my children to grow up with empathy and respect, and tolerance and understanding and

L: and justice, and those sorts of things, and then we talked about – as parents, 'how do we make sure that our kids are respectful?'

C: I would be horrified if my son treated someone like that. To me that would be the most horrific thing (OD1, L729).

It is more than likely that Craig and Louella would have eventually had a conversation about the values they hold dear. However, the shared experience of the concrete example provided by the story and illuminated by the enactment has possibly enabled them to express themselves more fully. Perhaps the experience of listening to others at the performance has

influenced them to listen better to each other during their conversation. It is possible that the story has provided a bridge for them to talk about their ideals and their hopes and dreams as parents. Brook (1989) suggests that the intensity of the dialectic created during a theatre performance merges public and private truth. Craig has been able to express his contempt for the way in which the young woman in the story has been treated and in doing so has revealed his values. Meanwhile, Louella has interpreted his response to the story through her own interpretation of the story.

Craig and Louella have engaged in a conversation in which they express the values that they feel are just. There is also data from couples who have revealed that their post-performance reflection involved critical reflection on judgements they made during the performance. Bea and Sarah are a female couple who attended the women-only *Pride* performance. Their post-performance discussion involved an examination of their strong response to (resentment of) the presence of a baby at the *Pride* show. They have admitted that this persistent judgement of the baby and his mothers' choice<sup>67</sup> to bring him had bothered them and interfered with their capacity to enjoy the performance. They have confided in me that they had a discussion about 'can you be judgmental about women who have children?' (*Pride02*, L425).

These three examples demonstrate the way in which audience members have engaged in reflective discussion after the Playback Theatre performance. The example of Bea and Sarah shows that they have also engaged reflexively, critiquing the way in which they were thinking during the performance. Turner (1982) promotes the ritual process as a way to initiate reflection and transformation.

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<sup>67</sup> The baby had two mothers.

As suggested earlier in this section, when audience members are particularly affected, they want to share their experiences of Playback Theatre through telling stories about the event. For a few audience members it was not enough to tell them about the event. For instance:

You don't want to just share it, you want people to experience it. Society has become unconnected. This (Playback Theatre) connects us (Melanie, DAW03, L29).

This response has regularly resulted in the audience member coming to the next show with others in tow. The data reveals that audience members often want to do more than just bring a few people along. They want to take Playback Theatre with them to other contexts. One claims:

I did think straight away that there might be an avenue for this here, with stuff that we do (with young men with head injuries). It could be an avenue for people to voice stuff that never gets a chance to come out (Carly, DAW08, L625).

During the course of the research there have been a number of occasions where audience members' responses to their Playback Theatre experience has been to produce a Playback Theatre event. One example of this occurred when Melanie saw the reconciliation performance. She was in a position to mount a special event for Disability Action Week that year. She has since produced a second Playback Theatre event for Disability Action Week the following year. A second example involved a woman whose first response to Playback Theatre was to criticise its limitation in directing the content. Despite having a personal response that was mixed and somewhat less than she had anticipated, Jude has proceeded to organise a Playback Theatre event for Refugee Week.

A third example in the data does not involve mounting a special event in the audience members' specific context. Rather, it has resulted in the audience member bringing her practice context to a non-themed performance. Gigi was working as a counselor for young people with drug and alcohol dependency when she first encountered Playback Theatre. After her first experience of Playback Theatre she has brought three young women to the next performance by The Company. This has been followed by her attendance at the remainder of



the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company shows that year, each time bringing different young people. By the final show of the year over half the audience were young people from the drug and alcohol clinic with the 'storytelling-space' that night almost totally occupied by this sub-group.

These strong responses toward some form of action to duplicate the experience of Playback Theatre for others in other contexts suggests that the values implicit in Playback Theatre meet the practice values of these contexts in some way. The refugee context, the disability context, and the rehabilitation context are all premised on values that promote personal agency, the liberation of voice and other anti-oppressive values. However it is not useful to apply Playback Theatre indiscriminately in these contexts based on this apparent congruity. There are data that raise questions about the responsibility of Playback Theatre in such contexts where practitioners endeavour to place vulnerable citizens at the centre. This is discussed in the next section through a consideration of where debrief and follow-up might feature in the post-performance period of Playback Theatre.

### ***7.5.3 Debrief & Follow-up***

Discussion about the limitations of the Playback Theatre ritual, in terms of follow-up and debriefing processes, has arisen from the Mental Health Week and Refugee Week performances. Informants express the view that some audience members at these shows are perceived as vulnerable due to their life experience and their status in the context, e.g., being a client. In both performances there have been numerous people in the audiences with whom others may be in a client-professional relationship based on the one-way telling of stories. Thus, as Turner (1969, 1982) asserts, the ritual framework of the performance provides an opportunity to disturb the normative social structure and thus, this professional-client relationship.

Further skewing the status quo at the Mental Health Week performance has arisen from the possibility that the performance ritual may have been too intense for the clients of this context (MHW4, L1041). It is the vulnerability of the carers and professionals in this context, the people who do not often get to tell their stories of mental illness that has emerged through the stories. Carers and professionals are often required to listen to the stories of others (MHW04, L8). Again, I could conclude that the ritual process of Playback Theatre has enabled carers to voice their experiences of caring for someone with a mental illness (MHW06) and negotiating the medical system (MHW03, 09). Stories about coping with uncharacteristic - often hurtful - behaviour from their loved ones (MHW01, 09) and living day to day with little support and encouragement from among family and friends (MHW03, 04, 06, 09) have been expressed during this performance. The intensity of the emotions expressed has prompted queries about after-care and the need for debriefing. For instance in reference to Hillary's sharing, Joss reports that she and others have spoken about follow-up. She states:

[There is a] need for ongoing support for people who shared such big stories ... [While the clients often meet together in groups] the carers are on their own, and wouldn't come to all the groups. I've not met you (Hillary) before, and there are hundreds of carers out there. So there was some concern for you about how you would take that back into your life after such a big share (Joss, MHW04, L1070).

Hillary has her own opinion about it:

Why should the responsibility of follow-up rest with just playback theatre? Why not the individuals that are there, whether it's Mental Health or Consumer/Carers Group, or CAG, or anybody. You can get onto responsibility, that goes on and on and on, it's got to stop somewhere. It's your responsibility, if you thought of it, you reach out, you go and touch that person, you give them the hug, ring them up, find that person's phone number, it shouldn't be passed on (Hillary, MHW04, L1120).

A professional at the Refugee Week performance (MDA13, L39) expresses a similar awareness. Perhaps the performance is reflecting or expressing the social system within which it has occurred, or in Turner's words, "the social system it grows out of" (1986, p.22). The ritual has initiated this dialogue about who should enact follow-up in this community. Hillary's response suggests that this is a question for the larger socio-cultural context. As Turner suggests, the dialectic between the aesthetic of the drama processes and socio-cultural

processes at this point in time reveal the broader cultural context (Turner, 1986, p.28). How might this community currently respond to one another in public displays of emotion? The Playback Theatre performance has opened a space to raise the question.

This example suggests that Playback Theatre can be thought of as part of a broader process in this context. Turner (1969) asserts that ritual processes enable the illumination of the structures of the society from which "subjects" separate in order to enter the liminal zone of the ritual. Further, this conversation represents part of the process of incorporation that occurs after the ritual experience for Joss and Hillary, both of whom are voicing potential for change in this context with respect to reaching out to others.

Similar concerns have been raised at the Refugee Week performance, however the sentiment is different, as the following excerpt from my journal suggests:

There is some feedback about debriefing. Same kinds of worries as the Mental Health Week show but people are angry and hostile ... it's all come from workers in the sector ... [and] none of who told a story. One woman got angry that her friend became emotional, another called out during the show, something about 'these are people's lives not stories.' She was angry (Reflective Journal, October, 2002).

Again, informants' comments point to the likelihood that the non-hierarchical, non-discriminatory environment of the Playback Theatre ritual has created a disturbance among professionals who have found themselves on unfamiliar terrain with regard to feelings and emotions. However, data also reveal a certain value within this context regarding professionals' responsibility to protect the refugee and asylum seeker. The outburst from the audience could be seen as one attempt to maintain professional control of the intimacy and sharing. One informant suggests that professionals have elected to tell stories during the performance to alleviate what they perceive as the pressure on the refugee and asylum seeker audience members to participate (see MDA03 & 10). Underpinning these actions are concerns that people would have their trauma experiences triggered (see MDA1, 12,13, & 14). As

mentioned above, it has not been those who told stories who expressed these views. Some audience members who have expressed these views may have experienced a surge in their own stories and found this disconcerting (see for example MDA14). Interestingly, there was no reference to after-care by storytelling informants.

The context of this performance has influenced the intensity of the responses about aftercare and debriefing. The performance did touch audience members with experiences of torture and trauma. One example of this is the man who told his story about his treatment at the hands of the Australian government. Before he told his story he expresses that he thought his story was 'too big'. He says, 'I don't know where to start' (MHW01, L88). After the performance he was nowhere to be found. Interview data reveal that the context has provided a particular holding of him beyond the ritual frame. The following two excerpts are from professionals in the refugee sector who had contact with him, one in the immediate post-performance period and the other the next day. One reports:

I spoke with him afterwards. Even though the past was incredibly painful he wants to look to the future. There was some pressure on him to tell because new refugees think they *have* to tell. I could feel his discomfort. Afterwards I debriefed him, just chatting lightly about stuff – regardless of the story (Nina, MDA13, L19).

And another says:

I saw him on the weekend and I asked what happened (to him after the show) and he said 'I went out to have a drink.' We spoke about it, he said it's really important that stories have been told (Ariel, MDA01, L89).

These responses by the teller suggest that regardless of how difficult it is there is value in telling his story. This does not exempt the Playback Theatre Company from responsibility but does raise questions as to how to establish appropriate post-performance processes in contexts that have implicit in them the expectation that people will disclose. The ritual containment in these contexts can be somewhat skewed by patterns of habitual disclosure or as was suggested earlier in the chapter, the particularity of the refugee audience members who are vulnerable due to the use of their stories as currency in the resettlement process.

As the discussion above suggests, emotional responses to the Playback Theatre event have been met with confusion and criticism. Implicit in these responses are the values of the commentators, one of which calls into question the storytellers' rights, and the protocols around what Shuman (1986) calls the "use" of stories. This insinuates that rather than the act of storytelling being empowering for the teller, as Boje (1991) suggests, it becomes dangerous or arduous. Particular to this show in the study, has been the presentation of a child-teller. A ten-year-old daughter has told a story. Her mother, father and sister are seated in the audience and during the telling I have acknowledged them from my role as conductor, a number of times. My notes state, 'It was as if the entire family was sitting alongside me as she told her story' (Reflective Journal, October, 2002).

Her parents have clearly been moved by witnessing their daughter on-stage, her poise and clarity. Her story of fleeing Iraq did not explicitly evoke adult themes, yet the enactment has contextualised it in the conflict and alienation of war, and the leaving behind of her father and older brothers. This scene has been enacted as the start of the journey. At the end of the enactment the little girl beams as she watches their safe arrival in Australia. Her story has been a celebration. In the audience her parents have been weeping. So were many others. For the little girl's mother, the story has been a way to remember (Shank in Frank, 1995). As such, it pre-empted an emotional weekend for her as she expressed her deep grief and sadness at having to be separated from her sons (MDA16). Literature on the refugee experience suggests that in the early phase of flight displaced persons focus on the moment, focusing their psychological energy on survival "and uncertainty of the immediate future" (Baron, Jensen & de Jong, 2003, p.246). It is later that they will experience symptoms of stress. Baron et al. (2003) propose that when the experience of emplacement commences, i.e., when the refugee has a new home and residency security, opportunities for the type of self-expression Playback Theatre can facilitate is considered crucial, however many refugees may also require specific

and long-term treatment. While the scope of this data limits the conclusions I can draw, it does raise questions about the adequacy of the warm-up and pretext for this specific context (e.g. the woman did not really understand what she was attending) and demands further attention. This data also raises questions about the contract with the audience in a Playback Theatre performance, particularly with respect to child-tellers (MDA01, L25).

The issues that have emerged from the refugee week performance could be considered an indication of a broader social or community process. This is aligned with Turner's notion of social drama as "an eruption" from the level surface of the social environment. If this is so, there is much to consider in the application of Playback Theatre within the refugee and asylum seeker context, and with respect to audience composition and performance purpose. This will be considered in greater depth in the next chapter.

## **7.6 Summary**

In this chapter I have presented data that suggest that audience members experience varying degrees of engagement with storytellers and their story, and the Playback Theatre ensemble and their interpretive enactment. This is related to their expectations of the event and any feelings of "familiarity" that they have or that they develop with the process and the people present. This familiarity is expressed as a feeling of connection with a storyteller, with the ideas expressed in their story, or with other people represented in their story. Failure to experience connection can lead to feelings of isolation and indifference. For some, connection occurs only when the story is dramatised. The dramatic presentation of the story also enables the individual to see glimpses of him/herself and to see others in a new light.

That these encounters with others occur in a community-based context heightens audience members' experiences. The ritual framework and performative elements disturb the regular social context and the associated and expected social behaviours. This enables audience

members to see others in a different light, question their initial responses to them and their stories, and find themselves moving toward the other as they negotiate various anomalies between their and others' ideas, opinions, values, and perspectives. The individual and collective nature of the experience piques in people a curiosity about others, particularly the storytellers, and including the performers. This curiosity coincides with a softening of judgement and a move away from estrangement from and toward interest in the other. At times this leads audience members to feel protective of others.

Like all theatre, the Playback Theatre performance requires a coherent vision. If the origins of the vision are with the audience, then the conductor must work to embody the vision, as if an agent or representative of the community (audience group) has handed her a baton in a relay. After the staging the baton is handed back to the community. The way in which the context and the form interact through this handing over and back of authority or responsibility motivated the discussion about after-care that was presented in the chapter. The in-house show is different. Hosted by The Company, the vision must be clearly articulated and the event framed in such a way that audience preparation is going toward the idea. The embodiment of the vision is a dialectic process between the Company and the audience, and audience members with each other. This interactive collaboration and dynamic embodiment of the social responsibility of what happens in a Playback Theatre performance demands specific attention by both The Company and the community in which it performs. Recommendations for the application of Playback Theatre are discussed in greater detail in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Conclusions and Implications

Risk-free and easily digestible theatre doesn't interest us. A non-commercial and risk-taking independent theatre, which values community and honors the possibility of the unforeseen encounter/connection is as rare as a needle in a haystack ... but it does exist!

Asha Richard<sup>68</sup>

In the opening to this thesis I call up the words of Morris Berman, who announces that if we are to "come to our senses" as a civilisation we must embrace the "things that really matter" like the "magic of interpersonal interactions"; things, he declares, we are most likely to find on the margins (Berman, 1990, p.341). In this closing chapter, I include the words of Asha Richard. She urges that the truth of human encounter is possible if one dares to engage in an experience of theatre that is non-commercial and risk-taking, like that evoked through the one-off community-based Playback Theatre context explored in this study. Playback Theatre is a performance event that engages audience members through its uncanny familiarity, intrigues audience members through its magical mystery, and awakens them through its raw and honest placement of the personal in the public domain. The mixed responses that audience members have to this hybrid performance form render it complex on the one hand, and on the other, a resemblance of the very mundane that is at the heart of human existence. An experience made possible only through the disturbances wrought by the ritual framing of a

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<sup>68</sup> In Fox & Dauber (1999, p.115).



theatre event that stands boldly on the cultural margins welcoming citizen actors alongside the stories of all including those who may otherwise be overlooked, avoided or discarded.

I began this study as a broad inquiry into Playback Theatre. I reach the end with a better understanding of the possible contributions and limitations of the one-off community-based performance event through the perspective of audience members. This chapter is dedicated to drawing together my conclusions and making recommendations. I present a summary of the findings in light of the questions that guided the research journey. I consider the implications of the research and make recommendations for purposeful and strategic Playback Theatre production as a one-off community-based event. Implications for performer-practitioner formation and development are discussed and recommendations toward further research are made.

### **8.1 Audience Members' Experiences of Playback Theatre**

This study nominated the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance as the focus of inquiry. The central question of the study was:

- What are audience members' experiences of this one-off community-based event?

I present a summary of the findings that indirectly address the three sub-questions the study sought to answer. The sub-questions were:

- In what ways do the audience members engage and respond during and after the one-off community-based event?
- In what ways does the Playback Theatre form induce these experiences?
- In what ways is Playback Theatre an experience of community for audience members within the specific context?

The summing up focuses on the two key audience positions the study has identified - those of participant and spectator, and the resulting tension of participation and reflective distance. I report on the way in which audience members have engaged and responded and conclude that the way in which the Playback Theatre form ritualises time and converges the public and private is pivotal for experiences of flow and *communitas*. Barriers to flow in the specific performance context of the study are outlined. A snapshot of various experiences of tellers and non-tellers is included. I then review the findings that demonstrate the connections that audience members have felt and made and their experiences of listening.

### ***8.1.1 Participant-Spectator See-Saw: A tension of participation***

The one-off event acts as a community forum where people from all walks of life come and participate. The dynamics of involvement or participation appear to be in a kind of see-sawing relationship with the act of watching or spectating. The easy rhythm of this see-saw is somewhat dependent on audience members' initial engagement, their capacity to move into and out of reflective distance, and the factors that help or hinder this. In ritualising the community gathering through the Playback Theatre form, participants respond to the invitation implicit in the form and seem empowered or challenged, or stimulated to be involved. This involvement may be greater than or different to what they would expect at a different kind of public meeting. Unlike some traditional ritual performances, the liminal opportunity afforded through the ritualised structure of the Playback Theatre performance has not induced deep trance states for audience members. The study showed that audience members at Playback Theatre have been constantly engaged by the invitation to participate and committed considerable energy to justifying to themselves why they might volunteer to tell a story. Early in the performance, this usually led them to sort through and if possible discard or reframe what might serve to impede their participation. This sorting process represented the segregation of audience members from their ordinary everyday world with its

protocols and structures to the ephemeral world of the ritual performance. Individuals' experience of this separation stage intrinsically affected the way they engaged in the Playback Theatre ritual.

Sitting with the constant possibility of volunteering to participate was a preoccupation for many audience members. They became occupied by their repeated preparation to tell a story. Some felt compelled to participate. Others were preoccupied with a persistent reluctance to tell. Those with a desire to tell often undertook an elaborate inner-dialogue in which they examined this desire. This inner-dialogue involved a negotiation of their personal values and some reflection on the possible consequences of participating. Audience members assessed new information and considered any intuitive incongruency they felt in response to the Playback Theatre process. The dynamic of reflective distance enhanced the engagement of the audience and introduced a tension of participation. Tension of participation could be considered the more potent tension underpinning audience members' experiences of the one-off community-based Playback Theatre event; more than the dramatic tensions emerging from the performative acts of storytelling and enacting.

The liminal or transition phase of the Playback Theatre performance was characterised by moments of unselfconsciousness, high spontaneity and experiences of flow for audience members. It is likely that the repeated invitation to participate implicit in the Playback Theatre form and regularly made explicit by the conductor gave impetus to experiences of flow. Certain elements in the form converged to enable participants to join in. This usually meant that the challenge present in the task of participating was not too difficult for the individual. The improvised nature of the performance represented too great a challenge for some audience members resulting in anxiety or confusion. Feelings of anxiety inhibited individuals' spontaneity and were a barrier to participation. This acted to impede their entry into the transition or liminal stage of the ritual performance.

Flow coincided with those times when participants felt some resolution with respect to values conflict or risk challenges arising during the performance. This was most often with respect to whether to participate as a storyteller yet could also be connected to reaching a new level of understanding about the rules of engagement and the collective culture of the audience; information that emerged as the performance progressed. The constancy of the in-and-out experience of reflective distance as audience members assimilated into the new and often unusual social environment evoked in the Playback Theatre performance was significant for those without prior experience of the form. Audience members who were familiar with Playback Theatre experienced this in-and-outness in the initial stages as they familiarised themselves with who was in the audience and anticipated the transition phases of the ritual. Taking the metaphorical space afforded through reflective distance enabled many audience members to integrate their responses and remain open to the liminal activity. Reflective distance could coincide with a flow break for an individual where they move away from the liminal activity for brief moments.

### ***8.1.2 A Break in Flow: Barriers to participation***

A move to reflective distance by new and experienced audience members often coincided with a break in the flow experience. A number of factors contributed to a flow break and acted as barriers to audience participation. Some audience members felt uneasy about fully entering the Playback Theatre performance due to some ambivalence about what was expected of them. This was often overcome when they established some familiarity with the ritual and felt as though they understood the rules of participation implicit in the form and the rules of engagement being negotiated simultaneously among those gathered. At this point, audience members were able to relax and surrender to the liminal activities offered by the Playback Theatre event. Flow was disturbed when surprise or shock, or unwanted thoughts, e.g. judgement about self or others induced a reasoning state in individuals as they strived to make

sense of unexpected feelings or thoughts. Contradictions felt by the audience at these times could result in a surge or a drop in the performance energy or interrupt the collective experience of *communitas*.

Participation could be further impeded by the challenge present in the prospect of performing. A growing familiarity with the form helped overcome this challenge. Anxiety about performing posed a significant barrier to participation. Boredom, disappointment, and feelings of alienation further restricted participation and disturbed the collective experience of the audience. Similarly, concern about others, dissatisfaction with the quality of the artistry, and discomfort arising from emotional responses limited an individual's capacity to surrender. These barriers to participation could result in people excluding themselves from the activity altogether. This included ruling out the possibility of sharing a story. Self-regulation such as this tended to interfere with a person's capacity to enter the liminal zone and achieve flow. However if self-regulation was due to feelings of uncertainty, it sometimes freed some participants to engage more fully in other ways. There was, however, an instance where audience members self-regulated by removing themselves from the performance altogether.

The prospect of participation triggered resistance in some due to a fear of exposure. This was contingent on who was in the audience, whether they were strange or familiar, and what rules of engagement and disclosure existed within the specific (public) context. It could also be due to the size of the audience. Fear of exposure was generally more problematic at the context-specific performances than at the open public performances. In the former, a sensitive interplay occurred between the anonymity of the public event and the familiarity brought about through individual's various relationships within the context. Some people became worried about who was in the audience and the consequences of revealing too much or became concerned about being judged. These dynamics were also in play at the open public performances for some people who attended in friendship groups. Lack of ease regarding

exposing others also inhibited participation. Any factor that induced fear, uncertainty or anxiety acted to inhibit flow for the audience.

### ***8.1.3 Snapshot: Telling stories***

Storytellers at the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance had a variety of responses to their experience of performing. From the results of this study, I have concluded that the telling performance was usually a moment of heightened engagement for audience members. The storyteller's response tended to focus on the actors' and the audience members' responses to them and the way in which they were revelatory or not. The storytelling audience member was often highly appreciative and had strong affiliation with the actors and conductor after telling. Some non-telling audience members experienced a high degree of discomfort with the storytelling performance. The results suggest that this might have been linked to the personal values of the audience members with regard to the public nature of the telling or the perceived vulnerability of the teller. In some contexts the social protocols and values conflicted with the Playback Theatre values. This was a particular concern in the performance where there were refugee and asylum seekers in the audience and appears linked to the tension that can arise between some audience members desire to protect refugees from exploitation and the perceived pressure in the repeated invitation to participate.

### ***8.1.4 Snapshot: Non-tellers***

There were occasions at the Playback Theatre performance when an audience member was featured in a story told by another. Two particular experiences by non-tellers warrant specific mention in this summary. One of these occurred when an audience member featured in a story told by another. The non-teller in the story experienced feelings of shock and exposure. Additional consequences for the non-teller were varied. The revelation was surprising with the non-teller feeling betrayed or stunned by the teller's perspective of them or of the incident.

Non-tellers also experienced relief and appreciation after they had taken some time for reflection and claimed to have gained some insight into themselves and the teller.

A second unique experience for non-tellers arose when they resisted repeated persistent urges to tell a story. This occurred when the audience member deemed that the environment lacked what they required to enable them to surrender to the invitation to tell. The study has reported on one audience member who experienced disappointment in response to his decision to resist telling and concluded that there are some instances when an individual may never feel prepared to tell their story during the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance. In some ways, this audience member was unprepared to trust himself or the group under the momentum of the ritual. He did, however, overcome this during the after-show period.

### ***8.1.5 An Experience of Communitas: Connection through stories***

Experiences of communitas occurred as audience members witnessed the telling and the dramatisation of personal stories. It was during these times that audience members relaxed to watch and listen. The heightened intra-personal activity generated by the invitation to tell was (mostly) transformed when someone was selected to tell a story. At this time, the tension of participation abated, easing the expectation an individual may have placed on themselves to act. This shift resulted in a move away from heightened individualised engagement due to the possibilities of participation inherent in the form, to become other-focused. The audience shared the experience of listening and watching. This was a shift away from individual agency toward the formation of a collective watching audience. While there was no certainty that whole audiences had an experience of communitas at every moment, the study found that many times during a performance a number of audience members shared a simultaneous experience of watching, listening, or reflecting. This was reinforced during the after-show period, which revealed that many audience members checked in with one another to ascertain

how their experiences may have intersected. This also occurred at times during performances when the conductor created moments for audience members to acknowledge shared and diverse responses.

Communitas could be understood as a group experience of flow. Simultaneous experiences of flow among audience members equated to momentary experiences of communitas arising from a collective emotional response (e.g. laughter or tears) to a story or a spontaneously altered perspective and to the simple sharing of applause. At the performances that feature in this study, a number of people in the audience were found to simultaneously identify with the teller or other characters presented in a story. There were also audience members who had little collective engagement with a story. Often this was transformed when the story was dramatised. Spontaneous collective experience arose through the connections audience members made with and through stories. Mostly, the teller's performance was a unique and compelling collective experience. However, just as the invitation to participate resulted in audience members moving in and out of flow, the invitation to watch and listen produced moments of moving toward (the teller) and moving away. At times listening to someone tell a story was potentially the most riveting and the most distancing part of the ritual experience. Some audience members experienced communitas through a shared aversion to listening to a particular teller. Listening was sometimes challenging and complicated.

### ***8.1.6 The Challenge of Listening: Overcoming estrangement***

The verbal narrative performance is a duet with the conductor. This performance requires a certain kind of listening and sometimes proved difficult for audience members due to perceived values expressed through choice of language, vocal tone and delivery, body language, length, and their familiarity with the socio-cultural content. The representation of the worlds in the story through the Playback Theatre enactment mostly rendered a vivid animation for audience members and brought delayed communitas. The enactment amplified



the story and offered multiple perspectives or multiple interpretations of the story making it more accessible. This was a second chance to hear the story. These multiple moments of connection and re-connection formed a series of moments of *communitas* in the Playback Theatre performance.

The listening required first in the telling then in the watching further ritualised time and space. This enabled audience members to engage with people they might otherwise avoid or possibly never meet. This sometimes led to audience members overcoming indifference, developing curiosity about another, noticing how they were different or similar to someone depicted on stage, and gaining insight into how their worldview influences the way they perceive another person. When audience members experienced connection through stories they experienced a heightened collective engagement. The opposite was true when there was little or no recognition of the experiences of the characters depicted on stage. When an individual audience member failed to experience *communitas* they became progressively more alienated and critical and excluded themselves in some way. For some this led to total disengagement.

The collective sharing of the event represented an experience of community for people. Some audience members were motivated to extend their experience when the performance was over. This occurred as a natural continuation of the ritual process. In cooling down after their experiences of heightened connection, audience members often congregated and told more stories. They also engaged in shared reflection. This built the realism of the experience and began to incorporate the effects of the ritual for individuals and the group. People sometimes discussed the way in which a story or the performance touched them or the insight they derived from it. There was scope for audience members to reflect on the way their life experiences differed from what was shared or shown during the performance. This extension of the ritual contributed to or reinforced audience members perceived or assumed experiences of *communitas* during the performance.

Discussion about the performance and what it invoked continued beyond the formal performance frame as people completed the incorporation of the liminal experience. This was a readying to re-enter the structured world and relinquish the privileges of the ritualised world. A few people expressed concern that incorporation was not straightforward for some and recommended a debriefing process. For most, an experience of Playback Theatre stimulated personal reflection and encouraged a move toward personal action.

## **8.2 A Consideration of the Possible Limitations of the Study**

The methodology chosen for the study enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings. Using a multiple method approach facilitated verification. This was accomplished by searching for similarities and difference between data that was generated from the audience, the co-observers and reflective partners, and my reflexive process. Despite this rigor, the study was constrained by a number of decisions that impact on the way in which the findings must now be considered.

The findings relate to the specific one-off community-based performance. Playback Theatre has application in a number of other contexts, e.g., as a workshop process, as part of a series of sessions featuring a number of methods (theatre and non-theatre), or as a series of events within the same community or organisational context. While some of the findings may be relevant to these other contexts, I do not claim that they can generalise across other applications of Playback Theatre. Readers can draw their own conclusions.

The study was also constrained by the Company focus. The composition of the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company is predominantly (white) lower-middle and middle class with a diversity that spans many of the categories within which the performances in the study featured: mental health, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, class and race. The performances in the study are a product of this Company's collaboration with the various audiences. While many

of the findings may be relevant to other companies, the unique composition of the Company, the composition of the audience and wider community context in which the performances were based must be taken into consideration.

Situating the study in one city also limits the application of the findings. Brisbane is developing into a multicultural city, however it still has a predominantly Anglo culture. The newer ethnic diverse populations are not fully integrated. The populations who attended the performances during the study appeared to be representative of Brisbane's cultural mix. The findings may be of interest to other Australian and possibly New Zealand cities. The study however can make no claims to generalise. It does however make a significant contribution to the way in which the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance can be considered as a metaphor for community.

### **8.3 Implications arising from the Research**

The study illuminates how the collision of structure and anti-structure in the Playback Theatre performance yields a compelling social environment. The combined forces of public ritual and improvised performance act exponentially to induce risk taking and listening where participants are beckoned to perform in the reciprocal spirit of call and response. The call of the solo voices (storytellers) and the responses of the ensemble (the audience) evoke a potent metaphor for democratic community life. Like all call and response performances the leadership is interchangeable, from teller to conductor, conductor to musician, musician to actors, stage to audience. In this section I consider the implications arising from the study. I document the implications for performance. I discuss the implications for practice including practitioner and Company development in the context considered in the study.

### ***8.3.1 Implications for Performance***

Mock (2000) and Schechner (1985) acknowledge that a performance starts well before the audience arrives and has resonances beyond the stage-focused period. The focus on the application of Playback Theatre as a one-off community-based performance in this study highlights a number of implications for pre- and post-production periods, and for the discrete formal performance period, particularly in terms of initial engagement. In this section I examine these implications and discuss further implications for the promotion of anti-oppressive Playback Theatre practice.

#### *Pre-production - preparation to perform*

The study has found that the preparation period for the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance involves at least two discrete threads: the context in which the performance is conceived and the Company that is preparing to respond. Mock's (2000) framework suggests this period integrates conception and development. Schechner (1985) alludes to training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-up required in pre-production.

For context-specific events the conception usually originates in the community of interest, whereas, the Company conceives open public performance events. The study findings suggest that the former require a specific and deliberate development phase by agents in the context mostly in collaboration with the conductor. The context-specific communities were represented in the thesis by four performances: Disability Access Week, Pride, Mental Health Week, and Refugee Week. While these are communities of interest, it does not pre-suppose that people came to the public event with a shared history in relation to the context or in relation to the designated purpose of the event. Audiences are just as likely to be and feel disparate until a sub-context is established in the first moments of the event.

The study reveals that the establishment of a sub-context is a fundamental dimension of the open public performances hosted by the Company. The specific and political framing of the Reconciliation performance created a strong focus for audience members and resulted in an eclectic array of stories that interacted to reveal a multifaceted dialogue about reconciliation. The same ritual authority by the Company and the conductor is required for the context initiated event and thus demands thorough engagement with the context by the conductor in the lead up to preparing the Company to perform.

In preparing for the context-specific event, the performing ensemble (Company) will benefit from reflecting from the perspective of Schechner's pre-production process. There will be occasions when performers do not have the required training for some contexts, or have not undertaken sufficient rehearsal. The study suggests that the Company must balance the needs of the community with of the needs of individuals in the Company. The intense interpersonal nature of performing Playback Theatre demands that actors be prepared to consider their strengths and weaknesses in light of the context. This requires the Playback Theatre Company to develop a culture of discernment and a robustness around discussing the appropriateness of individual performers in specific contexts, keeping in mind that potent dramatic enactment is contingent on relationships, diversity and emotional resilience.

The purposeful and strategic application of Playback Theatre demands an open and honest collaboration between the Company and the community. It is necessary for the conductor to commence the sensitive process of inquiry from the outset while also representing the possible strengths and weaknesses of Playback Theatre and the Company that will perform. The intention in this consultative process is to maximise the likelihood of the performance being successful through the establishment of conditions that support a reasonably accurate preparation warm-up. The study reveals that many people come to Playback Theatre unaware of what is required. Comprehensive preparation by the conductor in partnership with those

representing the context will assist the Company to be as prepared as possible. This is essential. While Playback Theatre is improvised and actors are trained in spontaneity, this preparation will assist the Company to lead the community into the ritual. If the audience flounders due to the possible surprises and feelings of uncertainty that can arise when they encounter Playback Theatre for the first time, the ensemble will have done the preparation. This does not mean the ensemble will overcome the likelihood of surprise, rather it will result in a wide and tested individual and group repertoire to draw from when responding to the new situations that arise.

### *The performance*

Mock (2000) represents this stage as the dialectical process of presentation and reception. In Schechner's (1985) model it is simply *the performance*. The study illuminates two significant findings that have implications for Playback Theatre during the formal performance part of the ritual process. One concerns the challenges presented to audience members in initial engagement, the other relates to the tension arising out of the invitation to participate implicit in the form. Many audience members were similarly pre-occupied during these times.

The period of initial engagement is a particularly unstable time in the one-off community-based performance with audience members negotiating the separation from the ordinary domestic to the heightened ritualised social environment. In the first moments of the performance, audience members are looking for direction. The structural framework must be established efficiently, without minimising the expanse required for exploration. There is scope for Companies to maximise the ceremony during this time, however there is also a need to assist audience members to find a point of entry to the event. This suggests a need for hosting and inviting. The balancing act for conductor and ensemble involves establishing both the artistic and interactive nature of the experience. The additional balance between the ritual evocation and the social transitional needs of the event also require fine treatment. The

conductor must find a way to move between the two efficiently - a contradictory time that calls for maximising the transparency of the process while elevating the mystery. This requires strong artistic and ritualistic production values.

Beyond initial engagement, audience members experience a tension of participation. The findings reveal that this gives significant momentum to the ritual, however it also serves to block it. Implications arise for conductors around how to harness this participative energy. Working with this energy is complex and demands conscious and sophisticated conducting. The conductor must enter the flow and ride the wave, interacting with the audience to build the tension between each story so that it contributes to elevating the overall dramatic experience. Choosing a teller too quickly for example might extinguish this potent energy. Audience members may begin to relax (or withdraw) if they begin to think they won't be chosen. In between stories the conductor must work to maximise the audience's expectation that they 'could be next'. The conductor must strive for neutral text or span a diverse palette. Again, investing audience members with the idea that there are multiple possibilities for the next story. This sensitive task could lead to the conductor waiting too long. The rhythm required in the move from enactment to audience to storyteller equates to maximising the momentum derived from the tension of participation. The overflow of this energy drives the after-show period.

#### *After-show period*

Mock (2000) suggests that after the show the audience will be reflective. Schechner (1985) proposes they "cool down" (p.16) and then enter the aftermath stage. Implications arising from the study with respect to the after-show period point to the need for Companies and community organisers to extend the performance in a way that formalises this period.

Audience members incorporate their experiences during this time. They engage in reflective discussion and they tell more stories. Some require debriefing. There is scope for

performances with specific contexts, especially those promoted as forums or dialogues (e.g. reconciliation), to facilitate a more formal after-show discussion. This is a useful way for people to integrate the intellectual responses to the topic alongside the emotional/metaphoric experience of the performance.

The after-show period is also implicated as a time when the community could take responsibility for assisting people to incorporate their experience of the performance. This instills the notion of respect for the community's capacity to respond. In some cases, it might be necessary to set up formal processes for this. This implication arose out of my experience of and response to the Refugee Week performance.

The refugee week context had inherent stakeholder hierarchies that remained active despite the possibility that the ritualised nature of the event would act to destabilise them.

Professionals in the field expressed their concern about the vulnerability of refugees during the performance. I observed an undercurrent of alarm in their responses that did not seem congruent with what had occurred during the performance. It occurred to me that perhaps the workers were under some form of scrutiny and that this had rendered them cautious and alert. Later, I concluded that it was more likely that they were stressed and that they cared deeply for their clients. In Brisbane, many people working in the refugee sector have their own experience of migration and resettlement. While they have not been refugees, it is common that they had left homelands that were in conflict and had experiences of separation from their families. They are passionate about the plight of refugees (and asylum seekers). The after show period became crucial to the incorporation of this experience for many of the workers who needed to state their concerns and make recommendations for future applications of Playback Theatre. My contact with them immediately after the event, one week later, and then again, twelve months later suggested that some were still completing some form of incorporation. One after-show response that appeared potentially useful was to conduct a



performance for the workers. Here they could tell stories about the constant listening they do, about the successful resettlement of people, or stories that express vicarious trauma.

The research implicates the value of specific follow-up by the Company. While performance evaluation is a difficult process, continuing the process of inquiry in the community following a performance can lead to a number of outcomes. Significantly, it assists the conductor and the Company to incorporate the performance in relationship to the context. Follow-up can be as simple as a phone call with the organiser, however ongoing inquiry with audience members is useful. Ideally, this would occur within a week of the performance and in a group discussion format. This alleviates any chance of re-engaging the intensity of the performance. Companies will find use for this information in training and rehearsal. Perhaps more importantly, the ongoing inquiry acknowledges that the Company and practitioner (conductor) are part of the broader community, made more so by the sharing of the performance experience. This additional opportunity for incorporation has the potential to demystify the Company and lead to a greater acknowledgment of the collaborative nature of the performance.

#### *Promoting anti-oppressive Playback Theatre practice*

Playback Theatre has a natural affinity with contexts predicated on anti-oppressive practice values of self-advocacy, liberation of voice, re-storying lives, or dialogic process. The study suggests that individuals embedded in these contexts, e.g. Disability and Mental Health sectors could tend to see immediate value in the Playback Theatre form due to the centrality of personal story. Practitioners and Companies must be mindful of the way contexts such as these embrace Playback Theatre and be prepared to activate a critical consideration of the appropriateness of Playback Theatre for the purposes that are stated. In these instances, practitioners might be required to interrogate the proposed purposes for implicit oppressive assumptions being made about the relevance and usefulness of Playback Theatre.

The promotion of stories for story sake in these contexts can be problematic for the Playback Theatre Company. The eager way in which agents in these contexts see a place for Playback Theatre demands extra vigilance by the Company and practitioner during consultation and preparation. There is a risk that the agent of the community of interest will see immediate relevance in the Playback Theatre form. This could lead to a consultation process premised on an assumption of 'goodness of fit'. In earlier work on the exploration of the use of story-based methods with people with disability (Dennis, 2001), I caution that personal stories can be so compelling that we cannot leave them alone. I write, that "most of us [have] a deep and abiding curiosity for that rare glimpse into the complex diversity and rich texture of the lives of others" (p.43). The combined curiosity of the agent of the community and the Playback Theatre practitioner could lead to indiscriminate application of Playback Theatre. However, sensitive and accomplished pre-production investigation and conducting in these contexts can result in significant dialogic and community-building outcomes<sup>69</sup>.

The context driven nature of a number of the performances in the study introduces factors that require consideration for the Playback Theatre practitioner-performer. Communities of interests like the ones that feature in the study often have implicit hierarchies. This renders the audience and the conducting of the audience, a potentially political process. Conscious and courageous conducting is required to ensure people become aware of the way in which their professional or client identities may help or hinder their engagement. This demands a practice style that resists the imperialist traps of reinforcing the dominant voices, alienating minority voices or worse still making minority voices vulnerable to exploitation. Performances in these contexts require proactive pre-production. The audiences at these events require sophisticated

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<sup>69</sup> The most illustrative example of this arose from The Disability Action Week performance. This event hosted a diverse audience from the Commissioner for disability discrimination, multiple levels of bureaucrats, service providers, advocates and people with disability. The study was not able to measure the efficacy of the Playback Theatre event within this context in relation to historical efforts at communication across stakeholders, however the Commissioner commented: 'you've achieved more here in an hour than we have in the past five years' (DAW03, L65).

conducting based on inquiry and risk taking. This involves deliberate and thoughtful conducting that repeatedly makes explicit who is there, who is missing, who has told, what voices are absent, what stories are absent.

The application of Playback Theatre in sympathetic contexts could be problematic when Companies privilege their desire to do Playback Theatre over the needs and purposes of the audience. Ultimately Companies have a purpose for doing Playback Theatre and for doing the specific shows. It is appropriate that the Company purpose drive public performance events. However, there is a risk that Playback Theatre Companies might subvert their purpose in their eagerness to perform Playback Theatre in various contexts and in doing so possibly undermine the purpose for the community in which they perform and the overarching purpose of Playback Theatre. This is a dilemma because Playback Theatre is best learned in practice. This does not eliminate the necessity for emerging and established Companies to continue to consider each potential one-off community-based performance on its merits and the merits of the Company members. As suggested earlier, this requires a commitment to comprehensive pre-production consultation and a preparedness to consider not undertaking the work.

### ***8.3.2 Implications for Formation and Development***

The research raises a number of implications for practitioner and Company formation and development. Inferred throughout the discussion on implications arising for the performance of Playback Theatre in the one-off community-based context are a number of implications for Company development. The socio-cultural history and performance repertoire of the Playback Theatre Company is an aggregate of the socio-cultural history and performance repertoire of the members. The research implicates the interrogation of personal and Company biases and assumptions with respect to Playback Theatre and contexts of practice. Undertaking an analysis of how various values and experiences of Company members converge to influence

the work of the Company and the possible interaction with specific audiences would assist Companies in a number of ways and enhance their capacity for performing good Playback Theatre in the community. Significantly, a process such as this would demand a commitment to self-responsibility with a focus on others. This approach is similarly underpinned by the values that have emerged as fundamental to the Playback Theatre method in the study. Transparent and accountable practice would be further strengthened through systemised practice reflection.

Reflective practice underpinned my engagement in this research as I continued to perform Playback Theatre. The research suggests that a systematic approach to practice reflection leads to conscious self-development of the Playback Theatre practitioner and fuels a motivation to invest further in the development of the Company and the broader community/city.

Individual practitioner reflection could interfere with the spontaneity required for performance and could be difficult to integrate if not undertaken as part of a thoughtful approach to development and reflection by the Company. A reflective practice opens the potential for a spirit of inquiry in Company processes and enables shared leadership with respect to thinking about Playback Theatre practice and the development of individuals and the Company as a whole. It can also lead to the development of the form and considered application of the form in new contexts, or a new application of the form in old contexts.

#### **8.4 Recommendations for Future Research**

Throughout the concluding discussion I allude to a number of areas that invite future research. An immediate extension of this research would be the exploration of what maximises the worth of the one-off Playback Theatre event with the specified community context.

The study found that audience members experienced a change of heart about others and were affected by the multiple perspectives made explicit in the dual telling-enactment performances. There is scope for future research to explore the effect of participation in Playback Theatre on changes in social distance between people and the degree in which the sociometry of the group is altered. This research would extend the findings in this study that suggest Playback Theatre can overcome estrangement and could assist practitioners to better understand the usefulness of Playback Theatre for increasing tolerance and generating co-operative social environments.

Research considering the value of pre-production activities on the Playback Theatre performance could assist Companies to make decisions about where to invest human and financial resources for work in different contexts. The involvement of multiple stakeholders and the identification of overlooked stakeholders could lead to a better understanding of who to involve and how to involve them in the pre-production period of the Playback Theatre performance in specific contexts.

Another focus for future research is the barriers to participation or flow experiences that are reported in this study. This could yield additional insight into the requirement of conducting, music, and acting for maximising the Playback Theatre performance for participants.

I am particularly interested in the interaction between the socio-cultural histories of the Company and the context of the performance event and how one influences the other. This arises out of my observation about the content of the stories told during performances in the study. Reconciliation and refugee themes were the driving force behind two of the performances. The March and July Public Performances and the Pride performance also featured stories about indigenous identity, value conflict, war, race, belonging and home. Research to explore the relationship between the contexts and content of performances by a

particular Company in relation to the composition of the Company is warranted. One question might be: as producer and conductor of performances how influential is my agenda in evoking the content? Previous theatre and narrative research with regard to community-performance events and the socio-cultural environment from which they arise inform this recommendation. Peter Brook (1989), for example, recommends theatre companies be international to maximise their capacity to respond to diversity in a community.

Finally, a useful research focus for the future could be the exploration of Playback Theatre in the refugee context. This research could consider a cluster of specific applications of Playback Theatre, for example, a discrete event for workers alongside various events for refugee and asylum seeker groups based on shared language, culture and/or ethnicity, and an event for the generic community. In this way, some of the particularities about this context may be addressed, in particular, audience members familiarity with the Playback Theatre method. If approached in a developmental way, these specific performance experiences could then be followed by a combined event with the various sub-groups coming together for an expanded community ritual. The study suggests that one-off performances in this context may not be appropriate. There is however useful information to recommend the production of public performances framed by the refugee context like that conducted during the research for Reconciliation.

### **8.5 Playback Theatre: A metaphor for community**

By way of concluding, I discuss the notion that the one-off community-based Playback Theatre event as a metaphor for community. Conceived as a public event, the one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance places an emphasis on local stories as a means of connection and building community. The immediacy of the storytelling performances and the dramatic transformations of them on stage provide multiple metaphors for experiences of community. There is a delicate alchemy that underpins the efficacy of the

Playback Theatre performance in the community. The amalgamation of improvised performance and public ritual precipitates an expansive environment for risk taking and for challenging the dominant social protocols in the community context. Risk is fundamental to improvised performance. In Playback Theatre this is combined with the ritual structure of the form to create disturbances in the social environment. Participants respond by either accepting or rejecting the challenge, and thus entering or resisting the liminal experience. The call to risk is responded to by audience participation and is reliant on individual agency. Numerous elements conspire to influence whether an audience member responds at any given time in the performance. The conductor has significant sway in how this is maximised, however they are not singularly responsible. Their sway is mediated by the counter-balance offered through the call to listening inherent in the Playback Theatre method.

Playback Theatre summons us to listen. Unlike the individual agency underpinning the necessary culture of risk taking the call to listen engenders collective action. The one-off community-based Playback Theatre performance is a counter-cultural social environment where people are encouraged to share stories. This requires spectators and Company members alike, to listen for what's being said, what's being shown, what's being asked for, and what's missing. In this way, the Playback Theatre method enables everyone to take responsibility for the telling spaces that are being shared. This generates a spirit of inquiry and curiosity about the other. The interaction between risking and listening requires a certain kind of sharing that represents an experience of community where Self and Other are juxtaposed. The *Self* is engaged as *I* anticipate and act, as *I* take up the offer to risk. The *Other* is evoked by *my* interest in them and *my* commitment to listen. The risking-listening call and response provides a tangible process for overcoming the culture of separation that works against "the magic of interpersonal interactions" (Berman, 1990, p.341) in local communities. Playback Theatre

opens a space where we can meet in our sameness and our difference and potentially rise above estrangement and judgement.

As an ephemeral experience of community, Playback Theatre offers a chance for audience members to see others in a different light and perhaps overcome estrangement by knowing and understanding more about them. The mutuality implicit in the form means that this may create reciprocal opportunities for seeing and coming to know more of the Other. These public reflexive acts promote insight, with audience members thinking about what they think and believe or, perhaps more significantly, discussing what they think and believe. Experiences that foster the erosion of social distance due to reflection, or as a result of discussion between individuals because of perceived difference, no matter how small or intangible, represent an opportunity for a community. This value was made explicit in the findings. At many of the performances in the study, a number of people referred to the importance of hearing the stories of the others, from bureaucrats hearing the stories of people with mental illness to older women hearing the stories of younger women. Through this, Playback Theatre as a one-off community-based event supports communities to consolidate what Rapaport (2000) calls community narratives. This might be a narrative that embodies the shared experience of the Playback Theatre performance *and* the stories told within the performance. Like an oral history that evokes the tradition and lore of the gathered audience, the one-off community-based Playback Theatre event elucidates multiple truths and celebrates the courage of the audience/community.



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# **APPENDICES**



## APPENDICES

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**Appendix 1**  
**Playback Theatre Spatial Conventions**



(From Salas, 1993)

## Appendix 2

### Describing A Playback Theatre Performance

Playback theatre is an interactive form of theatre based on the personal stories of audience members. In the course of a performance, a series of stories are spontaneously told by volunteer tellers. Each story is then paired with a discrete dramatic enactment inspired by the particular text, mood and images inherent in the 'just-told' narrative. By means of evoking the performance scenario further, I will attempt to transport you to a performance.

You enter the space, in the Australian context this could be a contemporary theatre space, an old community hall, a school classroom cleared of desks, the boardroom cleared of tables, a courtyard between two accommodation blocks, indeed it could be almost anywhere such is the diverse application of the Playback Theatre method. However, regardless of the usual function of the place, it will have been neutralised as much as possible so that, together with the performing ensemble, you, the audience, can transform it in your imagination to a space well ready to hold a performance. There may be a stage, there may not. The transition of this place from functional to ritual space begins with the audiences' first reading<sup>70</sup>. Ideally, the entry is situated at one end so that the space communicates some orientation to what will

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<sup>70</sup> In the performances by Brisbane Playback Theatre Company, furniture is then arranged (often by the actors themselves who find this level of engagement with creating the environment intrinsic to their preparation to meet the audience well in a strange space. Unlike traditional theatre performances, there has not been the customary rehearsal period within which performers can claim the space. And, while the requirements of the space have been negotiated, this does not guarantee the physical, emotional and intuitive knowing that are an essential precursor for performers risk-taking and play. The reliance on spontaneity in improvisational theatre demands that performers' minimise likely causes of anxiety at all cost, and this physical engagement in evoking a spirit of performance in an unfamiliar space, is a helpful avenue for this. The efforts put toward energising and organising the space also contributes to transforming the space for the audience members. No space is neutral and some audience participants may know the space as a place for other functions, other behaviours.

become the focus of the performance - a large open area at the centre of a ritual circle. I imagine by now you have transported yourself to a familiar location (in your mind's eye) and made the necessary spatial changes I have suggested.

### ***The ritual shape***

The arrangement of the furniture is specific<sup>71</sup>: the audience chairs are in a semi circle, oriented toward the emerging performative space, what has been identified as the most neutral wall for example. At one side of the performance space (stage left), following the arc from one end of the semi circle of audience there are two chairs, facing forward. These chairs are significant in the ritual of Playback Theatre for it is from here that the audience-teller performs their story, seated alongside the conductor, who acts as a master of ceremony, host, and companion in the story-making process. At the opposite end of the semi circle, following the same angle of the arc as the two chairs, and therefore facing the two chairs, is a collection of musical instruments at the ready. These may consist of a guitar and various percussion instruments laid out on the floor around a cushion-seat for the designated musician. Alternatively it may be a piano, a cello, or a violin, it will depend on the musicianship of the performer. Regardless of the detail, it is from this place that the Playback Theatre musician/s will enhance mood and rhythm in the dramatic enactments of tellers' stories. Completing the arc is a row of stools (or boxes) from where seated actors listen to stories. The line of stools face outward toward the semicircle of audience chairs. These are ceremonial removed by the actors before, and replaced at the completion, of each discrete drama. Alongside the actors stools there is a 'prop tree' draped in fabrics that may be called upon to embellish characters, indicate location or other symbolic application - the

transformative potential of a simple piece of coloured cloth is many. See Appendix 1 for a simple illustration of how the central open space is formed.

### ***The audience arrives***

The stage is set for a Playback Theatre performance and the roadies-come actors absent themselves as the audience begins to arrive. They trickle in, in twos and threes, sometimes there is a larger group, and often people will arrive alone. Diverse in their composition, they take up seats... The ritual has begun. Unlike traditional theatre auditoriums prior to the arrival of the performers, this interceding period can be filled with chattering voices as people begin to claim the space and make connections. At some point to mood is altered signaling the commencement of the formalised telling-enactment process of the performance ritual. However, this does not mean an end to the informal interactions. There will be other times during the process that this predominantly social behaviour is encouraged.

Let us visit the start of such a happening, various things conspire to signal the beginning. Let us look at the start of the Reconciliation show as an example of beginning.

*Children's voices shrill in the courtyard as they hurl the volleyball to and fro. People arrive in twos & threes, chatting with one another as they pay the \$10 surcharge. At the welcome table, Rebecca invites them to complete a survey. "We really want to know who is here," she enthuses. At the back of the room, steam is billowing from the urn, beckoning early comers. A man's silhouette fills the door. He comes alone. Looks around as if to make sense of who is there, of the space, of his place. He sits near the back. More clusters*

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<sup>71</sup> On entering and seeing this new arrangement, it is hoped that the capacity of such audience participants to enter the performance is heightened. On entering and seeing this new arrangement, it is hoped that the capacity of such audience participants to suspend reality and engage in the performance is heightened.

*arrive, each with it's own familiar ease. Some people bring cups of tea back to their seats. The sole man change his seat, he moves forward and sits with a woman, they appear to know each other. The room swells to capacity. Nearing 8pm, there is an expectant air. We are all waiting to start.*

*The sounds of aboriginal clap-sticks signal the commencement. The room is now quiet and the calls of the children outside seem amplified, pressing in on us, insisting that we include them in our ritual space. We all know we must. An actor enters and says, "Why do I have to say sorry, I never did anything wrong." She freezes in a defiant pose. There is much shifting and fidgeting in the audience. The discussion has begun.*

### ***The show***

The performance then proceeds in a systematic way. The actors and musician, with the explicit purpose to engage and entertain the audience perform an opening sequence. This presentation is artistic and evocative; it signals the start. The opening sequence may also make reference to the context and purpose of the performance, ideally expressing an aesthetic, non-didactic style. The conductor then meets the audience and begins the process of inviting stories. In this early stage of a Playback Theatre performance, the conductor is looking to meet as many audience participants as possible, so that the links and connections between people begin to be made and the social distance between people begins to narrow. When the first audience member speaks, another transitional moment, marking the breach of traditional theatre's fourth wall, and the claiming of the space usually occupied by the privileged authority of writer and director. This is a delicious subversion of traditional theatre protocol and audience participants can move both toward and away from the idea of being a participant at this level. Simultaneously, it introduces that intoxicating performative dimension of 'doubt', but, rather than these being constrained to the domain of the

performers as Meyerhold envisioned, it is also planted among the audience-as-performers. Thus it is crucial in these early stages that the conductor works with authority to both invite stories and to manage the interaction with the audience participant to ensure brevity, without subverting the spontaneous creativity she must enable the audience members to seize.

### ***Ritual and artistic forms***

To facilitate and accommodate the aesthetic and ritual requirements of the performance there are 'conventional' short forms to call upon. To this end, the first phase of the performance will see the conductor inviting specific contributions asking for a word, or phrase, that captures the tellers experience, rather than inviting the telling of the complete experience, which will come later in the process. The conductor works to maintain and build dramatic tension and other aesthetic qualities that will keep moving this interactive social event into the realm of theatre. Without this, there is a danger the performance it will become another talk-fest and diminish the potential for liminal experiences.

Given this, with all the best intentions for brevity and the inviting of specific moments in this early phase, there will always be tellers who want to tell more who need to tell more. It is the teller, in a dialogic process with the conductor, who drives the ritual each step of the way. The conductor must yield with such tellers, and also guide them in the co-production of the performance. This ensures that the needs of the individual tellers and the needs audience as a spectator group are met with some equality through an aesthetic imperative. In addition to managing the brevity of the telling at this stage, the conductor will generally limit herself to inviting the participant to speak out from their chair in the audience, resisting the move to the stage until there is sufficient momentum in the process and the ritual frame is firmer. This enables the co-creation of liminal space to be made more explicit, without actually

needing to state the meta-process at every step. This systematic building process facilitates engagement beyond the cognitive-self so that the playback theatre audience is also engaged at the feeling-, physical-, aesthetic-self. Thus, this early section is somewhat like having a number of conversations, for example, between the performers and the audience, and the audience with each other. One dimension of this conversation concerns the negotiation of the norms of the ritual process - the ritual frame - that will then hold the performance through multiple transitions and liminal activity.

### ***The enactment***

As each teller speaks out their story from their seat, a visual representation of this phase contains the conductor standing up in front of the audience, and the actors standing in front of their stools. The conductor speaks, and invites the audience to contribute. An audience member responds. The conductor says, "Let's watch!" The focus shifts to the stage area where one by one the actors enter building a sculpture that represents their reading<sup>72</sup> of the teller's contribution. The sculpture is fluid, in that it moves rhythmically, there is sound that is usually abstract, and together the four, five or six actors build to a crescendo, at which point they freeze, holding the dramatic picture. Together, they then look to the teller in the audience to acknowledge their performing role in the piece, and their authority in the tale. The conductor immediately resumes the focus, and moves to another audience participant, who tells, and then a second fluid sculpture is created on stage. This shift of focus back and forward from audience to stage continues.

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<sup>72</sup> The players reading of the teller's narrative that is presented through the physical enactment is often referred to as 'the essence of the story.'



There might be three or four fluid sculptures; there may be more. This decision is the domain of the conductor who is constantly vigilant to the emergent performance process, and in tune with the ritual rhythm the group is building in collaboration with the performers, with a similar feel for the movement of people toward each other. Minimising the social distance between participants is a key objective of the early phase of the performance. The conductor may give further attention to physically reducing social distance by having participants introduce themselves to the person next to them, or directing the audience participants to introduce themselves to someone they don't know<sup>73</sup>. This strategy also expands the liminal space, enabling those who have not yet had the chance to 'tell' something, the opportunity to express a story that had been evoked and that they captured "just in case" the volunteered to tell, and then "just in case" they were chosen.

### ***Audience members move to the stage***

At some point in the performance, the conductor will initiate a move to the stage, and the transition from telling-in-the-audience to telling-on-stage. When this occurs, the audience participant takes up the role of performer more fully. The volunteer teller sits alongside the conductor, with the new perspective - looking out over the rest of the audience group, and tells their story. The conductor's role here extends to interview the teller more deliberately. The function of the interviewing conductor is to shape the story and to simultaneously attend to the needs of the teller, the actors and the audience. As the teller recounts the tale, the conductor directs them to cast one of the actors as themselves, and maybe a second actor as another key character in the story. Actors may also be cast as groups, animals and inanimate objects, depending on the structure and content of the narrative. As the teller

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<sup>73</sup> Later, this inter-audience contact can be extended by, for example, after a number of fluid sculptures, directing audience participants to tell someone in an adjacent chair their 'story.'

recounts the tale, the conductor is alert to the engagement of the audience, finding ways to maximise the potential for them to listen to the teller and engage in the story and remain engaged in the larger ritual process. For example, a story begins: "this happened when I was traveling in India..." and the conductor, recognising some recognition in the audience, might ask the teller to pause and turn to the audience and say, "who else here has been traveling in far off places?" Similarly, a teller may have said: "a cousin of mine is doing family history, the family tree"; and as conductor I ask: "who here has someone in their family who is doing the family tree?" Attending to this sociometry continues to build the links to the teller, even at this specific time when they have chosen to step out of the group and into the solo performance role as teller.

Once the story is told and cast, and the teller completes the telling, the conductor performs the transition from spoke narrative state, to heightened dramatic state, with the simple phrase, "Let's watch!" at which time the music surges and the actors lift their stools and carry them off stage in a dramatic exposition of the transformation they will from 'citizen' *listening* to 'actor' *responding theatrically and co-creating*.

### ***The enactment***

The musical interlude has a number of functions: it acts as a segue between the listening required during the telling, to the affective and symbolic domains evoked during the enactment; it is the first representation of the story, with the musician working to evoke the mood of the story in the performance; and it frees the actors up to re-enter the performing space with dramatic energy and intention. Meanwhile, after the actors remove the stools, they wait as the music swells into the open space. One-by-one they re-enter the stage to create the picture capturing the opening scene of the story. In the Brisbane layback Theatre

Company, this is done in silence<sup>74</sup>. Once the picture is set the music fades and the scene comes to life.

The actors continue improvising scenes until the enactment is complete, at which point they freeze and look to the teller. This "looking" again signals their appreciation of the contribution the teller on behalf of the audience and the performance. It also shifts focus from the full stage, back to the teller and conductor at the side. The conductor then facilitates the transition of the teller from stage to audience. There is often some form of acknowledgment for the teller that signals a 'welcome back to the fold' by audience members nearby. During this transition the actors reset the stage and are seated ready for the next teller. The conductor then invites the next teller. And the process continues.

### ***Reinforcing the ritual frame***

The small domestic or mundane detail like the stating of "Let's watch!", the removing and replacing of stools, the casting of an actor in the role of the teller, builds both familiarity and tension throughout the show. Audience members are able to anticipate the action more and more, and therefore take up their authority in the making of the performance. Like all ritual theatre, it is the process that engages people, sometimes so much so that people come again and again 'to playback' regardless of the performance events' context and purpose. There are, of course, times when there will be variations to the order of events, and there are other short forms that can be incorporated into a Playback Theatre show. As ensembles become more experienced, there is scope for them to imprint their own aesthetic and style onto the simple structure.

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<sup>74</sup> Other Companies huddle and have some discussion about what will happen when.

### ***Ending the show***

Regardless of the style of the dramatic acts or the combination of conventional forms that merge to make a Playback Theatre performance, the formal performance process eventually comes to an end. Here the conductor will effect closure in some way, from as simple as a spoken 'Thank you, that is the end of the show!' to a closing sequence that reprises aspects of the opening sequence but also echoes elements of the dramatic sequences that were created during the performance (Hosking, 2001).

### ***The buzz after the show***

After applause, the performers absent themselves. This signals another transition into the after-show buzz where participants often remain in their seats and continue to tell stories. Others will mix and mingle. Some make direct moves toward a someone who has told a story; this can be to thank them; affirm their act; or to share the story they remembered on hearing the tellers' story. The performers from Brisbane Playback Theatre Company who were involved in the show then re-enter the ritual during this informal phase of the performance. It is during this phase that we hear about people's experiencing of the show. We might hear things that were unable to be said in the 'larger' public arena of the formalised ritual phase. We might hear encouragement and praise. The after-show buzz is the time we might hear things and experience things that confirms for us that this has engaged and affected people. Resonances for performers and audience persist for a period after the buzz. Schechner calls this stage the aftermath. It is during the buzz or cool down phase and the aftermath phase that I spoke to the audience participants who contributed to this study.

## Appendix 3

### Promotional Flyer

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Brisbane Playback Theatre invites you  
to an evening performance

# ***Reconciliation! What's the Story?***

Playback is spontaneous - it is theatre created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience.

**The Merthyr Centre (behind the Uniting Church)  
52 Merthyr Road, New Farm.  
Friday 17 May 2002 = 7:45 for 8pm start  
Parking on street and at rear - wheelchair access**



RSVP by May 15

Phone  
37 346 001  
or  
346 188 557

Email your RSVP  
brbanplayback@theatrical.com

S Cost  
\$10.00

#### Researching Playback Theatre

*"The act of seeing can transform the person who sees and cause us to see differently for the rest of our lives"*

(Rachel Naomi Remen)

We believe Playback encourages such seeing and fosters opportunities for transformative moments. Brisbane Company member Rea Dennis is currently undertaking research to better understand what happens during a playback performance, so that playback may be practiced with greater awareness and accountability. This show will be video-taped for the purpose of this research. Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

## Appendix 4

### Audience Feedback Form

#### Audience Survey

Welcome to the BRISBANE PLAYBACK THEATRE COMPANY'S presentation *Reconciliation! What's the Story?* Please take the time to complete this brief audience survey to assist us with our ongoing commitment to provide a theatre experience that is thoughtful, creative and unique.

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your gender?

Female     Male     Other

2. What age range do you fall within?

Under 18     19 - 25     26 - 39     40 - 55     Over 55

3. How often have you attended playback performances before tonight?

Never     Once     2 - 3     4 - 6     More than 6

4. Who did you come with tonight?

By self     With one other     With 2 -3 others     More than 3 others

5. How did you hear about tonight's show?

At a previous performance     Through a friend     Through an email list

From someone in the Brisbane Company     Other \_\_\_\_\_

6. Are you available to participate in a discussion about tonight's performance in the next few weeks?     Yes     No

If yes please leave your contact details:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time tonight. Enjoy the show!

## AUDIENCE FEEDBACK - PLAYBACK THEATRE PERFORMANCE

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this short review of the performance by the Brisbane Playback Theatre Company for REFUGEE WEEK. This survey is designed to assist us with our ongoing commitment to providing a theatrical experience that is thoughtful, creative and unique. Your feedback is essential to this aim.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your gender?                       Female  Male
2. What age range do you fall within?  
    Under 25     26 - 39  40 - 55  Over 55
3. How did you hear about the show?  Email         Friend  Through BPT  
    Other
4. How often have you seen playback?  Once  2 - 3     4+
5. Did you share a story?                       Yes     No
6. What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Did a story come to you that you chose not to tell?     Yes     No
8. If yes, please provide some detail \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What did you learn from other people's stories? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What might you do differently as a result of this? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. What do you most remember about the performance? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. Would you be available to be contacted to discuss your responses further in the next few weeks?     Yes                       No

If yes please add your contact details    Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time.

## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 1 - After Show Discussion Group

##### Rec01

1 FACILITATOR: OK, I just need to get you to sign this form. So, are you new to  
2 Playback?  
3 ELOISE: Yeah  
4 SARAH: We've (Sarah & Bea) both been a few times before.  
5 Silence  
6 FACILITATOR: So you told the story about the shop?  
7 SARAH: Yeah, yeah. We were just saying how um, well Bea and I were just saying  
8 how it seemed less personal in a way because I think because of the topic of  
9 reconciliation, everyone sort of was in the past, and we were just reflecting that  
10 that's just probably about – it shows you where we are at as a community, about the  
11 issue of reconciliation, that (-). Like I was sitting there through the whole start and I  
12 was thinking this far away from bursting into tears and I was thinking I can't say  
13 anything, because if I try and say anything I'll burst into tears because the issue of  
14 reconciliation is so emotionally fraught for me. And when I actually, when Rea  
15 broadened it and I actually said my story, then I felt like I actually (-), I shared this  
16 kind of emotion, and then I felt more able to participate then. And then when it got  
17 back to the issue of aboriginal reconciliation, I felt better able to cope with it then  
18 like, because it had (-). It's quite a strange thing how powerful it is to see your



19 stories because I contributed once before as well, and to see it acted out by, well  
20 they're not strangers now because we know a few people in the group, but you  
21 know by people who this is the first time they've heard your story, and they don't  
22 necessarily have all the background on you, and they can manage to pinpoint so  
23 clearly, the emotions that you are going through, when you told quite a brief story. I  
24 don't know if that's about the universality of experience though – like how would  
25 you feel if you were in that situation, but I think Wow!

26 FACILITATOR: As an audience member?

27 SARAH: Yeah, and it's the same thing when you are watching someone else's  
28 story, like that younger woman's story about her grandfather, and the racist  
29 attitudes. When she was telling the story it had this level of dimension, and then  
30 when you see it being acted out, it's kind of larger than life, it has this huge, well  
31 not larger than life, but really vivid. You can really see what's going on, at a much,  
32 I think you can really see the different levels or layers of what's going on

33 BEA: Typically of the emotions of other circumstances

34 SARAH: Yeah, it sort of broadens it

35 FACILITATOR: how did you feel, its your first time?

36 ELOISE: I found it quite confronting at first, just um, I wasn't used to that kind of  
37 theatre, yeah so I found it quite confronting that is was on a very emotional level.  
38 Yeah, and I guess I was sort of watching that and I kept looking back to the people  
39 who's stories it was, just seeing if they were reacting in the right way, the  
40 traditional way, and that was good, it was good.

41 FACILITATOR: Yes I suppose there's a possibility that quite a few people were  
42 affected in that way. I was struck with the early moments, that they were mostly  
43 quite unemotionally told, so then what happened on stage was really very different  
44 from what was spoken, was that...?

45 ELOISE: Yeah I guess I was just trying to understand what was going on, to get the  
46 format, and I guess I sort of got more involved, got more carried away with some of  
47 the larger stories at the end. Yeah where they sort of developed a diverse look at the  
48 issues.

49 SARAH: I've always found, I don't know how many times I've seen playback, 3 or  
50 4 times I think, but I've always find that in those initial things, cause I know Rea  
51 and Jen and Anna, that I'm sitting there and sort of going so well, everyone's really  
52 uptight, and then always, it kind of reaches a critical point and whoosh everything,  
53 like the audience kind of opens up and it all just seems (-)

54 FACILITATOR: When did you think that point was tonight?

55 SARAH: Oh tonight? Umm,

56 BEA: I think that first story about the clay

57 SARAH: Oh you thought it wasn't until then? Actually, yeah I think that one was a  
58 bit of a breakthrough, but I think that maybe when umm,

59 BEA: There were probably other moments before that

60 SARAH: Yeah. I think the initial one's that are very short, the moments of your life  
61 I think they're always quite sort of, and that's obviously a warm up thing in the  
62 audience as much as for the performers and I think that tonight when Rea

63 broadened it a bit, when she said OK, apart from the issue of aboriginal  
64 reconciliation there are other ways that we need to reconcile, and I think people  
65 BEA: Especially in your story, when people actually laughed a bit  
66 SARAH: Yeah (laughter)  
67 BEA: relieved, and I think that reconciliation is such a hard topic, that lack of  
68 emotionality was probably about treading so carefully, not wanting to put a foot  
69 wrong or say the wrong thing to, but to express a personal experience. And I think  
70 with that broadening from Rea, and my sense of the laughter a couple of times, you  
71 know just that sense of relief, we don't all have to be so serious.  
72 ELOISE & SARAH: Yeah  
73 FACILITATOR: So was yours the first story after Ree said that?  
74 SARAH: No, I don't think it was  
75 BEA: It was the second one, there were probably a few (.)  
76 FACILITATOR: So, what were the stories that affected you most?  
77 SARAH: I really enjoyed the woman talking about discovering her Cherokee  
78 heritage. It was just so positive and invigorating. I thought that was really  
79 ELOISE: Something that everyone could relate too  
80 SARAH: Oh, do you think? Oh, yeah  
81 ELOISE: Well just that thing that, as you get older you know discovering  
82 something about yourself  
83 SARAH: Yeah  
84 ELOISE: You know maybe knowing that something's been there your whole life  
85 and sort of expanding on it.

## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 2 - After Show Discussion Group

##### Pride01

- 192 FACILITATOR: When you told your story tonight Gigi ... how was that?
- 193 GIGI: I wanted to tell more stories but I couldn't think of any
- 194 MEL: Yeah
- 195 GIGI: I couldn't know what words to put to them. Mmm
- 196 FACILITATOR: So is that the reason why you didn't have any stories?
- 197 MEL: Oh no I tried to think of something but it, I think you've gotta wait for the
- 198 right time.
- 199 GIGI: Yeah
- 200 MEL: I knew I was going to say something tonight, and I came here and 'I'm not
- 201 going to say anything' and (-)
- 202 Laughter, yeah
- 203 MEL: And then as soon as I got here I just knew and I just waited until I just, the
- 204 right response, yeah. And I'm glad I did.
- 205 EMMA: and safe too.
- 206 FACILITATOR: What made it safe?
- 207 MEL: All women, made it safe for me and the space, the music was good what I
- 208 was talking about before, and it wasn't a huge crowd, it was like yeah it wasn't like
- 209 a big crowd, or audience it was just like a group of women sharing something. Like

210 usually I hate small spaces, usually I can't stand them. But tonight because it was  
211 small it made me more comfortable. I think that when there's too much space,  
212 there's too much space for the energy to go out and people feel like they have to  
213 use. Which now I know that you don't have to use it and you can stay together and  
214 connect easier. And the songs before playback started to kind of set the relaxation,  
215 and got everyone in the mood to sort of feel something cause those songs helped  
216 me feel something so that sort of set the scene for the audience to get into it more, I  
217 think that um, some audience have a bit of trouble getting into it and I think that the  
218 songs set it really good.

219 EMMA: And the respect

220 MEL: Hmm

221 EMMA: Playback is [laugh] umm, gave everyone, the respect you gave everyone

222 MEL: It just sort of like (.)

223 EMMA: Yeah for me feeling safe in owning my own story, rather than just giving  
224 something out there that's going to be somewhat of a let down

225 Mmmm

226 GIGI: It's core

227 EMMA: Yeah and I checked out seeing how it's played back for other people's  
228 stories just how amazing you were, I don't know words are hard to put to it, and the  
229 music was perfect. I don't know.

230 MICHAL: I liked it how like you are in tune with everyone else, like, you kind of  
231 know you can always related to it, I loved that part, listening about the stories.

232 FACILITATOR: Yeah its stuff where you can easily say oh that happened to me?

233 All: Yeah

234 MEL: And the actors were so like, when they spoke about something they were um,  
235 the way they spoke was very flowing too.

236 EMMA: Karmic

237 MEL: Like you, sometimes people speak and it seems um, what's the word?

238 HANNA: acting laughs

239 MEL: yeah, fake

240 Laughter

241 MEL: And abrupt, like you might say um, you turn around and say, you know, you  
242 were all very respectful in the way you spoke. The way people told their story, and  
243 I think that made a big difference for people, for other people feeling comfortable  
244 to come out and say it and um, the speaking and the slow flowing sort of  
245 movements helped me to calm down a bit and to focus.

246 HANNA: the pace isn't it? Something about the pace, sort of taking the time to  
247 really listen, um, and then taking the time to play it back in a way that's not rushed  
248 or driven or with urgency, that sort of thing.

249 MEL: it's not hectic. It's sort of like it's planned but its not

250 EMMA: its structured

251 MEL: spontaneous,

252 Yeah laughter

253 MEL: That's a contradiction but eh? Laughter...

254 MICHAL: There was something interesting that I noticed like um, I suppose it  
255 comes back to the performing and the energy, where sometimes I sort of did feel

256 the energy like you said, sort of getting lost and then like, and I'd be feeling that

257 and wondering where's it going, and then someone, would just go (sound)

258 EMMA: or do something yeah

259 MICHAL: and catch it and pull it back and then it would be just perfect again for

260 me, and um

261 EMMA: yeah

262 MICHAL: And there were a few times when I didn't feel that strong connection

263 and I think that was good because I didn't feel connected to some of the stories or I

264 didn't feel connected to the way they were played, but then I felt, then almost like

265 really soon after, I'd feel really connected again. So it sort of like, it was like

266 catching it again for me. So um, I don't know what I'm exactly trying to say, just

267 that it was really well done that, and when it ended, at the end it was just on such a

268 point that I think everybody in the room was there, everybody was capture, and that

269 was really good.

## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 3 - Individual Interview

Jul03

17 MAXINE: I was totally unsure in the beginning. It was very personal, I wasn't sure  
18 whether to participate or just observe. Then it started leaning toward a serious  
19 tangent. I became interested, 'maybe there is some juicy issues here...' I thought the  
20 use of music and sound and a couple of props here and there made the visualisation  
21 heaps more effective.

22 REA: So you found yourself watching the actors, the devices they were using?

23 MAXINE: I wasn't really looking at the way you were doing things. I was more  
24 watching the entire production. The teamwork was amazing, it had sensitivity  
25 without (.)

26 REA: what most affected you?

27 MAXINE: I came away with a much stronger image and feeling of what goes on...  
28 would have loved to see the mothering one (Previous show was themed 'Mothers').

29 REA: What was it like to tell your story?

30 MAXINE: It was very recent, the beginning of the week. I had a lot of time the  
31 think travelling up north with my friend and I was quite reflective at the time.  
32 Ordinarily I have a hectic schedule with little time to think about important things.  
33 That trip slowed me down... I really like how it was done. I am over the top, I say  
34 silly things, and I was drawing pictures on the way home in my journal, so I didn't



35 forget about it (the trip up north). I thought, this is weird, a funeral of someone I  
36 don't even know, this could be a little documentary. Anyway, I thought it was a  
37 good thing to tell because I had not quite reflected on it, and other people had told  
38 different things. That's what I liked about it actually, the structure, the theme was  
39 not rigid, and there was a natural flow. But there is the advantage of having a  
40 willing audience to tell the stories. It was interesting to me not knowing the theme  
41 before I came, is it always like that?

42 REA: What were the timed during the show when you wanted to tell a story?

43 MAXINE: I could have shared constantly, but I thought I shouldn't. Just about the  
44 travels through life, a million stories came into my head. At the beginning of the  
45 year when Jonathan was away (he told an earlier story that was enacted as a fluid  
46 sculpture), about our strong commitment, and how I felt totally free. There were  
47 stories from my childhood... When I came I totally wanted to be clear minded and  
48 relaxed, had a really enjoyable evening.

## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 4 - Individual Interview

##### MDA14

8 SHARON: This is all pretty new to me. I went to the friendship meeting at MDA  
9 with my friend Leeanne where I heard about the show. I recently began work with  
10 the Stones Corner Community Ethnic Development Association and am responsible  
11 for organising a production with the local refugee and tpv (temporary protection  
12 visa) groups.

13 After the show I was speaking with someone else who was concerned that there  
14 was no feedback or debrief session for people who tell stories. I thought this was a  
15 valid point and felt this should be.

16 My main response early on to the show was that the actors did not have enough  
17 skill to interpret the stories – it was all too narrative, all too literal, all too obvious.  
18 I thought, “How can someone within 10 minutes of listening to someone’s tragic  
19 story reinterpret it?”

20 So, the acting really annoyed me. It was repetitive, all very literal. The characters  
21 were the same, the ideas were repeated, but the heart was there.

22 I found myself cringing a bit at the similarities: like the use of scarves, this was so  
23 predictable; I knew they were going to grab the scarves. The story of the airport –  
24 the flying bit – seemed similar to the journey in the Iraqi story; the travel, the  
25 repetition of what was said. The gentleman actor always had the same role – hand  
26 on shoulder.

27 At the same time, I think it's a great idea. It has good intention. Something positive.

28 I am glad I went. It made me stop and think how good my life is and how good

29 Australia is.

30 It was a personal experience about the war, rather than just what you get on TV.

31 I can see it helping me organise the multicultural production; by being there and

32 hearing Abibi's story broadens my understanding of what it's like to be a person

33 from a non-english speaking background.

34 I had a discussion with LEEANNE. She was worried about the Iraqi family. I saw

35 them crying in the audience. This is just my point of view – I'm not sure what's

36 right.

37 I felt that people felt pressured to tell

38 When I called out, my tactic wasn't right. I ended up speaking over the woman

39 from the Ethnic Communities Council.

40 I feel the story was a bit sensationalised; I saw them crying; and then the quality of

41 the acting there so I was worried about them. It was a consumable version of what

42 was said. I was angry and frustrated about how it was done.

43 REA: would you want to get up there and act?

44 SHARON: No. I wouldn't touch it – I wouldn't have the skills,

45 I don't know where to go with it though. Maybe different actors. People from

46 multicultural backgrounds.

47 Do you know about the multicultural play? I am really looking forward to it but I

48 am finding it hard to find actors. So, I am getting out and about. I talked to Guiliano

49 and Maree – we were critiquing it on the way out of the theatre; I also spoke to

50 David from Mission employment that I thought it had a good intent; it had been  
51 positive for me it broadened my understanding of relocation issues. But the actors  
52 weren't up to the task.  
53 One thing that really got me going was the separation of families, it started me  
54 thinking about my own family.

## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 5 - Individual Interview

##### Rec04

78 JUDE: Sorry I lost my train of thought, oh yes you were asking about the stories,  
79 there are two stories I found sort of, quite moving, the ones that I still remember,  
80 one is the woman who went to that workshop on aboriginal weaving or whatever it  
81 was [pause]  
82 RD: Fibrecraft  
83 JUDE: fibrecraft, hm, I could feel the woman's pain, and it's, it also stuck in my  
84 mind because it had a very clear connection to reconciliation, how do we practically  
85 do it? How do we talk to people when we might not have a common language,  
86 other than English, which isn't always helpful, but where is our common  
87 understanding of being human, it's just not there, and that pain, and that inability, or  
88 not knowing how to bridge that gap, I think that was a very interesting story, um,  
89 the other story that I thought was very interesting which had less to do with  
90 reconciliation as such but more with identity, which is a problem for many people  
91 with mixed blood and stuff, was the woman that came from the states, that felt half,  
92 what was is?  
93 RD: Cherokee, I think  
94 JUDE: Cherokee, yes. I thought that was a story that was very well adaptable to the  
95 situations of many people here in Australia who feel between cultures, and have a

96 hard time adapting to either, or sort of positioning themselves, and feeling good  
97 about whatever choice they make, about whatever position, so these are the two  
98 stories I remember

99 RD: So personally, you could see that you had some of those, I mean you're from a  
100 different culture, so where's my place inside and outside with that stuff

101 JUDE: Hm hm hm

102 RD: Yeah

103 JUDE: I don't think I'm there yet though, I haven't asked myself that question, hm,  
104 hm, have I? (.)

105 RD: You said earlier that you felt like you came home, or that this was home when  
106 you arrived.

107 JUDE: Yes that's true,

108 RD: It's different, though, it's almost the opposite I suppose

109 JUDE: Yeah

110 RD: I mean this is the thing I guess, with people in the audience. I am not expecting  
111 them to be doing high level process. I am expecting them to be fully feeling and  
112 experiencing it. So, in an interview like this I guess I am asking you to look at  
113 yourself and to do a bit of analysis with me. So I find, in a way, it contravenes the  
114 subtle aspects of Playback Theatre in that it has it's own momentum, but on the  
115 other side, at any time after a show people can talk to someone and also be doing  
116 this.

117 JUDE: Hm hm,

118 RD: It doesn't have to be as a result of an interview

119 JUDE: Sure, hm

120 RD: So, while you were sitting there in the second part, you'd found you'd reached  
121 a point of engagement where you told your story. And then kind of (-), you know  
122 those were the first two, the one about the fibrecraft, and the one from the woman  
123 from the US, they were the first two stories.

124 JUDE: I can't remember the order of things.

125 R: I mean the first two after your (story). The woman with the fibrecraft and the  
126 woman from the US, were the first two after you, then there was a fellow who  
127 discovered that he had an African American grandmother.

128 JUDE: Oh, I totally forgot about the Spanish princess [laughs]

129 RD: Yeah, and then there was the young woman

130 JUDE: Oh yes, the young woman yes,

131 RD: Who told about her family conflicts. So what (was your experience) there, like  
132 you'd forgotten, but you said you weren't as engaged then, was it because they  
133 weren't so relevant to you?

134 JUDE: No, to be, can I be honest?

135 RD: Yeah I want you to be honest.

136 JUDE: I mean I did enjoy the whole evening. And I think that playback theatre is  
137 great. What I was a little bit annoyed about was that it wasn't about reconciliation.  
138 It was about people not really wanting to think through issues.

139 RD: OK

140 JUDE: Which is OK if that's what the evening is about. I mean I can do that and we  
141 all need that and it's wonderful, but I thought, 'This has nothing to do with

142 reconciliation', and I was then reflecting about it. Like why do you allow stories  
143 like that? And I thought it must be pretty difficult, in an audience, you know where  
144 people don't know each other, where there is very little trust in the air, you know  
145 how do you actually solicit engagement. And, um, encourage them to come up with  
146 stories. And if you actually narrow it to reconciliation only, you might end up with  
147 everyone sitting there and no one is actually saying anything, and you try to avoid  
148 that like the devil. But then you know, still with bearing that all in mind I thought, I  
149 would have preferred all the stories to be about reconciliation, in one way or  
150 another. I don't know how you can do that though, but that's what I expected. That  
151 the stories weren't about, 'Who am I?' But what about me and reconciliation?



## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 6 - Observer Dialogue OD0b

223 REB: Yeah. I had a couple of things going on. The stuff about old soul, and here for  
224 a short time resonates with my sister's story even though she was 14 when she died,  
225 but that kind of sense of belief in what happens in the world, happens for a reason. I  
226 really picked that up from Liam

227 R: Because your sister died too soon too?

228 REB: Yeah and his acceptance of it, fits with (-), and I found myself think, 'yeah,  
229 you've come to accept this a whole lot sooner than I did.' That thought came  
230 through my mind, and the baby bit, that's sort of where we're at with things at the  
231 moment, I'm giving thought to that in my mind.

232 D: hmm

233 REB: You know, yeah, to see how fatherhood affected him was of interest to me.  
234 And to see this man with such courage in sharing such a deeply emotional story. I  
235 really felt, 'Oh wow, I really admire you for doing that; your courage.' But definite  
236 (-) did you have any of that going on for you, that connection with personal stories?

237 D: Well in a way, I thought about us trying to have a baby and that it never  
238 happened. And I wondered how it would have felt if we ever had that circumstance  
239 where you had a baby and it only lasts for a short time.

240 REB: hmm

241 D: Um, and in a way, it's sort of like a dream. It did touch me a bit because I  
242 thought about our dream of having a baby, and it hasn't [happened], and we've had  
243 to put it to rest. Really, and um, yeah it did affect me. It did cross my mind, and I  
244 thought oh well, I don't really want to go there.

245 REB: I've got a job to do here

246 D: You know as I was making notes, I thought oh yeah

247 Rea: but it did get evoked eh?

248 D: Even though it was different circumstances or whatever, but I thought I wonder  
249 what it would have been, and in a way, it was sort of symbolic. I have to bury this  
250 idea as well, like he did.

251 R: Wow, so you could feel that symbolic relevance?

252 D: Well with him, and I thought well in a way it's similar to what we've had to do.  
253 But for myself I thought I've had to put this to bed, bury it or something, so it was  
254 similar

255 REB: Isn't it amazing that we can be sitting there watching someone else's story and  
256 you're having all these things

257 D: Other thoughts

258 REB:/D: Going through your mind

259 Rea: So was it more evoked for you once you started watching the enactment?

260 REB: No, when hearing him, he was so well paced, in how he shared his story, and  
261 quite sequential, and I could almost see it (-)

262 D: Yeah

263 REB: As he described it. And the other thing that flipped through my mind was a  
264 friend who lost her baby at 20 weeks, and I remember thinking 'oh, 20 weeks that's  
265 the time when the baby is technical a child, rather than just a foetus, and you have a  
266 choice about burial. Yeah all that was going through my mind, yeah so I gave a  
267 thought to my girlfriend, because it was the same timing.

268 R/D: hmm

269 R: So Liam's was a deeply satisfying story for you?

270 REB & D: yeah

271 R: It had very true emotional content and people appeared comfortable expressing  
272 sadness (.)

273 REB: yeah

274 R: Then we had the short enactments afterward. What do you recall about that?

275 REB: Yeah, um [the conductor] Jen asked what the story brought up for you

276 R: Yeah you have already alluded to the fact that you shared during that time

277 REB: I really needed to speak after that, I would have been just as happy if [the  
278 conductor] had said turn to your neighbour, but I just needed to say something

279 about Liam, because I was so struck by that. The enactments, I can't really

280 remember them, I remember more what I said and what that guy said, I don't even

281 remember who else spoke.

282 D: Between you and that guy it was that younger woman,

283 REB: oh yeah, that's right, cause [the conductor] had gone back to her and said how  
284 is that for you? Yeah

285 D: Then?

286 R: Mike's remembering about the first time he became a Dad

287 D/ REB: that's right

288 R: so you're still strongly with Liam's story then?

289 REB: yeah, I think so.

290 R: yet you didn't necessarily hear other people's responses, you were still with your

291 own response?

292 REB: I think I got stuck after that guy had spoken.

293 R: you were incensed?

294 REB: yeah, very much so. Um, I'd be interested to talk about the stories that make

295 the whole audience laugh together as well as the ones that make us sad.

296 D: yeah

297 REB: didn't someone tell a story about the garbo truck?

298 D: that's right

299 REB: laughing

300 R: yeah I am happy to go anywhere with you guys

301 REB: well she told the story, and she was very descriptive in the telling of it, and

302 actually there was probably enough in there to want to see more than just a pair

303 D: yeah

304 R: oh, that's interesting you would have like to see more of the

305 REB: yeah, laughing, her response in terms of what she did do, and what she would

306 have liked to have done

307 D: that's right, yeah

308 R: So people laughed then eh?

309 D: Yeah there was a lot of laughter, I've put here there were giggles and laughter,  
310 everyone appreciated that, and the thing is I think a lot of people could relate to that  
311 too.

## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 7 - Observer Dialogue OD01

1321 REA: Yeah, see so, I'm more curious about asking him about what struck him  
1322 about the show, something simple and open like that...

1323 LU: Yeah, and I think he'd answer that quite well, like I don't think he'd have any,  
1324 I think he had a view on it, and he'd be able to talk to you about it.

1325 REA: So I'm thinking about him, then Darren, both Darren and Elizabeth made  
1326 comments, like Elizabeth said the middle aged comment and Darren said, the first  
1327 thing he said was 'I didn't trust the troupe' or the actors or whatever

1328 DAWN: You?

1329 REA: No he

1330 LU: He didn't trust them

1331 DAWN: OK

1332 REA: So because they're the two people who actually said negative things I  
1333 thought they'd be good to follow up

1334 DAWN: Hmm

1335 LU: Yeah, they had strong opinions

1336 REA: Yeah and what has happened since, maybe I'll get nothing – these are just  
1337 ideas at the moment, I'll speak to the performers about it as well. Then I wondered  
1338 about the woman, who put her arm up, she was very engaged

1339 CRAIG: Oh yeah

1340 LU: Yeah

1341 DAWN: Jude

1342 REA: She was very engaged

1343 LU: She was

1344 REA: So she was also a lovely audience member for me, like a bit like you [Lu] I

1345 put her in that category

1346 CRAIG: Well she was experiencing that response all the time, she was (-)

1347 REA: It was externalised on her

1348 CRAIG: Yeah, yeah

1349 REA: That's what I thought, whereas other people were a bit more (-) whereas it as

1350 very alive in her

1351 DAWN: Yes

1352 REA: But it was very animated with her

1353 LU: She's the lady who told the computer story

1354 REA: Yeah. Now with these four women here, because they stayed in their small

1355 group at the end, I thought maybe about speaking to one of them about, you know

1356 asking one of them about that conversation, to get a bit of information... who

1357 would you have been curious to talk too? That might be a better question to put to

1358 you, you've said Kylie, who else in that audience are you curious to hear from?

1359 DAWN: Kylie, only because of her story

1360 REA: Yeah but you've been watching these people

1361 CRAIG: I'd only be curious about the guy,

1362 REA: Darren?

1363 CRAIG: Hm

1364 REA: You could see stuff going on for him?

1365 CRAIG: He seemed like a really interesting person

1366 LU: He was talking to the girl next him a bit

1367 CRAIG: Hmm, it seemed

1368 LU: I'd like to have known what they were talking about  
1369 REA: They were together I think, did they arrive together?  
1370 CRAIG: No  
1371 REA; Oh,  
1372 LU: But I think they did know each other, the way they were chatting  
1373 CRAIG: She was very quiet and  
1374 REA: One of the guys I am curious about was the one who was lingering around  
1375 the coffee at the end, or that man who came in and said 'why do people come to  
1376 this?'  
1377 LU: That was the guy in front of us  
1378 CRAIG: That was Darren  
1379 LU: Oh, I thought it was the guy in front of us  
1380 CRAIG: Yeah, yeah  
1381 REA: The lone guy, oh was it Darren?  
1382 LU: Wasn't it the guy in front of us? With the little bag  
1383 CRAIG: But isn't that Darren?  
1384 REA: So is he the one that said  
1385 CRAIG: Yeah cause you were (-)  
1386 DAWN: Oh I thought you were talking about (-)  
1387 REA: You said 'lone male sitting by self finally found a friend' and said 'I wonder  
1388 why people come to these things?'  
1389 CRAIG: I think that was Darren, yeah  
1390 LU: Yeah  
1391 CRAIG: Cause you said, "he just said (-)"  
1392 LU: I overheard him talking to the girl next to him  
1393 REA: Right.



1394 LU: But it was more, 'oh, I wonder why...'

1395 DAWN: Hmm

1396 REA: Good, anyone else? I guess I am going to have to be realistic so I am going

1397 to have to make some decisions which are going to be incredibly hard, cause not

1398 that everyone has spoken afterwards, I've got little insights...

1399 DAWN: So who? Ok, so who was Rebecca's husband, the one who sat next to her

1400 because he was shifting a lot?

1401 CRAIG: He'd be good

1402 DAWN: He'd be good to ask I think

1403 CRAIG: Cause if he was so

1404 LU: Uncomfortable

1405 DAWN: It might not be so favourable

1406 REA: OK

1407 DAWN: I mean if he's open to it, he must've had a different perception in his mind

1408 of what it was about

1409 REA: Yeah the trouble with an audience member like him is that I think he just

1410 comes for Rebecca

1411 DAWN: And he probably did...

1412 REA: I guess people do come to shows just because people want them to come

1413 with them

1414 LU: Yeah

1415 DAWN: Yeah, and initially I used to come for you

1416 REA: And you used to shift a lot

1417 DAWN: I used to shift a lot

1418 All: (laughing)

1419 DAWN: I'd be looking at my clocking thinking 'god how much more of this'

1420 LU: OK

1421 LU: (laughing)

1422 DAWN: I used to think what rubbish is this come on let's go home

1423 LU: (laughing)

1424 CRAIG: Middle aged women doing psychotherapy

1425 DAWN: And men there too, I'd think 'god what the hell are they doing up

1426 there...' (laughing)

1427 REA: Hey at Dick Smith, you can get a device you can put on your phone and do

1428 phone interviews can't you? Cause I am just thinking that some of these people

1429 might not want to meet with me, but they might spend 20 minutes on the phone,

1430 because it's a big ask isn't it.

1431 CRAIG: Hmm

1432 REA: So I might follow up a few of them and see if they are open to it.

1433 DAWN: Hmm

1434 REA: The other person I wondered about was my sister's husband because he said

1435 nothing in the show, nothing in the small group, and my sister has told me that as

1436 soon as they got in the car on the way home he said things like this make me want

1437 to become a politician.

1438 LU: Wow!

1439 REA: so clearly the theme, something must've gotten going in him

1440 DAWN: so ask him

1441 LU: He was listening in the group discussion

1442 REA: No one else? What about you? You've said Rebecca's husband, you said

1443 Darren. It's interesting that we are wanting to know what the guys were thinking

1444 eh, there were so few of them, and only one spoke, and he spoke twice

1445 LU: I'm just thinking (.)

1446 DAWN: You know who had things to say, and that was Sarah's friend Eloise  
1447 REA: She's ticked 'No' on her form, so I can't call her  
1448 DAWN: Oh, OK, cause she had lots of views actually even in her little discussions  
1449 CRAIG: She sat there all night didn't she, like she was watching... like just  
1450 REA: She said some very interesting things in the small group  
1451 CRAIG: Cause they're together aren't they?  
1452 REA: No  
1453 DAWN: Actually Bea and Sarah are  
1454 REA: And Eloise is Sarah's best friend, They are like a little group, I think Eloise  
1455 is straight  
1456 LU: Eloise? Did she tell a story  
1457 DAWN: No no  
1458 LU: Oh  
1459 REA: She had the little glasses  
1460 CRAIG: No I was meaning Sarah's partner  
1461 DAWN: Bea  
1462 LU: The older woman  
1463 CRAIG: Hmm, because she was very quiet  
1464 DAWN: Yeah she was very quiet  
1465 CRAIG: Very, just sitting back and just...  
1466 REA: Yeah I thought of trying to look closely at her on the tape, I found her, there  
1467 were a few people I found, who, you know, people who were clearly (-), they  
1468 weren't observing from out here, they were there but  
1469 DAWN: Actually, yeah Bea didn't say too much  
1470 REA: She didn't say much in the group (discussion) either,

1471            DAWN: Yeah I noticed that and it's not like her to be like that, Bea usually has her  
1472            views.

## Appendix 5

### Excerpt from unedited transcript

#### Sample 8 - Performance Text Reconciliation Performance

225 R: This is a time in the show when we press the pause button. It is time to enact  
226 longer stories. We've done a number of briefer snapshots, or snippets, so "what's  
227 the story" tonight? Maybe it's a story you brought along, or maybe it's a story that  
228 was woken up as you've been sitting here. What's the story you will tell tonight?  
229 Take some time now to tell your story to someone by you. Tell then a few things  
230 about it to practice telling. The next part of the show we will use the storytellers  
231 chair and people will come and join me on stage to tell, which is very exciting.

232 [1:12:40

233 There's a murmur across the group as people begin chatting. there is some  
234 laughter, others are sitting still not talking yet.

235 A man goes out to the toilet

236 Actors get a drink

237 1:15:05]

238 R: OK! I will interrupt you there because there will now be time to tell each other  
239 (.) Someone will come and join me. (...) Who is to be the first storyteller for  
240 tonight? (A Woman signals from the front row) Come on up. (She makes her way  
241 onto the stage and sits alongside me) Hi. What's your name?

242 TELLER: My name's Lorraine.

243 R: (out to audience) Lorraine (the addressing the noise coming from the fans) We  
244 now have the fans turned down a bit so people can maybe hear a little better. Um,  
245 Peter, you're at the back, maybe you can go like this if our voices are too soft  
246 (gesture, hand to ear)

247 LORRAINE: Yes, I don't have a very loud voice

248 R: That's OK, we'll manage

249 LORRAINE: Good

250 R: OK, Lorraine, please choose one of the actors to be you

251 LORRAINE: (leans toward actors) I've forgotten the names

252 R: you can point, (she does) Brigid? Great. (Brigid stands) So, what happens?

253 LORRAINE: Well, just recently I went down to Mittagong to do a workshop to  
254 learn about aboriginal fibre-craft

255 R: (nodding) aboriginal fibre-craft, what is that?

256 LORRAINE: Making string-bags and baskets and that sort of thing (she gestures  
257 with her hands here as if doing the craftwork)

258 [Man comes back from toilet]

259 R: (curious tone) right. Has anybody here done any of this work – fibrecraft?

260 [Pause] No. I can remember the dilly bags from my social studies textbook

261 [Some laughter and murmurs of recognition]

262 R: Do you remember dillybags? (Little responses from audience) So, (to Lorraine)  
263 where were you?

264 LORRAINE: Mittagong and the aboriginal women came down from Arnhem Land.

265 There were four Aboriginals there and they were teaching us, and there was a white

266 woman with them, she was a co-ordinator.

267 R: OK, (nodding)

268 LORRAINE: And when they instructed us, well they really didn't, [laughs] they

269 would take the material (gestures here fast moving hands and fingers as if working

270 the 'fibre' and they would work very quickly with their hands and you'd stare at it

271 and try to figure out what the heck they were doing and then they'd hand it back to

272 you and you know, (as if they were saying) 'just get on with it.' [laughs again]

273 R: So this was a different way of teaching, clearly.

274 LORRAINE: Well they really weren't teaching at all, they didn't explain anything

275 and then you'd sort of have to work it out. Um, I was real uncomfortable with them

276 R: oh?

277 LORRAINE: If you asked them a question, they might or might not answer you. If

278 they didn't feel like answering they just wouldn't. It was as if you hadn't spoken. A

279 couple of us would go off everyday and get lunch and we'd bring back these trays

280 of food, and the food wouldn't be eaten and it would actually be taken back, they

281 wouldn't eat it.

282 R: What did you make of this? This bringing of trays full of food and them not

283 eating

284 LORRAINE: Well it was my turn to do it, so I asked them 'what would you like me

285 to get?' and there was no answer.

286 R: So, what happened?

287 LORRAINE: So, it was. And some of the women, there were about 15 of us in the  
288 tour group, and some of the women were sort of bending over backwards to be  
289 chummy and friendly and I didn't know how to handle the situation. I wasn't  
290 comfortable.

291 R: When you say some of the women

292 LORRAINE: The other women in my group

293 R: Women who had traveled to Mittagong with you

294 LORRAINE: Yeah it was part of a big forum and there were lots of workshops and  
295 this was just one of them.

296 R: What's your hunch about why they didn't eat the food?

297 LORRAINE: I just felt there's a gap that I didn't think I could bridge. I mean I  
298 know aboriginal women here in Brisbane that I can communicate with as well as I  
299 can communicate with anyone else. So I didn't know how to

300 R: And that was difficult for you?

301 LORRAINE: Yes! I felt it was difficult and uncomfortable and I don't think I was  
302 the only one who was having that experience (laughs) I would like to be able to but  
303 (shrugs)

304 R: But no matter what you tried in this situation there was a gap that you could not  
305 bridge.

306 LORRAINE: (nods) Yes!

307 1:20:18



308 R: OK (sitting further forward on seat out to audience) we're going to see  
309 LORRAINE's story about travelling to Mittagong and coming up against a gap she  
310 could not bridge. Let's watch and listen.

## Appendix 5

### Sample 9 - Excerpts from Reflective Journal

#### Extract Number I

This is an early example of notes I made from the literature as I began to organise the focus of my study.

7/3/1

Need to find evidence on the absence of value of the Playback Theatre experience  
Many who contract PBT for the first time are naïve of PT's purpose/benefits, in fact they are often just looking for something new, or different, a treat, a diversion.

#### Extract Number II

This entry corresponds to some feedback about my conceptual framework and methodology. Early on I was struggling to effect any distance from my practice; and my self-referential reflective process. This was a reflexive period in which I was thinking about my thinking.

21/8/1

What is my interpretive frame?

How will I read my data?

I have been worrying constantly about entering the field. How do I ask permission. From whom do I ask permission? No matter what happens, my research is going to effect people. It is not neutral. This helps me to get some distance. I think one of my biggest issues is my closeness to the form, to the participants. I have some way

to go before I feel as though I have consolidated my research identity within the playback theatre community.

Observation - I will be a participant observer.

Ingrid suggested I consider doing the data collection in my own community. She said to consider who might be interested in thinking this stuff through with me.

25/8/1

I am interested in the place of story in building connections, increase connection between people => increase in the sense of community.

27/8/1

North Coast Deanery performance - the strongest conclusion I have is that a dialogue happened and that in some way there were a number of elements of the community present. I was able, to some extent elicit stories from different sections of that community. This brought with it discomfort and conflict. I was then able to reinforce that PT honours subjective truth... each of us will have our own version of the story.

Playback Theatre could be said to be a dialogue. Stories are drawn from the audience and these stories inform each other and speak to each other. This study sets out to examine the dialogic nature of a PBT performance.

24/09/01

I am interested in the process that happens when we witness each other in moments of spontaneity - we are moved, we are shifted, we are changed. Part of me wants to be able to measure that, to take a picture of the energy of the performance - that exchange - but you can't.

### **Extract Number III**

This extract was written about a month after the Reconciliation performance and reveals some of my early thinking about the methodology. It also reveals my early reflections about the performance as a product.

24/05/02

This morning I am watching the footage of the audience as I listen to the performance, so I can't see the stage. I have seen some of the stage footage, and so far have been finding it challenging to watch. There is a whole level of analysis that is engaged around my conducting and the enactments – I know it is rooted in the ways we always think about performances and it seems only natural that I would go through the same thinking for this one.

I think the performance went really well. Yet I am finding it hard to say that sentence to myself without some elaboration that tends to sound either negative or like I am making excuses. For example:

We had a last minute withdrawal of an actor, so ended up performing with just three [all women]– in the moment I wanted to rant and rave about this, and to have a discussion about the dynamic & resource difference of playing with just three. I must say I do think this conversation has probably been had many times before, but I have never seen anything written on it... [in the playback writings]

Then there was the gravity of the theme – reconciliation. At some level I worried that the performance would be overly intellectual, and so may have focused too much on this in the warm up... In hindsight I have lots of ideas about how I might have entered the stories of the night.

Another thing in me has to do with the space. I deliberately choose not to use Macquarie House as I find it oppressive... instead I chose a hall where we'd performed a few times before. At the time I felt it offered what we needed, to set up cameras... and the rest. It had a stage area so we used that - it wasn't a big stage, or a particularly big space, but ... I have all these wonderings about how the space held or didn't hold the performance.

Then as a consequence of all three of these things: three actors, the theme, the space, I feel like we never quite reached the aliveness required to build a good dramatic journey...

Anyway having said this I am extremely pleased with the outcome of the show. People were there to genuinely explore the notion of reconciliation. We had amazing stories that disclosed aspects of reconciliation with self, with family, with ancestors, and how to live with the various values one absorbs over time. There were no indigenous Australians...

We had a story from a woman who had just come from a fibre-craft workshop with women from Arnhem Land, then a woman who has Cherokee heritage who wants to claim it, but knows this would not be sanctioned in the US. The third story was a man who had a family history of association with aborigines with the un/spoken qualification 'but you don't marry them', this having something to do with keeping the children 'pure.' He dated an aboriginal girl as a young man... but the climax was that after his dad died, and family tree exploration revealed that the great grandmother who was proudly known as Spanish, was in fact African... A young woman came to tell the final story, in her story she actually confronted her grandfather about the un/spoken racism that she lived with when she was a child with aboriginal neighbours (living on the wrong side of the tracks).

What's fascinating is to track the conversations that occurred next. There were stories just coming awake in people who initially felt the show was 'soft' or 'propagating the us/them thing' – 'where were the aboriginal Australians?' There was a conversation that critiqued the concept... what is reconciliation? What does this word mean and where does it come from – while on one level I found this conversation particularly intellectual with a bit of covert 'teaching' going on, or at least some attempts to influence rather than just listen, new stories were eventually told, with the debate being expanded to include the German/Jew, and Christian/Jew conflict.

In another group people told a whole series of stories about Redfern in Sydney, a place which evoked ... mystery, intrigue, danger, curiosity – a place that epitomised somewhere/some people who were different from 'me.' In this group there was a guy who had seen a bit of playback and I think is very drawn to it, but has not yet been in a company. He began saying he didn't feel safe with the actors, and over about 45 minutes he added to his story – 'it wasn't the actors, it was that I thought everybody knew each other' then 'it wasn't that really, it was more that more story was confused inside me...' to eventually telling some of it to those in the small group... very interesting – his mild hostility was transformed once he admitted how disappointed he was that he didn't "get to tell it."

Another woman spoke to Rebecca at the end – Rebecca has invited her, so this was a friend to friend kind of comment I think... she was saying how she just didn't get it, why would anyone want to tell a story? She identified herself as a writer and spoke about how she can't even be in the same room with someone who is reading her work, she questioned who owns the story... anyway I am not so sure whether the comments were from her head or whether there was other stuff engaged, so I am hoping to interview her. Rebecca spent time explaining playback to her though, which would probably happen in the course of such an event, but this may influence how she responds about playback in an interview.

Having said all this, I felt that the conversation that formed the bulk of the performance really demonstrated a genuine attempt to discuss where individuals were currently placed in relation to the notion of reconciliation. Perhaps more interestingly, there was considerable reflection on those areas in people's lives where they have direct opportunities to act with respect to being reconciled/connected. Also, there is now the problem of finding focus with respect to what the research is asking and at this stage I feel far too close to the show to be able to fine tune that.

That's enough for now. Feeling tired, meeting with observers tomorrow and fellow performers on Sunday to discuss the show.

#### **Extract Number IV**

This extract from my field journal demonstrates the thinking I was engaged in following the Mental Health Week Performance.

28/10/02

[MHW perf]

I have been reflecting on the role of the conductor - I was thinking about Nathaniel and how I omitted to ask him for a reply to Hillary's story - indeed I didn't know he was there, but I should have known. This raises questions about safety... but not the safety of the teller, the safety of those told about. Extending this I recalled my work at the Refugee perf, and how I acknowledged Woorid's story as her family's story by acknowledging them, and afterwards, asking her Dad for his response. He said, "we suffered." Anyway, there were some comments from the feedback - people being worried about the family, and I felt that in some way, my asking him for a response was criticized a bit, so what's the right answer? Of course, I have to seek out others in the audience who are in the story.

[chasing a theme - to tell or not to tell]

Sometimes, it is the fact that others are in the audience that stops people from telling. That was [name's] greatest fear, that there would be large silences, that no one would tell because they didn't want the others hearing their story. Another woman also referred to this as a reason she did not tell. Her story was about the chooks she shared with her neighbour. She had not had a chance the talk with her neighbour about it yet so didn't want to bring it up in public - yet it was the thing that came to mind when invited to share a story that showed her in conflict with herself.

Later on Friday, I began to think about the other person in the research who I felt most disturbed with - Asha. Again, she was a nonteller, in someone else's story. I felt a sudden surge of ... [ this is not a word place].

Again, that was a show where the conductor had not identified the other person. Wil came and told *his* story. But Asha was there, she was in the story. She had her own version of the story... It was also a life and death story, a big story. In Nathaniel's case, he could interpret the story as him having some hand in Mac's death. This is not so for Asha. But the part of the story she focused on as Wil needing to resolve, was the interaction with her over the burial of the baby... I wonder what Nathaniel's version of that story would have been... does it matter. In Asha's story - I played Asha, after I realised I was playing someone in the audience I felt ashamed, worried about her, let down and unsupported by the conducting.

### **Extract Number V**

This extract is a poem I wrote when I was finding it difficult to express myself in writing.

The use of poetry enabled me to use shape on the page; and also enabled a more abstract



expression. I was then less concerned with trying to "capture" the idea and more interested in expressing myself.

15/12/02

OPEN

Seems like another life

I wonder if I'll get the transcribing done

PLEASURE &

PAIN

familiar stories

simple connections

more

more

more

getting frenetic

neurone singing

electric

what about the listening

what about the typing

click

click

click

pedestrian typing

accelerating thought

**Extract Number VI**

20/3/3

... during a show, different audience members are negotiating with themselves as to whether to tell or not. This constant weighing up, introduces an air of uncertainty, or doubt (as Meyerhold says), and therefore has implicit in it an aesthetic quality. There could be participation from the audience at any moment. But more significantly that they, the audience has some kind of control over it.

## Appendix 6

### Data Analysis Schedule

Date	Activity
July 2001	Stage 1: Trial data collection - practitioner's analysis of performance
Nov - Jan 2002	Stage 2: Extended practitioner interviews
March 2002	<p>Stage 3: Intensive Data Collection -</p> <p>I commenced data collection with the specific aim of developing observational frames. Placed (participant) co-observer in the audience to compliment my on-stage observational point of view and to test feasibility of observational goals. Began sourcing audience informants and conducting initial conversational interviews (Wolcott, 1995).                      Recording of field notes and journal reflections                      Decision to videotape performance to assist in observation.                      Permission to use video-documentation.                      Preliminary analysis reveals the value of audience interviews and I start to see the limitations of player interviews.</p>
May 2002	<p>Observational frames broken up to cover the event from inception, preparation, performance, through to the cool down or aftermath (Schechner, 1985).                      Specific performance produced for purposes of research and to trial video documentation as a way to maximise the observational data gathered. This decision was based on the indications from previous performances that multiple data sources intersect and provide some form of triangulation.                      Collection methods during the videotaped performance included: participant observation; feedback survey to source</p>

	<p>participants; audience conversation groups; audience individual interviews; audience follow up interviews; observer dialogues; player interviews reflective journal.</p> <p>Preliminary data analysis to guide next phase of data collection.</p>
<p>June - July 2002</p>	<p>Decision to abandon video-documentation.</p> <p>Ongoing fieldwork, over the next eight weeks collected data from every performance.</p> <p>Sourced participants for conversational interviews using the simple survey form. Inconsistent opportunities for after-show group discussions due to the context of the performances.</p> <p>Data analysis; identified basic thematic categories; progressive funneling to guide next phase of data collection</p>
<p>Aug - October 2002</p>	<p>Led by the data through the progressive funneling process field work continued over another 12 weeks</p> <p>Decision to abandon performances for specifically commissioned groups and focus on performances that were ostensibly 'open' and an event in their own right</p> <p>Ongoing observations and interviews at performances; Ongoing [co]-analysis, extended categories from first stage.</p> <p>Practitioner reflection and interactive reflection, transcription of video-taped material, and transcription of audio-taped interviews.</p>

## Appendix 7

### Example of Thematic Analysis of Stories Reconciliation Performance

Early in the performance, audience members brought forward a number of ideas, suggesting that the concept evoked a wide range of responses. This negotiation of the terms, concept and practice of reconciliation eventually took a course in the show as the application of the method moved from shorter forms to the longer forms in the storytelling process, where a participant comes on stage and tells their story with the support of the conductor.

#### *Themes in early part of show*

- Regret at not knowing the truth of the aboriginal experience
- Wanting adequate compensation for the work that indigenous Australians performed when they were bonded to the state
- The confusion of living with mixed messages about aborigines during childhood
- The inspiration of prominent aboriginal leaders
- Feeling angry about the lack of apology to indigenous Australians for inhumane treatment in the past
- Noticing a shift in attitude toward aboriginal students being "problems" in the school system
- Coming to terms with new knowledge about the idea of reconciliation going back to the teachings of the Catholic Church and excitement that this is linked to the idea of being connected into humanity and forgiveness
- Daring to present oneself honestly and the hurt resulting from a prejudiced response to personal honesty

- The dilemma of managing a deep commitment to activism with the need to prioritise time
- The struggle of feeling implicated in someone's personal business when it contravenes your values

The themes that are articulated above represent my interpretation of what I have heard and seen during the performance. From my observations, many of these themes were echoed throughout the performance, emerging in other stories that were told. One emphasis that I identified in the stories told during the performance revolved around the question: "how to do reconciliation practically" (Rec04, L84). There was a range of responses to this question in the form of other stories. These responses included: implicating the self and the family as domains in which we can practice reconciliation, learning about yourself and your values, learning about your family and your family values, and daring to challenge beliefs and values held by family members.

The data reveal that an exploration of these themes continued in the after-show discussion groups and into interviews two and three weeks later./ Stories told later also contributed slightly different perspectives on what was told during the performance, or brought forward themes that had not been emphasised in the performance. During the performance there was a reference to the idea of the way the Catholic Church ethos espouses reconciliation. Transcripts reveal that this context was explored further in one discussion group (see Rec03). Perhaps the way in which I conducted the performance influence the way in which this idea

was somewhat disregarded in later stories. Audience members might have felt more inclined to tell if this theme had been given more attention (Rec13, L18, Rec14, L52). Simple conducting action<sup>75</sup> within the performance process could have assisted these audience members to add their voices to the performance. This would possibly have resulted in some acknowledgement that there were others in the room that knew about Catholic reconciliation making a concrete link between the teller and these other audience members within the ritual.

Undertaking this kind of analysis of the content that emerges during the performance can also assist the conductor to identify what stories may have been missing and what voices may have been absent. It is possible that there were also a number of themes that were not voiced at the performance. Transcripts of after-show discussions reveal stories of overt racism, stories in which people felt angry about, unconcerned by, disgusted by, and disinterested in indigenous Australians (see for example, Rec02, Rec15). Other absent stories that were revealed after the show include the witnessing of specific atrocities against aboriginal people (Rec 14) and stories that the audience members adjudged were too damning of white Australians to feel safe voicing them (Rec13). Again, specific conducting statements and invitations could have illuminated these themes in the show, even though this may not have resulted in the full telling of these stories. The conditions to tell a story during Playback Theatre depends on many variables, some of which are intrinsic to the values, beliefs, experiences and skills of individual audience members.

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<sup>75</sup> This would involve a simple inquiry such as, "who know of this in the Catholic Church?"

I am not suggesting that all themes should be brought forward within one Playback Theatre event. However, the conductor's role must give attention to these small offers from the audience. This is the *content* of the performance, and the values of Playback Theatre imply that it is toward the audience members' agenda that the performance must veer, not that of the Company or the organiser. I made the following note about the Reconciliation performance in my reflective journal:

I know I wanted my conducting to be unobtrusive but I can't believe how little I do with the tellers. I am sure my desire to be enabling rather than overly zealous because of the research made me more timid (than usual). At times, I think this (my style) worked really well, but I think that sometimes it was too hard for the actors. And I miss checking in with the audience too. Like that reconciliation in the church one was out of the blue, I should have found a link for her. I related to her discovery so I think I assumed others would too. This possibly blocked me bringing this out more (Reflective Journal, June 2002)..



## Appendix 8

### Unedited Transcript: Carly's story Disability Action Week Performance

Carly is onstage, her wheelchair pulled up alongside me, the teller's chair off in the background. She is a playful teller who has poise and is also comfortable with the attention.

CARLY: it was a disability awareness thing combined with indigenous awareness, and sport & rec were involved, and one of the things we organised was this game of basketball and there were people who were used to playing wheelchair basketball, and people who were used to playing basketball standing, and we got them organised in wheelchairs.

R: Really? [to audience] Who here has tried using a wheelchair who is used to standing? [there are no takers] [to Carly] So, what was it like for them?

CARLY: [giggling] well it's that whole thing of sitting in a chair, but then having to make the ball go in the same hole (that they were used to reaching from standing height), and then, maneuvering, and they were falling round all over the place

R: so a couple of words for them,

CARLY: a mess

[Audience laughter]

CARLY: at first, and there was real reservations, the way the 'wheelies' were playing

R: so what was the reservation about?

CARLY: I think it was that you had people who were proficient in a skill and they were put into an environment where they were not competent.

R: so were they all athletes, yet were *not competent* (emphasise last two words)

CARLY: Yeah, (there was) a mixture of guys and girls, and it is interesting I think the crowd was on the side on the non-wheelchair basketballers, and had a fairly big laugh at their expense

R: [to the audience] OK, (you will behave) as the crowd. You guys are really enjoying this. Let's have a practice of this

Audience: laughter and comments

[CARLY enjoys their participation]

[More laughter]

R: thanks

CARLY: and to exemplify that (here Carly explains the physical constraints of catching, passing and bouncing the ball when in a wheelchair). When you're sitting down, you know when the ball comes, you can't jump you have to let it land, and the same for dribbling, if you stand with the ball, anyway these are the things that these players are trying to do

[Audience Laughter]

R: so they're trying to jump

[Audience Laughter]

CARLY: yeah

R: so how did it go?

CARLY: fabulously because after a period of time when they were all over the place, because they're skilled in many ways, and that was helped (when they were ) in the chairs because we gave them some advice about how to use the chairs, and so there was interaction there, and so they got more comfortable, and their natural basketball skills started to override their inexperience with the wheelchair, and it became much more even, and there was a wonderful connections with the players and also the audience, yeah it was great [pause]

R: Great (nodding at Carly). (To actors/audience) At the beginning of this story they're will be some "parallel-world" time so that the actors can establish the world of the proficient wheelchair basketballers, and then the world of the less proficient wheelchair basketballers before the two come together. Let's watch

## Appendix 9

### Example of Ongoing Storytelling Post-performance period - Reconciliation (Rec03)

The following excerpt is from a discussion group following the reconciliation performance and shows the emergence of stories in the cool down:

Man 1<sup>76</sup>: you just bringing that up then just reminded me, and I haven't thought about it a lot. My first wife ran the aboriginal preschool in Everley Street in Redfern, and we used to have two cars one that we'd drive and park in Everley Street which was covered in aboriginal flags, and the other car which we didn't take there, and there's more that goes on around that, but actually from you (Paul) just talking there, somehow I remembered all those things. I didn't remember it for one second out there, and now I've got all these stories that have suddenly emerged in me right now.

Woman 1: actually what you just said about Redfern made me remember a whole, one of my friends used to live around the corner from there and we'd go walking past it, being part of their life, part of their lifestyle, like having the guts actually to walk down that street

Man 1: you get used to it

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<sup>76</sup> Use of Man 1, Woman 1 & Woman 2 here to discriminate between different voices.

Woman 1: you know, far out what the hell did they burn their house down for? Did they need fire wood. You know like just to be in the middle of it and not understanding and somehow being detached.

Woman 2: Yeah my grandmother lived at Sydenham which is two railways from Redfern, and we'd go down for school holidays, and my nan would say do you want to go on the train? We'd get on the train, and go forever (just having a train ride) anyway Redfern would be one of the stops – and the whole of that area was just so wild and different to us because, and there were all these Italians, and there were just waves and waves of migrants so it was just like difference on a plate, and it was like indigenous Aussies were just more of the difference, and somehow when I got older. It wasn't my grandmother's doing and I don't know how we found out but Redfern was this really out of bounds, and you don't get out there (the station) and walk around or whatever. Anyway its sort of like these things come into you, you know you don't necessarily get it as a kid but for me, there was all the same, it was all incredibly different from a small crops farm south west of Sydney on a dirt road. Going into Sydney and seeing you know, Greek family or Italian family, and they're all selling things in shops and it smells funny, you know...

Woman 1: experienced so much here, to have all that here in this room, something about playback (very soft). (Rec03, L204).