Gathering Voices
Essays on Playback Theatre

Layers of Meaning: Research and Playback Theatre-A Soulful Construct
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Layers of Meaning

Research and Playback Theatre—A Soulful Construct

Tarquam McKenna

Research traditionally has been viewed as a search for data, something presented externally to be observed and experimented on, with an external locus of control. Playback attends to interiority, the inner world, and the data are the experiences of the audiences and actors. In this sense it is different from experimental research which “tests” ideas. When one is researching into playback theatre there is a need not only to perceive the surface of the memoirs, to watch the performance, but to bear witness to their ‘soul’. Ethnographers faced this problem in seeking to understand the meanings of foreign tribes, but they let the truth reside in an interpretation of meanings. Here we are trying to reach an understanding of other persons, of stories embodied in the external rituals of stage. How can we carry out this research without recourse to the superficial? How can it be revealed to us?

The purpose of this paper is to see to what extent the observational research paradigms of ethnography, analysis of biography, and heuristics can apply or be adapted to playback theatre. It is also to examine to what extent the analysis or construction of theory can relate experiences so immediate and contextually contingent to something which appears to be transcendental, numinous, and essential. My thesis is to argue that playback theatre can be used to construct a sense of purposeful engagement and is a way to develop an 'essential understanding of the self,' by moving beyond a mere 'functional' notion of identity. I hope also to illustrate that there is a relationship between interiority and artistry, and that ultimately playback theatre can be seen as a
soul-making tool. This paper is a yearning for the deep stories, the intangible accounts of understanding, that move beyond the philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic experience to the realm of the numinous. The emergence of a scientistic model of inquiry in arts therapies has enabled a strengthening of the value (validity) of art as a means (instrument) to wholeness (outcomes).

A Return to Soul

This chapter builds on my earlier academic writings in which I have written of the need for research that considered the 'soul'. This call for the return to soul, which I hold is central to the identity of playback theatre, continues in this paper. If many of us have been robbed of our true biography, then playback theatre is a way to remember the dismembering.¹ It brings biography intimacy and soulfulness together. Playback provides us with a way to wholeness and soul must be seen as the seminal notion in the identity of this theatre art form. As Plotinus says, from the soul all things begin. Carl Gustav Carus, the German court physician (1789-1869), wrote that understanding comes when "those wonderful and mysterious processes of the unconscious world of the soul are understood by the conscious mind; if it sees itself supported by the unconscious like a rainbow floating lightly over a dark wall of rain clouds, then the basis of essential understanding is at hand..."²

Playback Theatre has moments when it attends to collectivity, identity, and ritual, using theatre as a way to life-making. The stories in playback are often the soul-journeys towards the "numinous" realm that hold the teller in their truths.

I invite the reader to consider the well-made playback performance as a 'memoir'.³ The actors, musicians, and conductors become a mirror for the
teller, who has a need for the story to be told. The playback performance brings the audience and actors to a place where their 'search for grand narratives' will be enmeshed with personal stories or 'more local, small scale theories' which are 'tales of the field.'

Dismembering
The experience for the teller of the enactment in playback is not only a retelling, but also an occasion of deeper and fuller knowing. It may be that there is a different consciousness 'raising' as a consequence of the art form. Playback theatre is always a ritualistic occasion. In this theatre form a human being attends to his or her self and at times to something greater than the self. In this respect I have written elsewhere of the 'journey' or 'quest'.

Playback theatre can become a metaphorical quest for meaning. In educational, psychotherapeutic, social, and community contexts playback theatre is engaged as a means of collaboration for entering multiple realities, which can include those beyond the habitus of daily life. Playback demands a disciplined approach to artistry, which brings a shaking of our roots, where the action is like a conversation leading to conversion to another way of being, behaving, and gnosis. Playbackers call the occasion of shaking of our roots “deep stories.”

The telling of the story (conversation) is the first stage of awareness, as the story is told to two audiences, the actors and the theatre audience. It is an active telling, not the passive presentation of scientific objects of research. To see our lives mirrored in the re-actions of others is a re-re-presentation, which is both privately and publicly reflexive (for teller and theatre audience respectively). The teller yearns for wholeness (conversion) and the playback form is one unique representation of this call to wholeness. It is in the seeing of the re-enactment that there is a strengthening in the move towards wholeness. The art form of playback theatre for some tellers becomes an occasion for the 'fitting together' of lost pieces. In the following table I have stressed that that which is crucial to playback theatre is a teller's awareness of the audience to whom she feels compelled to tell her story (table 1). As the
teller enters into the telling in a confessional or 'deep storied' manner, then she requires an audience to witness. In witnessing the story, the move towards integration occurs.

The conversation metaphor does not assume that we can only construct the idea of a self in relation to the reactions of other social beings. Playback is a way of revealing beyond mere re-constructing. Conversation also implies intentionality on the part of all participants, and this is one of the things that makes playback theatre so different from empirical research—not just playback's search for meanings, but also the purposeful and shared revelations of meanings.

In the immediacy of the performance teller, actors, and audience are all invited to see their individual and collective lives from a new perspective. Sometimes this conversion brings a total shift, as the self is confronted; other times a softer, gentler transformation occurs, as the self undergoes a subtle metamorphosis. In all instances participants are enticed to a new way of seeing, behaving, and knowing. However, it is the seeing beyond the habitus that interests me as a teacher, researcher, and playback conductor.

Most current contextual research dynamics exclude intimacy as a way of knowing. This is a quality of humanness that is challenging to define. Emotional valencies expressed in artforms are frequently of necessity “bracketed” off for empirical researchers, since these are regarded as mere epiphenomena and intangible. The endeavor to apply some systematic analysis to knowing does occur in research. Analysis is not inappropriate. However I suggest most research is too heavily concerned with logos only, with little attention to eros. Soulfulness is of necessity holistic and perceptually defined. Playback theatre is inconclusive and generative and therefore is doomed to failure when tested by experimental, naturalistic and transformative modes of inquiry as given in table 1. (Experimental research, as mentioned earlier, involves the testing of hypotheses building on axioms of meaning; naturalistic research draws on a natural setting to “hear” the experiences of the researched group; and transformational research aims to not only know meaning through hypotheses and the natural experiences of the researched group, but ultimately to bring change to that community.)
Playback offers occasions to develop multiple meanings, the opening up of wider or new horizons, so different from the scientific “seizing the one correct representation” which fits the theory. Playback is able to move beyond the known horizons to a place where there are other aspects of truth, a holistic place which gives us as tellers and audience other ways of looking at ourselves.

Given this discussion, questions arise which warrant further examination: Are playback theatre practitioners concerned with the potency of the imperceptible world and the inner culture of people? Does playback theatre cosmology embrace a strong correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm? Does it embrace “quality praxis,” including all dimensions of phenomenal reality? In playback theatre is both the macrocosm and microcosm lived out through creative endeavor, thereby enabling the community of audience and actors alike to reflect on a variety of models to interpret their individual and collective 'consciousness' beyond the mundane? Does playback offer a quest for wholeness whilst not precluding social concerns? In playback theatre are we asked to look at areas of life that are complex central institutions of inner-world views alongside the macro-sociological views? Can playback attend to the manner in which we confer meaning that is expressive of the foundations or raison d'être of our inner (micro-sociological) life?

I hold that the playback actor, conductor, and community can be fully occupied with the present focus, and can at the same time, with sensitive performing, acknowledge the ancestral roots of our contemporary practice. The forms in playback theatre fulfil a bonding function that attends to the members of the audience and the actors alike. Actions within the performance can be either reinforcing of accomplishments for teller and audience, or a reframing of “failure,” or parts of life that may still be unknown in the teller's
mind. Playback theatre as a voice can be a place for new beginnings or a reflection on memories of the past.

Playback Theatre as an Emerging Research Method

If we engage in playback theatre and accept the soulful manner of this theatre form, then we can say that this theatre can be a truly unifying experience. I propose that our own models of research with playback and other theatre modes must now begin to reflect an awareness that addresses everything in the performance as a manifestation of an underlying process. The entire web of relationships and processes in the playback space is therefore intrinsically dynamic. Playbackers have ascribed what we believe we are doing in playback. Now we must find a way of showing that this is what we really are undertaking. In this proposed model of inquiry I posit that the Western metaphor of knowledge as a building block be replaced by the network of interrelatedness. One is taken to a place of expanded consciousness where movement, voice, and art interweave. In playback, both the actors and audience are entering into symbolic processes to receive and represent calls to wholeness. In playback theatre shifts in awareness, active involvement, and social reconstruction are all attended to. In this theatre form a community of memories is created where audiences are meeting together, becoming socially interdependent, participating in a ritual of discussion and decision-making, and sharing the practice of playback theatre as a way of defining their history with attention to the past and the future. Two scholars, Jerome Harste and Caroline Burke, have given a template that addresses what they call experimental, naturalistic, and transformative research. Playback theatre could be viewed as a fuller and richer research perspective to these now familiar modes of understanding. The Playback Theatre Model builds a depth that is lacking in the other modes of inquiry prescribed by Harste and Burke.
Playback transcends all three modes of inquiry. It does not have to accommodate them, or “go through” them, but rather offers a fuller way of knowing.

It would not be enough to see playback only as a way to know what researchers call cultural literacy or cultural diversity. Playback moves the audience and actors to places of deeper knowing or ‘gnosis’ that are transcendent to the word or the action. The audience and the teller are taken to a place of union within themselves. This self-fulfillment occurs because the intimate, numinous, and aesthetic come together in this art form.

In the map below, the left column represents the focus of research, the vehicle and intention of research, and the stance of knowledge to which the researcher adheres. Also illustrated are the procedures and paths to understanding embodied in the thinking of the researcher. Listed are the significance, result and presentation form of the research. Finally, the product is defined.

In adding playback theatre as a liberatory art form, the theme of connectivity becomes central. There is a shared responsibility to use theatre to know shared meanings and as such the theatre form is co-creational research. Playback is tentative by nature and the procedures inside the performance bring the actors and audience to a place of integration, where there is some shift in awareness, or transformation.

From table 1 it can be seen that with playback theatre we have an indirect, culturally constituted medium through which this private distress can be viewed or voiced, acknowledged, and potentially transformed, enabling the playback actors to use playback theatre as an art form to re-constitute their worlds and the worlds of their tellers and audiences. An intrapsychic reconstitution or transformation occurs for the teller and the audience through deepening the level of accessibility to unconscious materials transcending the
ordinary sense of self. I have engaged Jo Salas’s notion of “entrancement” to consider one outcome of playback as a research instrument. Western consciousness is too heavily centered on a rationalizing, abstracting, and controlling ego. Frequently the individual no longer has the ability to perceive other realities. Here playback theatre is being used as ‘gestures of soul’. These gestures of soul are the call to emotional literacy and beyond to moments where there is a sense of ultimacy and consequently soulful literacy.

The path to understanding for the individual is both a private (intra-reflexive) and public (inter-reflexive) process. Indigenous cultures have always had a special, codified, and ritualized awareness of the Self, the archetype of wholeness and the regulating center of the personality that transcends the ego. Transcendence in the playback theatre performance results in a ‘communion’ or a quality of mutual relatedness based on a co-created relationship through aesthetically rich theatre.

The broad concerns and limitations of research in theatre and drama have been noted above. Table 1 indicates how playback theatre builds on the model of artistry alluded to earlier. I now want to propose that playback theatre is in itself a reliable research instrument if we use the lens of heuristics and ethnography to explore its inner validity. Playback theatre allows for the emergence of relevant concepts discovered during the course of conducting performances and additionally enables observation of a wide range of phenomena. It could be seen as a research instrument that is generative and allows innumerable relationships to be explored.

Playback Theatre as a Journey into Entrancement and Communion

The metaphor of the journey is affirmed in Harste and Burke’s paradigm for transformative research. In playback theatre the journey and the descriptions of the journey through enactment are always seen as partial truths, since the
mode of communication used is always incomplete, as culture itself is incomplete. We are reminded that culture itself is not precisely boundaried and continually evolves. In this sense playback theatre replicates the metaphors and symbols of a culture. The teller, conductor, and company of actors recreate an incomplete, imprecisely boundaried picture, and the playback performance is a reflection, or mirror, of the teller’s field of inquiry. In the telling and re-telling of the story a continual transformation occurs. It is as close as we can get to recreation of the world of the teller with attention to his or her interiority. This seems to be the goal of playback theatre.

Playback Theatre as a Journey into Soulful and Emotional Literacy

The emphasis of research within the field of playback theatre must be a multi-modal construction of the “nature of reality,” attending to an “intimate relationship” between the teller, conductor, and the audience community. This method will seek to bring the teller’s phenomenological experiences to the occasion of playback theatre so that these experiences will become a performance, which is an emic or insider’s view of consciousness. The teller’s intimacies are seen within the performance. The intimacy of performance will lead to an understanding of the inner world of the teller. Strong playback theatre pays a great deal of attention to the art making and the rituals that support the audience and actors in their emerging views of narrative and consciousness.

The conductor is variously a listener and a filter of the teller’s meanings that the actors translate into performance. The manner of hearing which the conductor embodies is not unlike a priest or therapist. The confessional quality of conversation might be similar, but this must always be without moralistic judgement. Tellers are always in charge of their telling. The conductor hears the tale and thereby invites the first disclosure of the
meaning that the teller has. In speaking of the conductor as therapist, there is an assumption that may need clarification. The conductor is *like* a therapist, but unlike the therapist does not have a goal of healing. The conductor and the teller are both in an ambiguous space of hearing and reframing the tale. This does not assume the conductor ‘knows’ the story (or a pathology) of the teller. In this respect, there is less therapist and more witness, as the conductor is mediating between both the teller and actors alike. The word “conduit” has been employed in Perth as a way of describing the conductor’s role. The conduit notion implies that the task of the conductor is to mediate in order to create a flow of rich, unimpeded, and smooth meaning.\textsuperscript{15}

Playback Theatre as an Artful Reflexive Methodology

Playback Theatre provides us with a framework, a reflexive methodology, which demands that the narratives and the performance be seen not only as spoken, but moved texts. It is clear that the nature of well-made playback theatre demands that tellers be in charge of their stories. They rite their way into consciousness by telling and retelling their tales of the field. The actors and conductors are the colors from which the teller creates the richest picture. Tellers write their autobiography with attention to the silences, shapes, and aesthetics of who they are.

Playback Theatre as a Journey Acknowledging Connectivity

Playback as a way to autobiography affirms the importance of spontaneity, intuition, and creativity. The strength of autobiography is becoming more apparent as researchers employ this mode of inquiry more frequently. Louise Smith writes of biographical methods. Reflecting on her own experiences in qualitative research, she suggests that the autobiography became “the most
important experience in my life,” a “turning point.” She considers that autobiography is one of the most rapidly developing and, recently, one of the most controversial forms of research. “Autobiography suggests the power of agency in social and literary affairs... It usually, but not always, eulogizes the subjective, the important part of human existence, over the objective.” 16 This is another essential reason to include autobiography as a way of recollecting within the framework of playback theatre. Playback theatre is by its very nature autobiographical. It is writing your own and often a new story with the attention of the audience. The audience serves as witness to what the teller is becoming in a profoundly intimate manner.

Playback theatre closely correlates with heuristics, as it demands the indwelling of questions so that answers arise spontaneously and creatively. The emphasis on self-disclosure requires an immersion that is self-searching. The acquisition of personal and public information is created and adds to what is known in the researcher’s mind. In playback theatre the narrator or teller is always in the teller's chair to spontaneously witness the intuitive and creative interplay. The realization phase in the action itself is the synthesis which brings a fuller dimension of understanding to audience and teller.17 The teller in this instance may have her epiphany at the moment of performance, or after the event. The ultimate purpose of the performance is to cast light on a focused problem or theme by living through a series of questions internally. It is the teller's task to address sources of being and non-being as the stories are witnessed in their playback. It is the actors’ task to perform from hunches, ideas, and essences as they emerge.

The quality of decisions that will be made in the playback theatre performance is constituted by ambiguity, excitement, and agony and requires the development of a metacognition which is not built only on factual weight or the theoretical places being created, but rather brings a narrative strength based
on rhetorical devices, convincing the audience that this is another person’s way of being. Playback theatre brings the community of witnesses mentioned above to a place where the performance is seen as being totally alive. This aliveness may be a reflection on the past or a moment of insight about the future. Playback theatre requires that the actor and audience as participant observers undergo a ‘living through’ of the concern of the hosting culture (the teller) created inside the performance contract.

We are obliged to consider the art works created in playback theatre as reflections of a rich culture and the journeys of our tellers as ways into relationship with multiple layers of reality for the community of witnesses. I hope I have encouraged playback theatre practitioners to move beyond the postmodern critiques of ‘documentary’ through this praxis, to move beyond a mere development of a ‘sociology of life’ or the slice of life approach, and thereby consider playback theatre as a means of developing a series of expressions of artistic and soulful engagements.

The quality of relatedness that I have alluded to in this essay requires that we move to a place where we can inquire of playback theatre with attention to the depth of interiority, where imagination, mystery, art, poetry, music, and intuition are equally valued. The attention to the deep stories is unique to our research and critiquing of playback theatre. Deep stories are unique to the art form of playback theatre and are central to its identity. The recognizing of the aesthetic realm which "analyzes" truths or "comprehends" from gesture and tone is more holistic than a mere scientific propositional mode of knowing. Playback theatre is a soulful place where there is a yearning for transcendence alongside a sense of reverence for the mysteries of the performance and the process of art-making.

Let us not forget the call to soul as unsuspecting realities and unknown worlds open up before us through this art.
References


____. "Drama Research Must Have Soul." *National Association for Drama in Education* 18, No. 2 (1994).


Table 1
A Place for Playback as a Research Instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Perspective</th>
<th>Experimental</th>
<th>Naturalistic</th>
<th>Transformative</th>
<th>Playback Theatre</th>
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<td>Prediction</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Connectivity</td>
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<td>Interrogate Assumptions &amp; Beliefs</td>
<td>Breaking Silences to Know our Truths</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Presentational Form</td>
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<td>Invitation</td>
<td>Aesthetic Theatre</td>
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Notes

1 See Hillman, *The Soul's Code*.
4 The field is the turf from which the tales grow for the playback performance. The stories of the tellers within the playback theatre performance might fall into major styles—realistic performance, confessional performance, and impressionistic performance tales (after the work of Van Maanen). See also Y.S. Lincoln, “Notes toward a fifth generation evaluation: Lessons from the voiceless, or Toward a post modern politics of evaluation,” in Denzin & Lincoln, *Handbook*.
5 T. McKenna, “Transformational Research and Drama Education,” in Michaels, *Educational Drama*.
6 I believe Durkheim said this of spiritual experiences. Ritual and theatre have a social role in that they bring focus to our needs to express ideas—both profane and sacred.
7 As a teacher in drama in special education (1981-85), I worked with people who were severely stressed. After relaxation “training,” a principal asked if perhaps I could measure the eyelid flutters or skin galvanic response to validate how relaxed the person was. I knew from my relationship with the student, developed over three years, that there were shifts in his quality of being. Defining these intangibles was my dilemma.
8 Conference Notes from John Carroll. See also “Literacy as Curricular Conversations about Knowledge, Inquiry, and Morality,” in Ruddell, Ruddell & Singer, *Theoretical Models of Process in Reading*, 1233.
9 I would like to suggest that this is an area for further research. The question is to be addressed in another paper in which I would ask the question “What does a playback actor do with the self as he or she performs?” Alternatively we might ask how “open” can you be to become a community of actors that is the palette from which the teller and conductor paint the picture?
10 See chapter one.
11 See Carroll, *Video Lives*.
14 Grainger's text, *The Glass Of Heaven*, looks at the use of dramatherapy and seems to give a full examination of the qualities of hearing that the priest and therapist both engage in.
15 Jonathan Fox explained the conductor role in these terms when he first came to Perth. See his *Acts of Service*, 121.
18 After the work of Harste & Burke (from Conference Notes given by John Carroll).