



Beyond Role Play: Playback Theatre And Conflict Transformation

By Linda M. Park-Fuller, Ph.D.

This material is made publicly available by the Centre for Playback Theatre and remains the intellectual property of its author.

**BEYOND ROLE PLAY: PLAYBACK THEATRE AND CONFLICT
TRANSFORMATION**

Linda M. Park-Fuller, Ph.D.
The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication
P.O. Box 871205
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85283 USA

**PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL PLAYBACK THEATRE
SYMPOSIUM**

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY
TEMPE, ARIZONA USA
FEBRUARY 27, 2005

Over the past seven years, my studies in Playback Theatre have revealed both expected and unexpected insights about this paradoxically simple and complex, common and unique, ancient and yet totally contemporary form of performance. As a communication and performance scholar, I continually find, through practice and experimentation, new facets of Playback experience interfacing with developing theory and emerging global, national, and local issues to further substantiate my belief in its avant garde role in 21st century performance study.

To place Playback Theatre in a category of the avant garde may sound strange to some ears, for the term is most often associated with the modernist avant garde of the 20th century, and conjures images of esoteric art sprung from Dadaism, surrealism, and futurism. Playback, with its highly accessible portrayals of common, everyday, stories and emotions doesn't seem to fit into that grouping. But I use the term in its literal sense of "front line," and align myself with theatre scholar and activist, Baz Kershaw, who sees the 21st century theatrical front as "democratized performance" (Radical, 20).

Characterized by dialogic exchange, participatory engagement, performative absence, and aesthetic reflexivity, Playback Theatre might be said to be Radical Theatre in Kershaw's terms, and a vitally important, if yet under-recognized, component of the new avant-garde. In this paper, I wish to focus on the first characteristic, dialogic exchange, as a frame for discussing Playback Theatre and conflict mediation.

It is my contention that dialogic exchange occurs on several levels in Playback Theatre. First, and most obviously, it occurs on the level of audience and performance company interaction during a performance when, for example, audience members answer questions posed by the conductor. Audience members also engage in dialogic exchange

with one another as they exchange stories—often answering a previous teller’s implicit question; supporting or arguing in narrative-form as they offer their tales—one after the other to comprise the show. Second, as Park-Fuller has noted, it takes place in the exchanging of roles when performers become audience members to the tellers’ stories, and audience members “perform” the telling of their tales, and the expressions of their feelings (Park-Fuller, “Audiencing”). At this level of abstraction, the dialogic exchange becomes more radical because it calls into question our very notions of what we mean by performing and audiencing.

At a third level of abstraction (the level that is most relevant to this symposium theme of nourishing ideas and sustaining communities), Playback Theatre “dialogues” with other activities, endeavors and enterprises. Unlike forms of performance that stay-put in the theatre building, dance studio, concert hall or even in the arts community, Playback Theatre engages with others. It dialogues with psychotherapy; it talks with social work; it confers with education; it consults with political activism; it converses with cultural studies; it deliberates with health and medicine; it compares notes with communication, and according to an article in the journal, Training (Schettler), it also mingles with management. And in the process of that dialogue, both the performance form and its partner learn from one another, grow, and develop.

It is this third level of dialogic exchange that I consider to be the most Radical aspect of Playback Theatre and the most significant for the future—not only the future of Playback Theatre, nor just of Performance Studies and Theatre, but also for the future of their dialogic partners—real and potential. On this third level where the boundaries of disciplines dissolve in the interests of solving humanity’s problems, positing unique

action research, providing creative solutions, they move beyond the restrictions and hidebound habits of the known and forge new theories, practices and procedures that currently lie hidden from our view. This is the level where applied communication and applied theatre endeavor not only to address problems on the surface, but to excavate that surface, to probe those problems' roots, and to invigorate a systemic process of understanding and healing.

In the remainder of this paper, I will examine one area of potential dialogic exchange that appears most promising to me—that of Playback theatre and conflict transformation. I will first discuss the relationship between conflict and “story” (or narrative), paying particular attention to the recent work of narrative theorists and conflict transformation. In the next section, I will examine the potentials of Playback Theatre performance to win the trust of the conflict participants or disputants; to reveal the hidden stories behind the conflicts; to separate the persons involved in the conflict from the problem of the conflict; and to provide a means of co-creating alternative stories on which participants may build a healthy relationship. In the final section, I will summarize findings, posit some conclusions, point out some concerns, and suggest possible directions for future studies. I must also note one important limitation of the significance of the study before continuing. The potentials of Playback Theatre for this study should be understood as limited to those conflict situations wherein participants have some desire for transforming rather than ending a relationship or interpersonal situation. When disputants simply wish to receive restitution of some kind and then part ways, these activities will not serve. Playback Theatre is a transformative art and activity and while it may be possible to use it as a method of deciding who has a stronger case, or

“who wins,” this study does not investigate such interests. Rather, I direct my attention to how it might help people in conflict realign their relationships by recreating their stories.

Narrative and Conflict Transformation

The use of narrative in the service of addressing conflict is not new. Most techniques of resolution, reparation, or redress allow for, if not encourage the telling of stories by involved parties. Whether the various techniques involve litigation, mediation, counseling, or some combination, each individual’s “story,” or “side of the story,” has a place in the unraveling process. Recently, as our understanding of narrative has developed and we have come to appreciate it as a linguistic and cultural construct as well as an account of events that features a particular point of view, scholars, psychologists, and mediators have begun to recognize the “power” of the story itself—as a living, fomenting ingredient within the conflict rather than a simple account of the conflict—an ingredient that is, in fact, partially responsible for the onset of the conflict and a major nutrient that continues to keep the dis-ease of the conflict alive. Fortunately, because we have come to recognize that, as a construct, the story is always at least partially a fiction, we know that it can be changed—in small or large ways. And, as scientists and practitioners have come to understand, when the story is changed to the mutual satisfaction of both (or all) the disputants, the conflict is also transformed into more peaceful coexistence. To transform conflict then, it makes sense to begin with story.

Recently, groundbreaking studies by Michael White and David Epston, and by John Winslade and Gerald Monk, have provided exciting insights on the use of narrative in conflict transformation. Basing their work on the writings of Michele Foucault, family

counselors, White and Epston utilize the following basic procedures to process family problems: 1) externalize the problem as separate from the individuals involved; 2) recognize the “dominant” or “cultural” story (what might be called the “master narrative”), functioning underneath the surface narrative, sustaining and feeding the problem by conscripting people into its service—making them “docile bodies” caught in its web; 3) identify “unique outcomes” (story threads of resistance to the dominant story based on what Foucault calls “local knowledge”) which serve to empower the individuals involved; and 4) discover and spin out alternative stories based on those unique outcomes—stories acceptable for all involved. Building on White and Epston’s theory, Winslade and Monk have developed these concepts in unique ways and applied them specifically to conflict mediation. Separating themselves from “problem solving” mediation techniques that treat the problem at the surface level, Winslade and Monk offer a process of “discursive repositioning” (what one might call story switching), which not only allows the participant to see him/herself with different needs and interests, but also includes “the conscious reshaping . . . of the discourses out of which needs and interests are produced” (62). In that way, their theory and practice go beyond addressing specific conflict situations to address the cultural roots of conflict. They become activists as well as mediators.

Winslade and Monk begin with the conceptual notion that dominant discourses of culture shape how disputes develop. Dominant discourses are formulas of thinking about life management, including “entitlements” and “responsibilities,” that come out of grand or master narratives. They imply the taken-as-granted “rights” and “wrongs,” that get

translated into discursive disputant positions, e.g., “he shouldn’t have done/said that,” “she can’t do that to me,” “that’s no way to . . .” “they always mess things up,” etc.

Dominant discourses create situations of privilege, determining whose voices get heard. They affect what gets storied in the telling, what gets left out. So, for example, patriarchal dominance privileges masculine discourses, manners, expectations, modes of expression and thought. Such a grand narrative may be operating at the root of, and systemically within a conflict without participants recognizing that its presence. And, depending upon the grand narrative or narratives that are told, dominant discourses may come to clash. For example, a student who considers herself a paying customer/client may feel entitled to demand from the teacher whatever she wants and needs, whereas a teacher who considers herself a master under which the student serves as an apprentice, may think differently about who can demand what of whom. Here, two dominant discourses born of two grand narratives come into conflict on a life-stage, and student and teacher simply strut and fret their short hour upon it--caught up as pawns in a story that is not of their making. Alternative discourses are creative ways of thinking and speaking that give voice to the silenced, that hear what isn’t spoken, that re-position identities in positive ways. These discourses break through the grand narratives, and can result in the construction of a new story that is ultimately more satisfying than just problem solving. Alternative discourses arise not from grand narratives but local story-threads of resistance—not resistance to the other disputant, I should point out, but resistance to the dominant story--a tiny scene or scenario, one might say, where the participants refused to play their parts. From these little stories can come a transformed

situation or relationship--not necessarily one that is completely conflict-free, but one that has a chance to develop along lines of peaceful coexistence.

Winslade and Monk describe their mediation process as having three phases: 1) the engagement where disputants agree to mediation, contract to the process, initially tell their stories and develop trust in the mediator; 2), the deconstruction of the conflict-saturated story where disputants are invited to separate themselves from the problem, to story the oppression of the problem as something outside of themselves, and to name power relations; and 3) the construction of an alternative story where parties uncover unstoried experience, identify alternative accounts, take alternative discursive positions, speak with new shared agency and empowerment, and mutually transform the story to predict a different future (57-93).

My descriptions in this short paper greatly oversimplify both White and Epston's processes and those of Winslade and Monk. However, my ultimate purpose here is not to teach their methods, but rather to play upon their theoretical foundations as on a stage and, by juxtaposing some of their conceptual insights with a knowledge of narrative in performance, consider how the creative, transformative power of playback theatre might take these theories and practices into new and fruitful arenas of learning and healing—for the benefit of all parties.

Playback Theatre: Narrative Performance on a Mobius Band

Of the many forms of narrative performed on stage or in the media (including reality shows, performance art, autoethnography, but with the probable exception of electronic hypertext), playback theatre may be the most self-reflexive—the most

potentially, “deconstructive.” Like a Mobius Band that constructs and deconstructs at the same time, performers of a teller’s story disengage the story from its lived-experience, find its center, dismantle its pre-reflective underpinnings, re-project it in mythology, metaphor, symbol, and reassemble it for presentation on the fly. No one observing a playback theatre performance can fail to recognize the constructedness of narrative, if only to comment on the wonder of it. The story performed is not the story told. And yet, paradoxically, it is the same story. Often, to the teller, the story performed is reportedly, “exactly right,”--never mind that the actors add and delete details, mythologize straightforward events into high levels of abstraction, or physically manifest abstract meanings in concrete visual symbols and stage metaphors never mentioned in the teller’s original story. Narrative is a shape-shifter, a chameleon, never the same, always existing in possibility, always waiting for a performance—be it a teller’s rendering of experience, a spontaneous playback theatre adaptation, or an audience member’s witnessing-performance of both—to bring it into being. The magic of playback theatre depends upon that characteristic of constancy and change.

The aesthetic paradox of stability in mutability—sameness in difference—present in the narrative form creates valuable opportunity for participant trust in a crisis situation—the required elements for conflict transformation work—whether in a mediation or counseling situation. It was that characteristic of playback theatre—that element of personal validation even in the presence of the physical deconstruction of one’s personal story that first suggested to me the potential of playback theatre as a vehicle of conflict transformation. If we can watch our stories—our real-life, personal, true stories--deconstructed and transformed on stage and know them as our own, as real,

as changed but true; we can understand the constructedness of our stories, and with that recognition we can more easily see that our reality is similarly constructed. With that insight, comes motivation to change both the story and the construction of reality.

A second paradox of playback theatre that makes it a particularly apt vehicle for conflict transformation work is the identification/detachment effect that comes from watching oneself portrayed on stage. That effect has been responsible for the deployment of many kinds of role play in conflict transformation work and need not be discussed at length here except to note that it when it occurs in concert with the deconstruction/transformation effect of the playback narrative form, it strengthens its efficacy potential. So, for example, if through the course of a playback transformation performance, we can literally view ourselves as characters manipulated by the conflict—by our conflict-saturated story—we may feel moved enough to want to snatch back our power from that dominant and domineering story and yet, we may feel simultaneously detached enough to begin to posit alternatives—taking a more objective role in creating an alternative story—acceptable to all parties.

A third characteristic of playback theatre that lends itself to narrative conflict transformation work lies not in its formal properties but rather in the culture of the people who founded, practice, and study this type of performance. While not therapy, playback theatre has long been aligned with therapeutic, pedagogic and sociopolitical human endeavors as well as artistic ones, and practitioners often cite humanistic and social objectives to their work as well as aesthetic and financial goals. Indeed, both the mission of the School of Playback Theatre, and the key values espoused by the International

Playback Theatre Network include social change or social values such as community building and diversity as posted on their websites.¹

Tracing the theoretical foundations of narrative theory in relation to conflict transformation and enumerating these characteristics of playback theatre that make it a promising vehicle for furthering this theory and practice comprises the bulk of my research at this time. While I study playback theatre, and teach its theory and practice in several undergraduate and graduate courses, and while I have in the past directed playback troupes, I am not now affiliated with any company, nor am I a conflict mediator or counselor. It will require the cooperative work of practitioners to test my ideas and to see if what I envision is, in fact, viable in the field.

While I cannot at this time set forth procedures without the guidance of an experienced conflict transformation mediator or counselor, therefore, I can nevertheless envision certain instances in which playback theatre might be practically useful within a transformation situation. I offer some suggestions with the understanding that they might be used in various combinations or variations, or that they may simply stimulate ideas for additional exercises and procedures.

Playback Conflict Transformation Processes

I should begin by stating that I would expect these processes will be most successful when the playback theatre director is also knowledgeable in mediation and/or counseling, or vice versa. Nevertheless, when a conflict transformation expert can work closely with a playback group and the playback theatre conductor tag-teams with the mediator or counselor, a similarly successful result could also result.

The most obvious incorporation of playback theatre may occur in response to the initial telling of the disputants' stories. This could be done separately where one participant meets with the company to tell and see his/her story; and then the other meets with the group later. Or it could be done with both disputants present to hear and see both stories. The decision would depend upon the situation and the recommendation of the conflict expert(s). Either way, an effective playback performance of the tellers' individual stories can provide validation for each—laying a foundation of trust in the process and in the participants. At the same time, the performance can signal to the disputants that the narrative is itself an unstable construct--open to multiple understandings and capable of prompting new recognitions on the part of each participant. Since performance of stories often prompts self-reflexive insights from the tellers, it would not be unusual, I suspect, to make important progress in this initial encounter.

Several playback theatre methods could be used in the process of deconstructing the conflict-saturated story. One simple technique, aimed at separating the participants from the conflict, would be to ask the disputant(s) to cast an actor or actors to portray "the conflict." Personified in that fashion, the actor who has picked up cues from the interview on how the conflict had affected the participant(s) lives, will find ways to obstruct their conversations, restrict their actions, disrupt their plans, and otherwise manipulate them so that the participants can see that it is the dominant conflict-story (and only relatedly, the other disputant), that provides much of the oppression they experience. Another approach would be to ask them to tell stories about how the conflict affected the people around them, and then ask them if they wished to see those stories. Watching an

actor called “conflict” torment one’s family and friends could be quite eye-opening. Yet another approach, presented at a time when the participants begin to look for an understanding of how this conflict occurred, would allow performers to play back their individual stories in the form of the dominant grand narratives that underlie the conflict. With the permission of both parties, such grand narratives could promise to be grand indeed, possibly occurring as fairy tales, myths, computer-programming, or lectures about “a woman’s place” and “a man’s job,” as just a few examples and, these “grand” playbacks might provide some welcome “over-the-top” humor along with insights into the nature of “master narratives” that can enslave. Allowing the student-customer in the example cited above to see an exaggerated, silly form of the “education-as-commodity narrative” (as if learning could be sold on Wall Street, auctioned on EBay, or sold as snake oil, perhaps), may allow him to understand why the professor resists him; and conversely, showing the professor a humorous, exaggerated form of the “apprentice narrative” complete with a cruel, Dickensian-type master, perhaps, could bring the two disputants to the recognition that there must be a better, alternative narrative to build on than these two.

Playback techniques could prove helpful in the construction of an alternative narrative as well. Early playback performances may reveal story-threads of “little stories,” that the conductor/conflict expert could point out, and ask the disputants to tell longer stories about. The participants might be urged to recall a time when they refused to play the role that the grand narrative had mapped out for them, to tell that story and to see it replayed. Or, each disputant might be asked to recall a time when they got along when together, and to tell that story with as many details as they can remember—no

matter how brief that encounter was. When the stories are played back, the participants might be asked to respond to what was different—what happened to the actor(s) playing the conflict? What happened to the actors playing the other people in the scene? What kind of story was being created?

After further discussion, the participants might at some point be ready to tell a future story that they predict “might happen” if the alternative, mutually supportive narrative they are co-creating is nourished and allowed to grow. After that story is played back to them, they might be asked to talk about it, and respond to it. Another technique might involve telling a hypothetical story that “could happen” if they fail to sustain the alternative story through their concerted efforts and instead, through lax attention, fall back into the control of the dominant narrative(s) that led to, and sustains the initial conflict. Again, the visual encounter of two potential stories—one of their success and one of their failure could serve as potent reminders of what they want to work toward, and what they want to work to avoid.

These are just some of the ways in which playback theatre can enhance the theories and methods of narrative conflict transformation. These short descriptions center on the telling of stories and the playback of those stories, but certainly the use of other playback theatre forms such as Pairs, Fluid Sculptures, Tableaux, and others are invaluable tools in the process as participants could be asked to share feelings and see them played back after a tense moment, or share conflicted feelings and watch them enacted after the process is complete. Moreover, it is my hope that Playback facilitators and facilitators of narrative conflict transformation will think of other exercises and other techniques as they continue to explore the boundaries of both areas. As expertise in the

use of playback theatre for conflict transformation grows, I suspect that the process can become at once, more formal, and yet more spontaneous, with an arsenal of playback exercises at the service of the facilitators, geared to reveal the grand narratives behind our individual conflict stories, and fashioned to help us build alternative, healthy stories, acceptable to all concerned.

Yet, while it is hoped that playback can be useful in relation to conflict transformation, I would offer a cautionary note that it be employed not as simple role play that can be done by participants of any group therapy session, for example. Playback Theatre is far more than role-play. Its performers are highly skilled in working together to interpret and to provide just what is important and needed in a spontaneous, adaptation performance. The sharpness, the acuity, of that intuition and expression comes from months and years of working together as a group. It would be as much folly to expect mediators not trained in playback to use these techniques effectively as it would be to expect a playback theatre company that has never studied conflict to mediate successfully. Luckily, there is training available in both areas, and the activities are compatible.

Summary, Conclusions, and Future Directions

Contemporary performance theory allows us to see playback theatre in the 21st century avant garde as a Radical performance form characterized by democratized, dialogic performance. Playback is dialogic on three levels: among audience members and performers; in its role reversals among listeners and performers; and in its ability to prompt dialogue among disciplinary areas. In particular, Playback Theatre shows

potential to dialogue with conflict transformation theory and practice to stretch the potentials of each.

While narrative has always played an important role in conflict transformation, recent studies that draw upon poststructural theory show particular promise in going beyond problem solving to address the roots of conflict. Research teams, White and Epston in therapy and Winslade and Monk in mediation, give insights based on Foucault's master narratives and dominant discourses to understanding personal conflicts. They provide procedures for transforming conflict through the deconstruction of conflict stories and the reconstruction of alternative stories—acceptable to all parties.

Playback Theatre provides a unique, visual and embodied method of deconstruction and reconstruction that holds great promise for conflict mediation. Three characteristics that make it especially appropriate include: 1) the paradoxical stability-in-mutability of narrative allowing for personal validation in the face of deconstruction; 2) the identification/detachment effect that comes from watching one's persona performed on stage which allows for motivation to change on one hand and, on the other, the distance required for objective judgment; 3) the humanistic and social objectives of persons who tend to be aligned with playback theatre, resulting in compatible interests of art and community health.

While playback practitioners and conflict experts should choose what techniques will prove most helpful for each circumstance and situation, some applications seem obvious. Playback could be used to validate disputants' stories and build trust; to deconstruct the master narratives by personifying the conflict and observing its effects;

and to construct alternative narratives by identifying unique outcomes and projecting future stories. Both playback stories and short forms could be used in the process.

While this study has discussed numerous ways in which playback theatre could be beneficial in a conflict transformation session, the study has obvious limitations. First, these techniques have not yet been tested in the field. Second, while I can suggest that playback theatre has the potential to go beyond surface problem solving to make changes in the social roots that cause conflict, I can only posit that possibility at this time. Finally, in what is less a limitation of this study than limitation of academic print media, I cannot show you what playback theatre, deployed in these ways, might look like. For something close to what these activities might be like, the reader must attend a playback theatre event, or at least read a transcript of a playback theatre performance.²

Future action-research in the field is an obvious next step for those interested in this area. Additional theoretical studies in poststructural performativity will strengthen the endeavors of those who work for change through art. And, of course, performance practice is an essential research focus for us all—making us aware of what we do, and what we can do, through our art and through our craft.

The dialogic potentials of playback theatre are as rich and diverse as the form itself, and as the diverse practitioners and scholars who are drawn to it. Playback theatre is fun. It teaches without torture; it leads without a leash, it makes the complex, comprehensible, and it does so through story. While playback will survive just fine as an aesthetic performance form, its radical characteristics should not be overlooked or under-deployed in a society that needs all the help it can get. Conflict transformation is

but one arena where playback theatre can go beyond its boundaries to make this world a better place.

¹ “The mission of the School of Playback Theatre, operating in New York and other locations, is to provide comprehensive training in playback theatre to individuals and groups for the purposes of individual empowerment, awareness education, artistic fulfillment, community building, reconciliation, and social change.” <http://www.playbackschool.org/> For Key Values page of the International Playback Theatre Network website, see, <http://www.playbacknet.org/iptn/index.html>

² See Fox, “Appendix,” 217-261.

 WORKS CITED

- Fox, Jonathan. Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala, 1986.
- Kershaw, Baz. The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Park-Fuller, Linda M. "Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism." Text and Performance Quarterly 23 (July 2003): 289-310.
- Schettler, Joel. "Learning by Doing." Training. 39 (4), 38 (5), April 2002: ISSN: 0095-5892, VNU Business Media, http://0-rdsweb1.rdsinc.com.library.lib.asu.edu/texis/rds/suite/+UAel8ZneqxwwwwwwFqz6+W+8h6h_xFqo15nG+v89oFtmFT7mFNfmRFP2zmwwwwwwwwwuFqmFT7ewlnxmwwwwwwwebCm3e3R1wpW_9eIS4pveISBD_eIS4dvewhXtqG5nwGqrelhkw5oDqeIzHmMewzXtq5Gm5inxWeIhkw5oDqeIzHmM/full.html
- White, Michael and David Epston. Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Winslade, John and Gerald Monk. Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.