



Why do tellers tell?

By Di Adderley

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**Essay written for the School of Playback Theatre
Leadership course
July 2004**

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Why do tellers tell?

Prologue

At the International Playback Theatre Conference in Fremantle some years ago, I sat between my father and stepmother at a public performance conducted by Deborah Pearson. It was their first experience of playback and I so wanted them to love it, as I do. I had first seen playback and met Deborah in 1990, on my first visit to my family since they emigrated from the UK and, in the intervening years, playback had become a major part of my life. I wanted them to understand, to meet my friends, to approve, I suppose, of this new direction I had taken.

But it was not to be. As the performance progressed, I could feel my stepmother growing more rigid and straight-backed by the minute. “Why on earth do people want to tell such personal stories in front of all those strangers!” was her response afterwards. She was angry and upset, seeing the teller’s free choice of this kind of “public exposure” as incomprehensible. I don’t really know what my Dad felt. On his own, he would, I think, have expressed interest (he has a strong connection to theatre), would probably not have told a story, but would have been accepting of others’ interest in the form. But in this situation he was embarrassed by my stepmother’s vehement disapproval, and, caught between the two of us, felt he had to support her. He muttered non-committal smoothing-over noises as we drove away, saying the performance “was not our cup of tea, that’s all”. I tried to be accepting of her/their view but inside I felt disappointed and hurt. Why, oh why, did it have to be *my* family who didn’t get it?

I am reminded of this story as I set out to write about why tellers tell, because my usual experience in playback is that tellers (and the audience witnesses) gain an enormous amount from telling. What impels someone to speak from the audience or to rise from their seat and cross the space to the teller’s chair to recount their experience?

Introduction

Numerous books have been written about the way human beings use story-making as a means to structure the jumbled continuum of life into bite-sized manageable chunks.

People tell myths and tales as a way of making sense of their world. ...
The listeners and the storyteller participate in an experience which connects them to their family, tribe and nation, through past and present, towards the future.

(Gersie & King 1999 p.23)

Our drive to understand the meaning of our existence has been explored from time immemorial by artists, philosophers, scientists and indeed every individual who reflects on the nature of life.

Heather Robb, director of Théâtre de l'Improvisiste, quotes one of the organisers of a performance for refugees in France:

I was particularly impressed by the fact that you managed to get the refugees to speak ... I think several elements made this miracle possible. First, the friendly way in which your 'compere' approached them ... Then the quality of the silent improvisation ... allowed the expression of the teller to be reproduced rather than simply turned into a 'performance piece'. And finally ... the respect you showed in the search for criticism or corrections.

(Dr Jean Doubovetzky quoted in Robb, Interplay April 2002)

Here, the relationship between conductor and teller, the accuracy and artistry of the enactment and the respect shown in wanting to be sufficiently accurate for the teller's needs are cited as what persuaded tellers to tell.

I am going to explore three areas, all of which I consider are of crucial importance in enabling tellers to tell.

- The ritual aspects of playback, which provide a containing, holding framework for the stories;
- The underlying values and attitudes of the playback practitioners which provide a safe-enough space for tellers to take risks;
- The human need for recognition and validation of our existence by our fellow travellers.

Ritual and containment in playback theatre

In his article 'The therapeutics of the audience', John Casson, psychodramatist and dramatherapist, says:

The first theatre audiences who attended shamanic ceremonies, Greek tragedies, mystery plays and dramatic rituals did so for more than entertainment: these theatres were for healing purposes, for spiritual uplift, fertility, catharsis and community benefit. Entertainment was important but these events also contained symbolic processes that spoke to deeper aspects of the individual and collective consciousness of the audience with the intent of providing relief from psychological and social tensions.

(Casson in Jennings 1997, p.43)

In *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*, Thomas Scheff refers to ritual and myth as "dramatic forms for coping with universal emotional distresses" (p.108). He recognises that ritual "is necessarily a complex event, serving many functions" (p.121) but his particular focus is on the emotional needs which ritual serves.

The formula for successful ritual, I argue, is the same as that for successful drama: the social form must reawaken collectively held distress which is unresolved in everyday life. The reawakening must occur in a context which is sufficiently safe so that the distress is not experienced as overwhelming.

(Scheff 1979, p.12)

Scheff's hypothesis is that, particularly in the Western world, we are subjected to numerous 'socialising' experiences through childhood which teach us to suppress normal emotional responses (such as crying, anger, rage). This repeated process results in the body holding on to quantities of undischarged emotional and physical tension. The *organismic* (or real, central, healthy) self, to use a term from person-centred counselling, is impelled to seek ways of dispelling these tensions in ways which do not too directly confront the individual with their own particular troubles. Ritual and drama are ways of safely doing this:

...collective discharge in a social setting, such as theatre or ritual, has powerful social as well as psychological effects. The feelings of relief from tension, increased clarity of thought and perception, and heightened fellow-feeling which follow collective catharsis give rise to extremely powerful forces of cohesion and group solidarity.

(*op.cit.* p.51)

When we cry over the fate of Romeo and Juliet, we are reliving our own personal experiences of overwhelming loss, but under new and less severe conditions. The experience of vicarious loss, in a properly designed drama, is sufficiently distressful to awaken the old distress. It is also sufficiently vicarious, however, so that the emotion does not feel overwhelming.

(*op.cit.* p.12)

Scheff refers particularly to the importance of ‘aesthetic distance’:

At aesthetic distance, the members of the audience become emotionally involved in the drama, but not to the point where they forget that they are also observers. Aesthetic distance may be defined as the simultaneous and equal experience of being both participant and observer. Part of the person’s attention is in the past, absorbed in reliving a distressful experience that has been re-stimulated by the present context; however, part of the person’s attention is also in the present, realizing that there is no real threat.

(*op.cit.* p.57)

This would seem to accurately reflect the position of both a playback teller recounting what practitioners refer to as a ‘deep’ story, and of the audience witnesses. One of the most important ways playback creates ‘aesthetic distance’ is by having an actor playing the teller, who therefore is observing her/himself, as in a mirror. The subject becomes object. The teller is in role as playwright/creator watching (observer) the performance of his own creation (participant). The audience is simultaneously watching (observer) and connecting to their own experiences through the teller’s story (participant).

Dramatic distance allows the person, whether as actor or as spectator, a passage back and forth between ... the subjective and the objective ... real time and imaginary time, from existential reality to dramatic reality.

(Meldrum in Jennings *et al* 1994, p. 15)

Jonathan Fox is less insistent than Scheff on the necessity of reaching catharsis for the playback ritual to be effective in releasing social and psychological tensions. In *Acts of Service*, he reminds us of the ‘variability’ of catharsis in improvisation – sometimes it comes and sometimes it doesn’t. He also quotes Peter Brook from *The Empty Space* about the moment when “both sides – actors and audience - relax to the point where judgment and defenses melt into shared experience”. Fox calls this “the catharsis which heals society” (Fox 1986 p.152)]

Robert Landy, adapting Scheff’s ideas on distance to provide core concepts on over-distance, under-distance and aesthetic distance for dramatherapists, phrases his definition as follows:

Aesthetic distance ... is notable for balance of affect and cognition, wherein both feeling and reflection are available.

(Landy 1993, p.25)

This seems to me to be a better fit with Fox's advocacy of "a theatre that neither promotes feelings without mind, nor mind without feelings" (Fox 1986 p.151).

'Deep' stories are frequently concerned with the major themes of the human life journey: rites of passage of the life cycle, such as birth, initiations, marriage, death, the ongoing spiritual quest – the very stuff of ritual. Any story told which concerns these themes is highly likely to trigger connections for all present, as they are events we will all relate to in our own particular contexts.

Rituals are usually led by a central figure – a shaman, priest, em-cee. This role has many sub-roles and functions, which might include:

- to lead the individuals who attend in a process of group formation;
- to invoke the necessary spirits for a successful outcome to the ritual;
- to be expert in the forms and rites of the particular ritual;
- to be a staunch guide and companion throughout the journey which the participants will travel;
- to interpret for the group the signs and symbols which emerge during the ritual;
- to bring the ritual to a satisfactory conclusion.

The conductor in playback is just such a figure, and is, I believe, a crucial factor in why tellers tell. I will write more fully about the relationship between the conductor and audience in the next section.

We might also think of rituals as particular sequences of actions or events which are endowed with meaning by the specific content of the here-and-now moment being enacted. Through repetition, they create security by developing a sense in the audience of having a 'map' to guide them in what is potentially unstructured or chaotic time and space. For example, the stories themselves, like sacred vessels, have a particular ritualistic journey to travel. Each one is:

- Invoked or conjured up by the conductor
- Volunteered by a teller to the conductor and the group
- Passed on to the actors by the conductor (in the moment of speaking the key phrase 'Let's Watch')

- Enacted by the actors and musician;
- Re-presented back to the teller (through the final gaze of the actors back to the teller when the enactment finishes);
- Given a final ‘health check’ by the conductor; what was it like for the teller to watch their story? Did we get it ‘right’ for them?
- Recalled by the conductor in the summing up of themes

Rituals frequently take place in particular physical spaces. No matter where we perform playback, we create our own ‘sacred space’ by the very particular arrangement of stage and audience. In the stage space will be enacted the stories. The audience have their own space at a safe distance (neither under- nor over-distanced), knowing the action will remain ‘in its place’ and will not chaotically overwhelm them. The conductor and teller have their own special place, between the audience and the actors’ space.

Sometimes in theatre these strong spatial boundaries are deliberately breached, but this is the exception, not the rule. I’m recalling many pantomimes I’ve seen where there is a chase sequence around and through the audience space. The characters involved are frequently comedy characters, which diminishes the potential threat of such an invasion. There is usually quite a ‘buzz’ of nervous laughter around the audience as the actors chase up the aisles and along the rows of seats, and a collective sigh of relief as the actors return to the stage.

In playback, I have seen such a breaching of the boundaries on occasions and have usually not found it helpful. However, I do remember one occasion when just such a rupture of the ritual seemed to work. The story was about the teller’s experience of being bullied as a child, of feeling paralysed and no-one coming to the rescue. The teller had spoken of the ‘stuck’ nature of the situation with both bully and victim unable to change the dynamics. The teller spoke of his adult recognition that what the child needed to have happen was for someone from outside, an advocate or rescuer, to come into the situation and protect him. In the enactment, the actors themselves got stuck in the repetitive cycle and were not finding an end. The musician suddenly stood up, called out “Stop!”, marched onto the stage and proceeded to take the ‘bully’ to task. It was a completely unexpected intervention; for a moment I think we all forgot to breathe. Then the teller clapped his hands with laughter and delight and the audience broke into spontaneous applause. At the time it was a shock, but also a great relief that something had happened to move the action on. Of course, it could have been done in other ways. The actors could simply have stopped – this is how it was in life for the teller. The musician could perhaps have found a musical way to change things. It might have been better to leave it to the conductor to offer an alternative ending. But the musician made the choice she made, and the teller and witnesses responded positively to it. The actors’ space was entered by the musician but the audience boundary was not breached. It was perhaps more shocking to the performers than to the audience, especially since we knew that this particular musician had previously had no interest in taking on an acting role.

The shape of the overall performance, of each individual story within a performance, of each enactment (whether fluid sculpt, pair, scene or one of the myriad newer forms that playback companies around the world have created) all serve to structure and boundary potentially chaotic time. Within a very few minutes of beginning, the audience have a sense of how long a short-form enactment will be and the rituals the conductor will take them through. The repetition of Invitation – Telling – Enactment – Acknowledgement and the key phrase of transition ‘Let’s Watch’ creates expectation that no matter what specific story emerges, the fundamental chord sequence (to use a jazz simile) will remain constant; the story will be contained within it.

Structure reduces anxiety by providing a boundaried container. Creative structures, to be therapeutic, must be neither rigid nor empty, but provide a supportive, stimulating space for free play ...

(Casson 2004, p.243)

In the times when a story appears to break through these bounds – perhaps times when a teller or other audience members are particularly triggered into their own pain, the conductor has ways to manage this, to hold it and, again, contain it. The pain does not overwhelm the ability of the performers and the form to keep it within bounds. A lengthier than usual sharing after a scene, a short-form to capture some of the feelings, some music to express the unspeakable, a further story on the same subject are some of the options available to the conductor to maintain the container’s integrity.

If we reduce anxiety through creative structure, we offer the conditions which may enable tellers to courageously step out. Even if they are not aware of the structure of their story, we are engendering the belief that the conductor will be able to help them find a beginning, middle and end – some sense, and meaning – to their story, this particular portion of their life.

Underlying values, beliefs and attitudes in playback theatre – the ‘contract’ we offer

In a therapy context, a therapist will deliberately, overtly, consciously establish a ‘contract’ with a client or therapy group. This will include such factors as how we are going to be with each other, the time boundaries, the cost, what the client wants to achieve, the right to say no, the boundaries of confidentiality, individual roles and responsibilities, methodologies of work etc. This is necessary in order to make the therapy session a safe-enough place for the client to take the risks required in the process of change. Variations must either be mutually negotiated (such as agreeing with a group an extra 10 minutes for sharing) or individuals must be prepared to deal with the consequences of an ‘unlicensed’ breach.

A theatre contract, as well as all the details of date, time, place and cost, will most often include a (covert) understanding that the audience will, by and large, be in a relatively silent observer role, will ‘stay in its place’ and applaud at the end. Direct participation in terms of active physical or verbal intervention is rarely sanctioned in conventional scripted theatre. And, of course, there are exceptions. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed immediately springs to mind, with its emphasis on the ‘spectactors’ trying out ways of changing the oppression they have witnessed.

The contract for a ritual, or a heightened dramatic event, such as playback, is different again:

Host organisations need to be clear that playback creates a ritual that will stir feelings and respond to problems only indirectly; that everyone present will have an equal voice; and that there is a great potential for creative breakthroughs in these rituals.

(Fox in Fox & Dauber, eds. 1999, p.125)

The planning discussions that take place before a playback performance establish the organisational contract. I would seek to establish both the nuts and bolts and to convey something of what might or might not be expected of an event of this nature. The creation of the direct, face-to-face contract with the audience happens throughout the performance, particularly in the early moments of the encounter. The ‘contract’ I need to establish here is a way of being with each other for the duration of the event in order to make this a place where tellers will be willing to reveal themselves to the rest of the group. As I see it, I offer this contract through how I behave towards the audience, not by verbally discussing it, but by modelling. And what I offer is based on my values, beliefs and attitudes towards other people and towards the work I am doing.

So what is it that I believe in and offer every time I step out as a playback practitioner?

Firstly, I want to wholeheartedly express my concurrence in the four “key concepts” Jonathan Fox advocates for the work in *Acts of Service*:

- spontaneity - “that flow of sensory information, evaluation, and action that fuels our ability to adapt with creativity to a constantly changing environment” (p.211)
- theatre – “It involves enchantment, live communal encounter, atmosphere. It involves story, role-taking, performance. It values improvisation and the flexibility to make drama out of the most here-and-now concerns” (p.211-2)
- service – “a citizen actor, who performs as needed by the community, then melts back into the social fabric ... Service without security, without fanfare, without adulation” (p. 214) (though I do hope to earn at least some proportion of my living here!)
- grace – “There is something in the concept of grace that does not seek for perfection so much as finds the perfect in what is. ... this is what art does: describe the most difficult truths in a way that we can bear to remember because the rendition is beautiful.” (pp. 214/216)

Insofar as modern society does *not* cotton to improvisational modes and drama events, these concepts ... also take on the force of ideals, which I propound for the improvement of society and the safety of the world.

(*op. cit.* p.212-3)

Going hand in hand with these for me are the core conditions from person-centred counselling theory, as the fundamental building blocks of effective, assertive, interpersonal communication:

The creation of a growth-producing climate in a therapeutic relationship requires that the counsellor can:

1. be genuine or congruent
2. offer unconditional positive regard and total acceptance
3. feel and communicate a deep empathic understanding

(Mearns & Thorne, 1988, p.15)

Particularly in role as conductor, I aim:

- to be fully myself within the appropriate boundaries of the role;
- to be welcoming and open to all the stories which emerge;
- to be connected, to have a communicable empathic relationship with the audience and each particular teller.

At a recent performance for a conference on bereavement, I effectively ‘doubled’ the audience, using my empathic understanding of what was happening to enable the group

to move on. One of the workshops at the conference had been on the subject of working with asylum seekers and refugees. The stories told had strongly affected the participants, one of whom told of her experience during the playback performance. After a very powerful and sensitive enactment, the audience were silent, many in tears. I invited the musician to play, which she did, beautifully. Afterwards they were still unable to respond to my asking them to say what was happening for them. They were literally struck dumb by what they had heard and seen. My sense of the collective feeling was that to say anything would be to trivialise the vastness of the suffering they had been hearing and witnessing. It would be disrespectful, almost sacrilegious, it felt, to move on to another scene. I reflected these feelings back to the group who seemed to collectively be released from their trance and begin to breathe again. We were able to enact the feelings in short forms and move on to the next scene, which moved the red thread forward by looking at the teller's experience of working with loss in the transgender community.

There are three ways we communicate: with our words, the way in which we say our words, and all the many aspects of our non-verbal communication. Research has shown that by far the largest portion (over 90%) of interpersonal communication is carried by the largely unconscious modes – tone of voice and body language. By and large, only our words are to any major extent subject to conscious control – and even then we're always improvising and things sometimes 'come out all wrong'. My tone of voice and body language will almost always 'leak' something of my real internal thoughts and feelings if there is a discrepancy between what is coming out of my mouth and my inner truth.

So if I say "I understand" when I don't, the teller will, on some level know and distrust me. If I posit acceptance in my words, while inside I am making critical judgements, on some level the teller will know and sense my criticism. If I am 'trying' to be friendly while internally I am feeling scared, upset, hostile, on some level the teller will question my authenticity. And this will, of course, reflect on how much he or she (and, by extension, the whole audience) will be willing to tell.

In order to embody my belief in the key concepts with an ability to communicate from a basis of the core conditions, as conductor I must warm-up myself up to:

- a playful and appropriate spirit of warmth, of lovingness, towards the audience;
- my commitment to, belief in and advocacy for the healthful nature of playback theatre;
- my enjoyment of myself and my colleagues as performers and willingness to communicate from my own performer role;
- a wholehearted willingness to listen respectfully and to reflect my understanding;
- a willingness to hold the joy and the pain, and not to run away;
- a spirit of exploration, creative risk-taking, and appreciation of the beauty of the stories.

It is the true, authentic communication of these things, largely non-verbal, which builds the rapport and confidence between conductor, actors and audience. We are saying to the audience “I want to make this space both exciting and sufficiently safe for you to risk the creative challenge I offer you – to step out and tell your story.” If I can do this well enough, and if there is enough willingness and warmth in the audience (for this is a co-created venture) our ship will sail well. In Heather Robb’s performance quoted earlier, the ‘friendliness’ of the ‘compere’ was particularly noted as contributing towards the ‘miracle’ of enabling people who were full of anxiety and shyness to speak out in a public gathering of strangers.

And there are times when I fail dismally at this monumental task. Recently we performed for a group of teenagers and their parents in an impoverished area of the north of England, where I was unable to warm myself up to these qualities. There had been many problems in setting up the performance and internally I knew it would be very difficult. If I’m honest, I only accepted the commission because it was for the sister of a company member and I would have found it hard to justify turning it down. Yet I knew it was not ‘right’ for us. For various, perfectly valid, reasons the organiser had brought together two groups of people – teenagers and their parents – who were unlikely to be willing to tell much of their stories in front of each other. The parents were, to some extent, obliged to be there and largely sat at the back, stony-faced. The teenagers were silent, embarrassed or showing-off to each other. And I didn’t like them. From the moment they ‘invaded’ (that was how it felt) the school hall we were performing in, I wanted to go home. Of course, I tried to ‘find’ my ‘good conductor’ self, but I know in my heart I failed. My belief is they saw through me and this was a factor in the superficial nature of the stories and the performance.

Finally, in this section on values, beliefs and attitudes, the performers’ introductions of themselves model a willingness to share, as well as illustrating that the stories we seek may be placed anywhere on the continuum from the everyday details of life to the major events. I believe we are also modelling an attitude towards public story-telling which is about being willing to put deep stories out there, for people to make of what they will, without having to have a confidentiality agreement, so beloved nowadays by all kinds of professional healers. Modelling trusting each other, as neighbours, not strangers, in fact.

The human need to be recognised

... I think the most important step is from the audience to the teller's chair. And the teller or the potential teller has to do that alone, just for himself. He has to do this very hard work, somehow, to go to the chair, to stand up for his story.

(Sperling in Fox & Dauber, 1999, p.152)

The third of my triumvirate of key factors in why tellers tell is the human need to be seen, recognised, validated in our very existence, understood in our most painful, shameful places, loved, noticed (if not for our strengths then for our weaknesses). If playback practitioners can create a sufficiently safe space, a sufficiently powerful and containing ritual, then tellers will emerge, out of their own need to be visible and audible in the world.

I recall a psychodrama workshop years ago with Francis Batten, where a participant was playing the psychological game of saying "Oh please don't look at me". Francis took her literally at her word, and instructed the group to all turn their backs to her. He then asked if this was what she wanted. It was not.

As children, if we do not manage to persuade others to love us, notice us, care for us, touch and cuddle us sufficiently we will die. Or at least, fail to thrive to a greater or lesser extent. The world is full of such grown-up children who crave recognition and touching, yet fear that the world's gaze will be unbearably critical and shaming. So we are caught in a dilemma. Long before 'To be or not to be' comes 'To be seen or to be invisible'.

In the theory of personality known as Transactional Analysis (TA), the term *recognition hunger* is used to describe our need for this kind of acknowledgement by others. A *stroke* (so named by Eric Berne, TA's originator, after the child's need for physical contact) is a unit of recognition or acknowledgement of our existence, and can be verbal or non-verbal, positive or negative, conditional or unconditional. In the absence of positive strokes, we will seek out negative ones – any stroke is better than no stroke at all. We must, after all, be seen. If no-one else sees me, do I even exist?

As an example, my neighbour and I may have a simple encounter: "Isn't it a beautiful day!" "It certainly is." In TA parlance we have had an *exchange of strokes*, in this case positive, verbal and non-verbal.

However Claude Steiner suggests that a *stroke economy* exists, perpetrated by parents as a way of controlling children. The rules of the stroke economy are:

Don't give strokes when you have them to give.

Don't ask for strokes when you need them.

Don't accept strokes if you want them.

Don't reject strokes when you don't want them.

Don't give yourself strokes.

(Steiner in Stewart & Joines 1987, p.78)

Knowing that strokes are essential, children soon learn to get them by performing in the ways their parents demand. As adults we continue, unconsciously, to obey the five rules. "As a result we spend our lives in a state of partial stroke-deprivation." (*op. cit.* p.78)

Steiner sees the stroke economy as the basis of commercial and political oppression, suggesting that we are readily manipulated and oppressed by agencies, such as governments, corporations, advertisers, entertainers and even therapists, who set themselves up "in the role of stroke monopolists" (*op. cit.* p.78).

To re-claim our awareness, spontaneity and intimacy, ... we need to reject the restrictive 'basic training' our parents imposed on us regarding stroke exchange. Instead, we can be aware that strokes are available in limitless supply. We can give a stroke whenever we want. No matter how many we give, they will never run out. When we want a stroke, we can freely ask for it and we can take it when it is offered. If we don't like a stroke we are offered, we can reject it openly. And we can enjoy giving ourselves strokes.

(*op. cit.* p.78)

This is what I teach in my assertiveness workshops!

To return to playback, we offer multiple positive, verbal and non-verbal, conditional (we love you if you tell) and unconditional (it's also OK not to tell) strokes to our stroke-deprived audiences. We are pleased to see them, delighted they have taken the trouble to come to the performance. We listen to them and invite them to listen to each other. We put our spontaneity and creativity at their service and invite them to spontaneously and creatively join us in the enterprise. We clearly say we need you, we cannot do this without you and our whole endeavour is for you, for your community, our community, this world we share and which is so marvellous and so troubled. The 'stars' of a playback theatre event are as much, if not more, the tellers than the actors. Afterwards we hear audience members going up to the tellers and thanking them for their stories. More marvellous, positive stroking!

In my sociodrama training with Francis Batten, he talked of the *disturbing motive*, which impels us forward into creating and developing new roles within ourselves, taking creative risks in our lives, and the *reactive fear*, the opposing force, which we allow to prevent us from moving forward. These two forces are like an ever-moving see-saw, with the two ends vying to be on top.

A very powerful factor in tipping the balance towards the disturbing motive, and getting a teller out to the teller's chair, must surely be witnessing the previous teller's experience of telling. Part of the fascination for the audience is in watching the teller's response as the enactment is taking place.

What is happening in a playback performance? ... First, *someone is talking and other people are listening*. Does it matter who talks? Who tells? It is my contention that it matters *very much*, because the chance to tell one's story is part of what a playback theatre performance has to offer. ... many people ... live without the sense of a hearth, a campfire, a meeting house or communal space within which individual stories can be told and heard ... We are denied the chance to experience individual and group catharsis, that crisis of pity and fear.

(Day in Fox & Dauber 1999 p.84)

If in playback we can tip the balance in favour of the disturbing motive, then tellers will emerge of their own volition, in the search for strokes. If we fail to do so, then reactive fear will rise to the top, and we will struggle to get tellers. Most of the time, in my experience, we manage this balancing act superbly. Rather than having too few stories, there are so often too many tellers to fit into the allotted time.

Epilogue

Of course, this is a very limited look at what enables tellers to tell. There are numerous other factors involved, both individual and collective. But to me these three are the key ones we, as playback practitioners, can influence.

And there are the times it doesn't work. Implicit in any discussion of what does enable tellers to tell is the counter discussion: what might discourage tellers from telling. To end, I'd like to look briefly at some of the individual and collective factors which, I believe contributed to my stepmother's strong negative reaction to the performance she attended and lack of willingness to participate.

I am fairly sure that her own psychological history was a major factor. She has spent several enforced periods in mental institutions for severe depression, compelled to join therapy groups she found intrusive and useless. She has received many ECT treatments which have robbed her of memories. Her parents believed "you keep your dirty linen in the linen basket and you do your own washing".

For me and my Dad, the theatre is an environment we know well and love. For her it is not. She felt on foreign, uncomfortable territory, out of her comfort zone. My presence is difficult for her and we do not relate easily, vying on some level for 'ownership' of my Dad.

Most of the audience at the performance had strong connections with each other as participants at the playback conference. They had knowledge and understanding of what was to happen and were already warmed up to the action.

The physical environment was difficult to manage. The room was long and very wide, so it was hard for the conductor to keep connection with everyone, and from the back rows it was difficult to see or hear clearly what was happening. My parents have hearing difficulties and we were sitting towards one end of the wide semi-circle of chairs, beyond the end of the stage where the conductor and teller were sitting, half with their backs to us. I should, of course, have been more aware of this problem and tried harder to get them seats nearer the front, though I am not sure they would have wished to be too close, too visible in this gathering of converts.

But that is water long under the bridge and though I am disappointed not to be able to share this part of my life more with my father, it has in no way dimmed my own enthusiasm. I have no doubt of the importance and effectiveness of playback theatre. I will continue to practice it for as long as I am able to do so. It's as much a part of my life as eating, sleeping, laughing, crying, playing. There will always be more tellers.

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