



The Beginnings: Reflecting on 25 years of Playback Theatre

By Hannah Fox

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I remember Thursday nights were rehearsal nights. Maddy and I usually got to have a babysitter that night but sometimes we would accompany our parents across the river to Playback rehearsal. Back in the early days, when I was a kid, the world only had one Playback Theatre company and it rehearsed in Poughkeepsie, New York at the Mid-Hudson Arts and Science Center (always was a mouthful!). From my memory, the MHASC was an old brick building (or maybe it was white) run by a nice little old man. The museum was downstairs and Playback rehearsed upstairs. My favorite thing about going to Thursday rehearsals and First Friday performances was buying special little animal pins from the museum man to add to my collection. Meanwhile, upstairs, the original company was hootin' and hollerin' making all kinds of funny noises, and making up something called Playback Theatre.

There were twelve members in the original company: my mom and dad, Judy, Michael, Carolyn, Vince, Susan, Bruce, Gloria, Dan, Pete and Danielle. In my eyes, they were a kooky bunch and very embarrassing (and nothing at all like the parents of my friends) but they were family--to me and for each other. The original Playback Theatre company was not just a performance troupe but was a close community, a tribe.

I remember big Vince's big bear hugs, Susan's twinkly, mischievous eyes, Bruce's silliness, Gloria's softness, and Michael's laugh. I remember flying to New Zealand and Australia in 1980 with my parents, little sister, Michael and Judy to introduce the form to a new continent. I remember Willy, Sarah, Isabel, and Star--the other Playback kids--and how on the 10th anniversary of Playback Theatre in 1985 we all received t-shirts which read: "I Wish My Parents Were Normal." I remember the white overalls the troupe wore as a costume and my dad's black bowler hat that he always put on before he conducted a show. I remember taking a bus for fifty cents from New Paltz to Poughkeepsie on Saturday mornings (without any grownups!) for the children's Playback class. I remember the whole clan hanging out on summer afternoons in Judy's backyard.

Playback Theatre is now a quarter century old and we kids are thirty instead of ten. We are the age our parents were when they invented the form. Some of us do Playback ourselves, some of us don't. Some of the original company members still practice the form, and others have moved on. However the membership changes, Playback Theatre, as a theatre technique, an international network, and as a movement for social change, continues to grow and evolve. To demarcate this moment in history, on October 14th, 2000 there was a twenty-five year birthday celebration performance at the Unison Arts and Learning Center in New Paltz, New York which featured three Playback Theatre

companies: Hudson River Playback, Community Playback, and the Original Company. It was a moving and heart-warming evening, particularly to see the original members, a little bit older, a little bit grayer, back up there on stage together.

To commemorate this occasion I have interviewed Jonathan Fox, Jo Salas and Judy Swallow (separately) with a few questions about the beginnings. This will hopefully serve to be the start of a documentary film project on the "Beginnings of Playback Theatre" earmarked for the spring.

HF: Where did playback theatre come from?

JF: My dream of a new kind of theatre that brought theatre back from the domain of entertainment to its earlier purpose of preserving memory and holding the tribe together.

Ju: PT sprung fully-formed from the head of Zeus.

Jo: I know of course that it evolved out of a mixture of things in Jonathan's background but my first memory of a playback twinkle in the eye was one day as we were driving home from an afternoon with friends in Connecticut. It must have been 1974 because you were about three. Jonathan had disappeared upstairs to play with you and the other children, and as we drove home he talked about how you kids had acted out things that you were thinking about, things that had happened to you. There was a particular resonance to this conversation and it has stayed with me.

HF: How/when did you get involved?

Jo: At that time Jonathan and I were both in a little experimental company called It's All Grace. When his vision came into focus--probably a few months after this ride in the car--he asked all of us if we were interested in exploring this idea. Some of us were, some weren't. We made a certain amount of progress, extremely preliminary, and then we moved to New York and gathered people together for the express purpose of continuing this direction. At that point, of course, it had no name.

Ju: I first saw Jonathan in 1975 when I and some other psychodrama students at the Moreno Institute took a Thursday night off to go down the street to a church hall in Beacon to hear a young man (dressed in flowy, batiked pants) talk about his dream to have a theatre that was as good for the actors as for the audience, a theatre that could honor ordinary life experiences through drama, and that could

bring people together through their shared oral history. I remember thinking, "how idealistic," but I was also intrigued by the ideas.

JF: I gathered the original group in the fall of '75.

HF: What was it like in the early days?

JF: For me it was very intense. I was so invested in the idea working that before every rehearsal my stomach was in knots. We performed very early, and the success of the performances helped the actors believe in what was at first just my vision.

Jo: None of us knew what we were doing. We just stumbled around and discovered things that worked, inspired by the flicker of the basic idea. We were young and fearless and it was deeply exciting and fun, even though sometimes frustrating. I remember feeling at times that we would never realize the vision with this group of people. But we did.

Ju: I remember the wonderful experimental atmosphere in the early days. Anyone could make a suggestion of something to try, and we would, just to find out what would happen. We stretched our minds, bodies and emotions, learning together and laughing a lot.

HF: What were some of the highlights?

Jo: In those early days, the highlights were just seeing that this worked--people had stories and wanted to tell, and wanted to hear other people's. It was remarkable and moving. Other moments--one of us making a huge artistic leap and letting us all see what was possible (this happened many times). Being 8 months pregnant and taking our first brochure to the printer's -- I felt like everything was bearing fruit.

JF: In our second performance, at an academic conference, we changed on the stage behind a screen. We taught children pt on Saturday mornings so that our children could also participate.

Ju: A highlight for me was the sense of co-creation. I always felt I could put my two cents in. And at the same time, a gentle guidance. I learned to trust Jonathan and Jo and my friends and myself and the life process we created. The playback community was part of everyday life - kids, hanging out with each other, creating a new lifestyle.

HF: And challenges?

JF: One kind of challenge was developing the form, figuring out what worked. Another was learning about process and how to keep this ongoing group cohesive season after season. A third was persuading the arts and social service establishments that our work could have value (at the beginning there was a great deal of resistance).

Ju: We risked. We risked being silly (an intro at a holiday show was to run out like football players, saying, "I'm Donner," "I'm Blitzen" etc.), idealistic, and emotionally expressive in response to what we heard inside the story, even if it was not said overtly (once I played the teller's actor in a dream where a man came in her bedroom window at night - I really got into the terror, heart pounding through my chest when the scene ended, and she said, "no, it was my ideal lover coming to take me away"--- presto, change-o, a real challenge to do the correction with as much gusto!). We also had interpersonal challenges. We did sociometry and psychodrama at times when there were issues to clarify and truths to be told.

Jo: I'm thinking of an experience in Toronto where we were confronted by an audience member who challenged us to "take off your masks." We had more confrontations with audience members in those days, though it was never common. I'm not sure whether people were just more outspoken in the 70s or whether we were so much less sure of what we were doing than we are now. The latter, I think. I remember the extreme stress as we got busier and busier, but still always pushing against doubts and disapproval from the world, trying to hold to our vision in the face of incomprehension and personal hardship. I remember Jonathan and me sobbing in each other's arms once at a rehearsal, just from the sheer and unremitting strain of it all.

HF: What was the original playback vision?

JF: To recapture that kind of ceremonial enactment in which there is no distinction between art and healing.

Jo: To offer ordinary people a place to see and celebrate and explore their stories. To use creativity and art to pay attention to unheard voices and to bring people together.

Ju: That personal stories are political, that accepting where audience members are in the moment is essential, that there must be an atmosphere of respect for everyone's story, and that anyone could be an actor and a storyteller in this mode of action communication.

HF: Has the original vision been actualized?

JF: That part of it which involves citizen actors dramatizing the stories of members of their own community, yes.

Ju: I think that despite the changes and the challenges, the original vision is on its way to being actualized: that each community can have its own playback theatre, a way to safely and respectfully experience the telling of stories about what's meaningful to it.

Jo: Yes, and...! There's more to come. One thing that I'm happy and relieved about is that playback theatre as a movement is still essentially and creatively anarchic, it hasn't become an orthodoxy, it's not professionalized or rigid. I feel that if it hasn't happened by now, it probably won't. We may have escaped a fate that happens to many new ideas.

HF: What is a special memory that you have of this time?

Ju: A special memory of an "aha": We were getting ready to perform as part of the US Bicentennial celebration in Kael Rock Park in 1976. We'd decided to enter by clambering down some cliffs at the back, carrying boxes and props and instruments, and wending our way through the audience to get to the stage. Somehow, as we waited to go on, and being so high up, I started to imagine slipping and tumbling down the cliff, sprawling and spewing what I carried into the crowd. As I started my descent, I realized that, no matter what happened, it was all part of life, and I was part of a group who would accept me for just being myself. A priceless moment of knowing.

Jo: Blindfolding Carolyn and Vince when they showed up for rehearsal and driving them in silence to a hot tub. We didn't take off their blindfolds until we were all in the water. This was our way of celebrating their shared birthday.

JF: There are so many. I think of our one-Sunday-a-month rehearsals (in addition to Thursday nights), when the deep stories had time to come out.

HF: How have you seen Playback grow over the last 25 years?

Jo: It has grown enormously in every way.

JF: For the most part, playback has grown gently, caringly, responsibly, maintaining its sense of the importance of staying in touch. This is very important for such an intimate form.

Ju: Of course PT has spread all over the world, and has expanded through the social and artistic visions of its practitioners. There is wonderful cross-pollination as groups meet and share new forms and ideas. Practical questions arise - inclusion/exclusion?, themes addressed overtly/covertly? how much "quality control," and by whom? when can PT be harmful? how can it be used to further social justice? and many more...

HF: Has the vision changed at all? How?

Ju: I think the vision has deepened over the years, not fundamentally changed. The recent discussion of how PT can be used to get people to face difficult subjects like racism is very rich. World events and situations that affect us are worthy of stories. We need to be brave enough to speak the unspoken and to take risks to open up a dialogue that won't be wrapped up nicely at the end of a show or rehearsal or gathering.

JF: My own vision for playback has grown with my understanding of the problems and complexities of achieving community. So the vision now includes emphasizing diversity in our groups and in our audiences.

Jo: I'd say it's become more focused, more courageous, in the direction of social vision and confronting injustice, and also in our conviction that this really can be extraordinary theatre as theatre.

HF: What was it like for you to celebrate Playback Theatre's 25 th birthday?

Jo: Wonderful, more wonderful than I expected. Especially the beginning and ending with 22 of us onstage, we felt so strong. It meant a lot to me to introduce the people in my current company to the people in my first company.

Ju: I was SO delighted to celebrate PT's 25th with so many people who have been part of our history. What a rush to look over the overflowing audience! I felt wonderful to see some of the original company old timers again and feel right in the swing and rhythm of the jokes and banter and deep abiding love for/from Michael. I liked co-creating at the rehearsal before hand and having each company be highlighted at the show before mixing it up.

JF: I had not been into the whole anniversary bit, but to take the stage With the original company at the start of the show, then be joined on stage by Community Playback Theatre and Hudson River Playback Theatre, and to feel the years of love and struggle behind us as the standing-room only audience clapped and clapped for us--this was a wonderful beginning to a marvelous evening.

HF: What is a personal hope for the future of Playback Theatre?

JF: That the name becomes famous because it is being used everywhere!

Jo: That we retain our adventurousness and courage, while holding the Compass to the essence of what playback is.

Ju: My personal hope is that people of different races, cultures, ages, sexual orientations can work together to create playback companies where people can trust that no matter how different they are from each other, they will be heard and respected. If this happens within the companies, this atmosphere will translate to the audiences. I hope in our company we'll continue to use PT as a vehicle for exploring and learning and expanding our own awarenesses - "a company that's as good for the actors as for the audiences." I feel very blessed to have my life infused with PT, and intend to keep it swirling around as long as I can swirl.

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