



The Shamanic Actor: Playback Theatre Acting as Shamanism

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ESSAY

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Introduction

“...it is true that we sometimes see Playback actors...who are remarkably effective in finding and playing the metaphor, as if they have an intuitive understanding of the necessity of metaphor. I think these are the shamanistic actors: they ‘feel and know’ things and are able to communicate them to the audience in a riveting way...”¹

Let me begin with a story.

It is November, 2001 and the day after I have split up with my then girlfriend (a significant fact, I believe). I am involved in a Playback Theatre workshop and performance in Devon, UK with the company in which I was then a member, *Four Winds and Fire*. The performance took place in the afternoon and one of the stories was from a young man about his difficulty to be creative in his life and his desire to turn to writing.

We had chosen to playback the story in Chorus. We were a company of only three with no musician and Chorus was a form we regularly rehearsed with and one that we felt intuitively drawn to in order to produce good Playback.

In the midst of the enactment a whole section of story emerged concerned with going to Africa and using his feet. This use of feet became a strong motif in the enactment. As we were performing I could hear his very vocal reaction as we performed this section. He was expressing the fact that we were playing back, metaphorically, something that had actually occurred but which he had not consciously verbally expressed. It was clear that we had hit upon truth. Following the enactment and in closure, the young man explained how a trip to Africa and being barefoot with indigenous peoples had been instrumental in helping him to turn to a career of writing.

At the end of the performance we were going around the circle of participants, witnessing each person’s response to the work before we ate food together. I sat in peace knowing that we had served this small community. As the participants talked about their feeling of having been fed by the work I, myself, sat quietly feeling fully nourished by the stories that they had so generously shared. This was in distinct contrast to the utterly low feeling I had arrived with following the break-up from the previous evening. I was feeling devastated, alone and extremely vulnerable. Only a few hours later I felt that I had done some of my best performance work in Playback and was feeling whole and at peace.

I tell this story for two specific reasons. Firstly, because of the significance of the emotional place I was in when I entered into this particular performance: one of

¹ Robb, H *Playback Theatre and the Popular Theatre Tradition*, in *Interplay*, Vol xii no.3 April 2002

intense vulnerability. Secondly, because of the appearance of part of the young man's story which he had not told but that appeared during the enactment. This was a physical metaphor which came not expressly from the Teller or from the PT Actors' conscious minds. So a question arises as to where it did come from...

“It is a Performer's job to transport an audience to another dimension of experience, just as the shaman's role is to act as a bridge between the worlds.”²

In this paper I intend to explore the connection between the role of the Shaman and that of the Playback Actor. My contention is that the PT Actor serves a similar function to that of the Shaman though this role, it could be argued, is divided between the Conductor, the Actor and the Musician. My focus in this essay, however, is to argue that the Shaman is the natural ancestor of the Playback Actor and that the actor in Playback Theatre is truly the *Shamanic Actor*.

As someone trained in Shamanic Practice the Story I have told above confirmed my belief that the practice of Playback Theatre is, in many ways, shamanic. Certainly the multi-purpose role of the Conductor would seem to bear verisimilitude with the figure of the Shaman. Interestingly Jonathan refers to the Conductor as Shaman within his discussion of the Conductor in his aspect as an actor,

“The conductor who boldly fulfils the shaman role will be seen by the audience as an actor, albeit a special kind of one.”³

However, though I come to appreciate and I hope, understand the role of the Conductor increasingly as my practice develops, it was the way in which the actor in Playback Theatre operated that first drew me to the form and made me aware of the link(s) with Shamanism.

² Saaille, R *The Actor as Shaman*, in Sacred Hoop, Issue 16, Spring 1997, p.23

³ Fox, J. 1986 *Acts of Service*, Tusala Publishing.

What is Shamanism?

Shamanism is a way of accessing spiritual⁴ guidance that dates back tens of thousands of years and pre-dates any known religion. *Shaman* (pronounced Shar-man) is a tungus word meaning 'healer', 'one who sees in the dark' or 'hollow bone' amongst other definitions. The tungus people live in Siberia and Mongolia.

What is so remarkable about the practices of shamanism is that indigenous communities across the globe engaged in rituals and ceremonies which bore incredible similarity. From the Native Americans to the Aborigines; from the Siberian Tungus tribe to Hong Kong the figure of the Shaman and shamanic rituals and ceremonies, such as the Sweat Lodge Ceremony, took place without (as far as we know in our age of modern communication) any knowledge of this simultaneous occurrence.

A Shaman is a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness and travels (Journeys) outside time and space into non-ordinary reality – a kind of parallel universe. In this altered state the Shaman works in the imagination – to shamanic cultures an actual place.

Three territories exist in non-ordinary reality: the Lower World, the Middle World and the Upper World. These are distinguished by different characteristics.

Here the Shaman can meet spirit helpers or guides often in the form of animals. The belief in most shamanic cultures is that the spirit of an animal takes pity on us when we are born and volunteers to protect us. This is called a Power Animal. Most people have two or three Power Animals around at any one time.

The only doctrine of Shamanism is that the work is used to benefit all life and is for the purpose of healing. Typically a Shaman is a person who is called to a healing path and their role is to heal both the living and the dead.

Shamans work with the spiritual aspect of illness believing emotional and physical illness to be the same. The work of healing will be carried out with the assistance of spirit helpers. The Shaman is not a healer in his/her own right. Rather s/he is a conduit to Spirit, hence the reference to the hollow bone. The Shaman will Journey to his/her Power Animal or Spiritual Teacher to discover whether a Client is suffering from power loss, soul loss or spiritual intrusion.

Power loss is when a Client's power animal leaves them without another one taking its place. Chronic illness such as colds and viruses are symptoms of power loss. Chronic depression or suicidal tendencies are other possibilities. The Shaman will return from non-ordinary reality with a power animal which s/he will 'blow' into the Client.

⁴ Without wanting to define 'spirit' at length the following is a useful definition of what I am referring to in this essay. *"All-is-One. Everything is energy. Matter is energy in 'solid' form. All is connected in a great web of life. The Creator and the creation are one. The Creator (or Great Mystery/Great Spirit) is in everything and everything is in the Creator. All beings are part of the Creator and are born from 'spirit' to matter and will die and move back into 'spirit'".*
Rutherford, L. 2001 *Your Shamanic Path*, p.8

Soul loss occurs from major trauma. The soul is our life force, our essence. In time of trauma be that rape, accidents, wartime stress, divorce, etc. a part of this essence separates from the physical body and travels into non-ordinary reality. In psychological terms this is dissociation. In shamanic culture the Shaman can Journey to find these soul parts and bring them back to the Client. In ancient societies this would be performed as soon as possible following the trauma. In contemporary society we may have been missing a number of pieces of our essence for some time. Consequently, the Shaman can only 'bring back' the most relevant part for the Client at that time. This is because the Client has to go through a process of re-associating that soul part in their body (several at once would be too much to cope with).

Chronic illness is also an indicator of soul loss but a person might also be living in the past, find it difficult to move forward with their life, feel like they are not whole; as if something is missing. Addictive behaviour is another symptom as the individual attempts to fill their void.

Again the Shaman will Journey on behalf of the Client, locate the soul part in Lower, Middle or Upper World with the help of power animals and/or spirit guides and return to 'blow' the part back into the Client's body.

With the loss of a soul part or of personal power a person leaves an opening for a spiritual intrusion. This is not malicious it is simply mis-placed. Often they are caused by negative thought forms and manifest as localized pain or illness such as cancer, neck pain or stomach disorder. The Shaman pulls or sucks out the intrusion and places it back in nature transmuting it so that it is neutralized and can do no harm⁵

Because shamanism works with the spiritual aspect of illness it is not possible to know what will be the result on the physical plane. This leads towards a self-healing aspect of the work as the Client addresses what changes they need to make in their life to maintain their health and accommodate the change in their power/essence.

Shamans also work as conductors of the souls of the deceased (psychopomping) their role being to help/lead a lost soul stuck in the Middle World to the light – a place to heal and evolve.

Shamanic Journeying can also be used to access spiritual information and guidance.

⁵ Interestingly there is more environmental shamanic work occurring in which Mother Earth is not expected to bare the brunt of these spiritual intrusions and they are lovingly transmuted and go back into the Client, e.g. they might be placed in a glass of water, transmuted and drunk by the Client.

The Actor – some definitions

Shamans are often regarded as the first actors; the first storytellers. The Shaman assisted the community to commune with spirit using song, prayer, drum and dance.

The notion of *communing with spirit* is important and indicates a very different function for the individual as Actor than many definitions of Acting throughout history. It is a difference in intention; a difference in the interpretation of the ability to “transport an audience to another dimension of experience” as Saaille phrased it. In many instances, as we progress into the 21st Century, this might be defined as the ability of the Actor to enable the Spectator to escape from their reality for the duration of a play or film – to be transported out of their, perhaps mundane, existence into a fantasy scenario for a brief period. The problem with this, as Bertolt Brecht realised, is that the Spectator, on returning to their everyday existence resumes this reality somewhat disappointed that it does not match up to the fantasy, with all its attendant emotional catharsis,

“...Exhausted
By the unceasing struggles of their daily life they await with greed
Just what repels the others. A little massage
For their flaccid spirits. A little tautening
Of slackened nerves. Easy adventure, a sense of magic hands
Bearing them off from a world they cannot master
And have to give up.”⁶

I want here to briefly appraise the role of the Actor in live theatre. This could be (and has been) addressed in many publications but in order to frame this discussion I want to refer to a few notions of the role put forward by some of the Western Theatre Practitioners of the last one hundred years. A development on this thesis would do well to address the various attitudes and interpretations of the role in, for example, Greek, Medieval, Elizabethan or Renaissance Theatre. In addition an examination of the Commedia d’ell Arte’s improvisational actor and the vast canon of Eastern Dance and Drama forms (all of which have had considerable influence upon many 20th Century Western Practitioners) would bear analysis. Consequently, I am defining a highly partial chronological link between the indigenous Shaman and the contemporary Playback Theatre Actor.

The Search for Truth in Acting

“... a tall powerful man with a cultivated resonant voice: his stage walk was the perfection of grace and dignity; and his lightning swiftness of action, as when in the last scene of *Hamlet* he shot up the stage and stabbed the king four times before you could wink, provided a physical exhibition which attracted audiences quite independently of the play.”⁷

⁶ Brecht, B *Speech To Danish Working-Class Actors On The Art Of Observation*, Poems 1913-1956 p.235

⁷ Donohue, J in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, p.18

Thus did George Bernard Shaw describe the ‘old fashioned’ acting of Barry Sullivan in correspondence to Ellen Terry around the turn of the 20th Century. The full-blown theatricality of Sullivan was part of a style of acting that had held sway on the English stage since the late 17th Century. The tradition was of boldly overstated personification and at this time, with the advent of Naturalism in theatre, some began to criticise its declamatory nature as being *untruthful*. This became the mission for a whole range of theatre practitioners throughout the 20th century, i.e. to discover how the actor could be truthful on stage. Ironically the theatrical 19th Century actor, borrowing from the French Classical canon of emotional gestures via the stock gestures, characters and plot lines of the Melodrama, believed that he/she was portraying truthful emotion on stage. The physical and vocal exaggeration of their performance was an attempt to reach all parts of the audience in the dimly candle-lit new theatres of the Victorian era.

Influenced by the scientific theories of Charles Darwin (in particular his *Origin of Species*) and the psychological discoveries of Sigmund Freud the Naturalists in theatre began to use the stage as a scientific laboratory in which to analyse the behaviour of the human being within its ‘natural’ environment. Led by the methodology of French actor and director, Andre Antoine, the Naturalists created detailed interior rooms in the stage space, taking away, as it were, the fourth wall of these rooms for the audience, as voyeurs, to observe the illusion of real people living out a *slice of life*.

For the actor to create the illusion of a real person on stage a new approach to acting was required and it fell to the Russian director, Constantin Stanislavski, to devise ways and means to help the actor portray a truthfulness that would be reminiscent of everyday life.

“Our programme was revolutionary. We rebelled against the old way of acting, against affectation and false pathos, against declamation and bohemian exaggeration, against bad conventionality of production and sets, against the star system which ruined the ensemble.”

(Stanislavski)

Stanislavski addressed the problem of how the actor could, in effect, shape-shift. In other words how the actor, who remained him/herself, could convince an audience that they were somebody else – the character.

He drew upon a range of devices incorporating techniques to actively analyse the play script but crucially he worked with the *imagination* of the actor (as I have noted an actual place to the Shaman) in order to build up the life of the character outside of the action of the plot. He also encouraged the actor to use their imagination to gain contact with their own remembered emotions, related to incidents in their own lives, to then adapt and use to truthfully portray the emotional life of their character.

Stanislavski was very influenced by the spirituality of the East and incorporated yoga and energy work into much of his actor training methods. His methodology became increasingly related to the physical body, e.g. his *Method of Physical Actions*, and less with a purely psychological approach to acting in the latter stages of his career.

The birth of Modernism at this same period in history led to experiments with the new developments in scientific and psychological thinking, as well as technological advances, that brought about somewhat different approaches to theatre and to acting than that of Naturalism.

The Symbolist Theatre viewed the human being's relationship with the material world in a completely different light. They argued that drama is essentially a sacred and mysterious rite which reflects the mystery of the cosmos and the infinite qualities of the human spirit. They called for a return to the poetic quality of theatre which they felt had been lost with the emphasis on realism.

Edward Gordon Craig was at the vanguard of such theatre. He is often attributed with wanting the death of the actor,

“The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the Über-marionette...”⁸

Indeed, much of his stage practice did appear to marginalise the actor and give primacy to the design of the set and the lighting. However, Craig was more responsible for the advent of ensemble acting than perhaps he is given credit and used the actor as part of a group of actors for the visual impact of the movement of their bodies together on stage. In addition his alternative view on the role of the actor bore greater relationship to the practices of Eastern Dance Drama and the actor in such as Japanese Noh Theatre than that of the current trend in Realist Western Theatre. It also appears to me as a part of the lineage from Shaman to Playback Theatre Actor when Craig says,

“The über-marionette will not compete with life – rather will it go beyond it. Its ideal will not be the flesh and blood but rather the body in trance – it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit.”⁹

Future 20th Century Practitioners would further develop the notion of the actor in relation to spirit. There were the experiments of Jacques Copeau (who ironically stated that the actor did not interest Craig¹⁰) and his Vieux Colombier company in the French countryside where they re-visited the techniques of the Commedia d'ell Arte and experimented with the neutrality of the actor via work with the *Noble Mask*.

In the USA Joseph Chaikin emphasised the actor's *presence* on stage in rehearsal exercises and performance made up of abstract improvisations (surely part of the heritage of Playback Theatre).

And Jerzy Grotowski who, with the notion of *via negativa* – the stripping away process which leaves the actor open to a process of spiritual purification in their encounter with the audience, saw theatre more as an act of communion.

⁸ Craig, E.G. from *The Actor and the Über-Marionette* (1907).

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Rudlin, J in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, p. 59

I want to turn my attention though to the other aspect that commonly defines the Shaman and the PT Actor – that of social responsibility.

Here the lineage encounters Bertolt Brecht and the Brazilian director, Augusto Boal. Brecht reacted against the Expressionism from which he drew so many of his techniques, because of its inability to explain the world as somewhere that could be influenced by human activity. He turned to the political theatre of his sometime colleague and compatriot, Erwin Piscator and developed his style of Epic Theatre acting, with its emphasis upon the concept of Alienation ('Verfremdung'), after watching the performance of the Chinese Theatre actor, Mei Lan-fang.

The Alienation effect best translated from the German as 'making strange' enabled the audience to observe the actor *presenting* the character. Through this style of performance, which resembled the reporting style of the oral storyteller, the actor was able to 'comment' upon the actions of the character and to make the audience regard the character's choices as defined by socio-economic factors. Thus the spectator was made aware of the actor and that what they were watching in the theatre was artificial. This promoted a critical observation of the action in order to make the spectator apply this critical approach to their own lives and to take action and make change, outside the theatre.

At the heart of the Brechtian actor's job was the concept of *gestus*. An original term which Brecht employed to mean both gesture and gist – an attitude expressible in words and/or action,

"The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters is what we call the realm of *gest*. Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by a social *gest*: the characters are cursing, flattering, instructing one another, and so on. The attitudes which people adopt towards one another include even those attitudes which would appear to be quite private, such as the utterances of physical pain in an illness, or of religious faith."¹¹

A *gest* is self contained and may involve any or all of a process, a social relationship, and a significant gesture or movement. I am convinced that finding the Heart of the Teller's Story in Playback Theatre bears some relationship with the concept of *gestus*.

Crucial to an understanding of my proposed lineage from the Shaman to the Playback Theatre Actor is the social dimension within the relationship to the audience/community.

"What Brecht introduced was the idea of the intelligent actor, capable of judging the value of his contribution...an actor in a community that supports a theatre must be as much involved in the outside world as in his own craft."¹²

¹¹ Brecht, B *Brecht on Theatre*, p.198

¹² Brook, P 1972 *The Empty Space*, p.85-6

Augusto Boal took Brecht's notion further and provided a stepping stone between the Epic Theatre actor and the Citizen actor of Playback Theatre. In Boal's *Forum Theatre* the spectator becomes Spect-actor and improvises on stage with the Forum Theatre actor. The Spect-actor's intention is to rehearse ideas for real change in dramatic situations of oppression drawn from the *spectator's* real life experience. The Forum Theatre actor, for their part, must be,

“...dialectical, must know how to give and take, how to hold back and lead on, how to be creative. They must feel no fear (which is common with professional actors) of losing their place, of standing aside.”¹³

And so we come full circle. I suggest that the Playback Theatre Actor incorporates both the notions of *social responsibility* and of *communing with spirit* in a combination not true of most forms of acting throughout history but most certainly reminiscent of the first actor, the Shaman.

I now go on to clarify these similarities and the processes that the Shaman and the PT Actor in many ways share.

¹³ Boal, A 1992 *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, p.237

Playback Theatre Acting as Shamanism

“It is a Performer’s job to transport an audience to another dimension of experience, just as the shaman’s role is to act as a bridge between the worlds.”¹⁴

There is, of course, an alternative way of interpreting Saaille’s assertion. This conforms to the function of the Shaman and I contend, to that of the Playback Theatre Actor. This involves a *transformation* brought about by the experience of being transported to “another dimension of experience” – an altered state. True to both the rituals of Shamanism and Playback Theatre is this aspect of some kind of rite of passage. In other words, the experience brings about some kind of significant change in the audience/community or individual Client/Spectator. This has been researched and written about by a number of Playback Practitioners and researchers including Peter Wright who refers to a social-aesthetic dynamic that facilitates a learning-healing dynamic, an interaction which he asserts could also be described as,

“community-building where the learning-healing dynamic enhances awareness of the interconnection between self, others, and experience(s) thereby constructing bonds between participants and acknowledging and illustrating the universality of experience and feeling.”¹⁵

My contention that Playback Theatre Acting is shamanic is based upon the notion that the task and the processes in operation to perform that task undertaken by the PT Actor in performance, are strikingly similar to that of the Shaman.

In the first place their *intention* is similar. Here I return to the notion of the individual Shaman/PT Actor communing with spirit and assisting their community to also commune with spirit.

This means that they both serve their community. Shamans of old served a quite specific spiritual health role for their tribe/community.

“Traditional shamans’ primary purpose was always to keep the people ‘in-spirit’, connected to spirit, in a state of enthusiasm for life. The root of enthusiasm is en-theos – connected to the divine, inspired (en = in, theos = god).”¹⁶

This often entailed living somewhat separately from the rest of the tribe because the individual lived, for a significant part of their time, in non-ordinary reality. Shamans were often recognised in childhood as loners or individuals who kept themselves separate in some way.

¹⁴ Saaille, R *The Actor as Shaman*, in *Sacred Hoop*, Issue 16, Spring 1997, p.23

¹⁵ Wright, P *The Empirical and the Ephemeral: Learning, Healing and Building Community through Playback Theatre*, *Interplay Research Report*, Vol xiii, no.3 May 2003

¹⁶ Rutherford, L *Your Shamanic Path*, p.10

In the case of the PT Actor the community may simply mean the audience for that performance. Jonathan refers to the Citizen Actor who,

“performs as needed by the community, then melts back into the social fabric – a modern answer to the aboriginals of ‘high degree’ who live as ordinary tribespeople except when they are needed.”¹⁷

I suggest that they serve the community by working with spirit or, more specifically, my understanding would be that spirit works *through* the individual that is the Shaman or the PT Actor. This brings us back to the concept of the *hollow bone*, a conduit for images, ideas, words, metaphors, etc. to pass from spirit in non-ordinary reality into our physical material world.

In the case of the Shaman there is an actual out-of-body Journey to the Worlds of non-ordinary reality to access this spiritual guidance. The PT Actor remains physically and consciously in the material world focussed upon the Teller, Conductor, co-Performers and Audience. Therefore, the PT Actor does not bring back the spiritual guidance in exactly the same fashion as the Shaman. However, both roles operate as a *conduit* to spirit – a hollow bone.

The task is complete for both the Shaman and the PT Actor when they structure this ‘guidance’ for the audience/client. They give the information aesthetic shape, borne of the skills of the storyteller. In the case of the modern day Shaman this is often a re-telling sometimes in the manner of the oral storyteller. In Playback the language(s) of theatre are utilised. Both provide focus and dramatic tension though, crucially, both *do not interpret* the images, metaphors, etc. in their enactments.

At the conclusion of the enactment – a specific phase in Playback and a re-remembering of the Journey for the Shaman – any healing or transformation is completed by the Teller or Client. In most cases the Shaman/PT Actor will never know the after effects of the ‘enactment’.

There is some divergence here. In Playback Theatre the Actor as conduit to spirit receives the initial Story from the Teller and channels/processes this information. They also undertake the enactment phase as part of a team – hence my earlier contention that, in some ways, the shamanic role is divided between the PT Actors, Conductor and Musician.

The Shaman serves most effectively with as little information from the Client as possible. In fact, it is potentially dangerous for a modern-day Shaman to Journey on behalf of family or close friends. There is simply too much knowledge and energetic exchange between these individuals over time that could affect the Shaman’s Journey and would bring with it too many factors that might contribute to an interpretation of the Journey.

¹⁷ Fox, p.214

Despite these differences I suggest that the key common features in the two roles remain:

- intention
- a conduit to spirit
- the aesthetic shaping of images/metaphors, etc. without interpretation

This brings me to how the two roles perform their functions. I contend that there are similar skills/attributes at play. These are in *listening, trusting, facing of fears or blocks* and in *re-enactment*.

Initially there is *preparation*. Both the Shaman and the PT Actor have to prepare themselves to be able to function as a hollow bone.

In the case of the Shaman this means working in a trance state achieved usually through drumming. The drumming works with brain waves. Listening to a monotonous drumbeat changes the brain waves from a beta state, in which we are engaged in what might be described as ordinary consciousness when normal breathing is about eighteen breaths per minute, to a theta state. In this theta state breathing slows normally to approximately four breaths per minute reproducing something akin to deep meditation. In the theta state,

“...there is a heightened degree of visual imagery and mystical experience becomes possible. Theta is a level of shamanic consciousness and access into deeper regions of the subconscious and of the ‘connectiveness’ with all things.”¹⁸

For the Shaman the drum replicates the vibration of the Earth and that of the human being - the heart beat.

Vibration via sound and music can, in itself, promote healing. Human beings, as all living things, are made up of constantly vibrating atoms and this can be affected to promote healing. Jonathan Goldman, in his book *Healing Sounds*, asserts that everything in the universe is in a state of vibration. ‘Resonance’ is the frequency at which an object most naturally vibrates. The human body, he asserts, is like a wonderful orchestra when we are in full health and everything is in rhythm. The organ or part of the body in a state of health will be creating a “natural resonant frequency that is harmonious with the rest of the body”.¹⁹ This influences his theory of harmonics – ‘overtones’ that exist within all sounds – and are a manifestation of all forms of vibration. They determine individual and specific sounds, even the differences in our voices. The Shaman works with drum, rattle and often his/her own Power Song and vocal harmonics are an inherent part of shamanic rituals. Harmonics, Goldman suggests, may create inter-dimensional windows through which the Shaman can travel or an invoked spirit may enter our physical domain.²⁰ The Mayan culture in Central America disappeared en masse and conjecture is that they ‘vibrated’ into an alternative dimension.

¹⁸ Meadows, K 1991 *Shamanic Experience*, p.85

¹⁹ Goldman, J 1992 *Healing Sounds: The Power of Harmonics*, p.14

²⁰ Ibid, p.63

The PT Actor does not work in the same fashion as the Shaman (though another thesis on how the PT actor works subliminally with the music and sounds of the Musician during the enactment might throw up further similarities). The PT actor is firmly rooted in the physical realm of the performance, consciously aware of what is being said by tellers and Conductor. Nonetheless, the PT Actor needs to be relaxed, open and sufficiently vulnerable to allow the images and metaphors to emerge and freely associate in relation to the Heart of the Teller's Story.

The PT Actor's preparation is usually concerned with a physical body warm-up, a vocal warm-up and a connection with fellow Company members. Within this, I would argue, the PT Actor prepares themselves as a conduit to spirit. As, perhaps via some rehearsal Fluid Sculptures, they enter into an altered state; they 'shut off' from everyday reality and 'open' themselves. This is a focussed condition which at its best, I suggest, resembles the theta state I referred to in relation to the Shaman. It is not deeply meditative but it does resemble a consciousness in which Meadows' 'connectiveness' can operate.

Once engaged in the Journey (Shaman) or the Performance (PT Actor) the individual has to **listen** on a very deep level (and not simply with the ears), working with an openness and vulnerability which allows images, words, feelings, sensations to arise in the conscious mind. This listening takes place in the mind, in the body and in the heart.

The PT actor is certainly listening keenly to the words spoken by the Teller which may be given structure by the Conductor. S/He is watching closely the body language of the Teller for clues as to the feelings in and around the Story that might and might not be verbally expressed. This is 'listening' for the sub-text: what is not determined by the meaning of the Teller's words but may be linked to tone of voice, speed of delivery, hesitation, the silent space in which nothing is verbalised, repetition as well as body language. These are assimilated by the PT Actor via the ears and eyes

There is also another level of listening I would suggest and this links to the body and heart of the PT actor. One excellent piece of PT advice was given to me during my 'Playback Practice' with Bev Hosking in the summer of 2005. Bev was coaching us in short forms at the time and suggested that when we were processing the brief stories from the audience for Fluid Sculptures we would do well to acknowledge *where in our body* we 'felt' or experienced the telling. This could give us a starting point from which to develop our enactment when we stepped forward, particularly if our conscious mind was, at that moment, 'drawing a blank'.

This 'listening in the body' has become an invaluable tool to me as a PT actor and has frequently led me directly to the Heart of a Story whilst by-passing the sometimes panicking or censorial conscious mind. It also suggests that, as a conduit to spirit, the PT Actor does not work purely with the conscious mind and this 'listening in the body' in order to by-pass the censorial mind is frequently crucial in Playback rehearsal and performance.

The Shaman works in similar fashion and, in my view, perhaps with greater ease²¹. During the course of a shamanic Journey the rules of space and time that exist in our realm of physical reality no longer apply. An infinite number of possibilities may come into operation including jumping forwards, backwards, sideways in time as well as events occurring simultaneously. Commonly the Shaman may shape-shift and become her/his Power Animal or indeed transform temporarily into any number of things.²²

It is the Shaman's job to witness and remember what He/She sees, hears, feels, senses and to bring these images, metaphors, etc. back to be re-membered (literally put back together again) and re-told *without interpretation* to the Individual for whom they are Journeying.

Whilst 'listening' in this manner the Shaman is also called to **trust** what spirit presents to them. It is all too easy to censor what is witnessed out of fear arising from the conscious mind discerning whether the images, metaphors, messages are 'good enough' or correct. The Shaman might be shown something by spirit which appears to have no bearing whatsoever on what they have been told by their client. Alternatively they might be shown something which they think might cause trauma in their client and wish to avoid this (who is actually avoiding the powerful potential emotions one might ask?). Here the story of one of my first Soul Retrieval case studies best illustrates what I mean.

The client was female, in her early 20s and a Drama Student who was also working with me on a theatre devising project. One day after rehearsals she asked to be excused from a future rehearsal because she had to go to the hospital. I found out, through conversation with her, that she had experienced two serious car accidents within the previous 12 months; one of which had resulted in a death. She was now having regular counselling and the hospital was using her treatment as a case study. She said that she was fed up with the sessions and felt that she wasn't really moving forward through them. Our conversation turned to the need to find the means to move forward with your life and not to keep continually re-visiting the trauma. At this point I told her about my Shamanic work and Soul Retrievals in particular. She was immediately keen to be one of my case studies.

She identified with many aspects of my Journey and the Soul Retrieval was of much significance to her. There was a lot of fine detail within the Journey that resonated for her. Her interpretation of the Journey came flooding out and she searched for more and more asking me in-depth questions about the Journey.

During the Journey I was shown images of a specific type of house and a very particular UK landscape. Whilst Journeying I could discern no specific relevance for these images. However, it transpired that she had lived in such a house as a young girl and had frequently gone to this part of the country on family holidays.

²¹ Shamanic cultures regard disease as 'dis-ease' and this resulting from a loss of power (in other words a loss of spirit).

²² Shape-shifting has often been regarded as a key aspect of acting and lies in the heritage of modern day pre-occupations with creating/assuming character, "As the actor shapeshifts from one form to another, the story unfolds". Saaille, p. 23

The relevant soul part that I was to bring back for her was indeed her as a young girl at this age. However, I also encountered another lost soul part of hers – at an older age – which was shown to me in a disturbing scene of sexual abuse. Being inexperienced in my shamanic work I was confused as to whether I had actually already found the relevant soul part to return. In addition if I told her about this other soul part I might be encouraging her into a place of trauma as this part was not yet ready or supposed to return. On the other hand if I did not give her this information I could be censoring and therefore, interpreting what I was witnessing in the Lower World within this Journey.

I needed to trust spirit. I needed to trust the clarity of my intention and the ritual processes of determining that I had found the relevant lost soul part. What I did was what all Shamans can do – I asked my Power Animal for guidance and was given it. It was key for me to remember that I was the conduit to spirit. The lost soul part came from non-ordinary reality and returned to my client via me but I was not interpreting or performing any healing myself.

It is imperative that the Shaman trusts what spirit shows them and brings this back to relay without interpretation. The Shaman must Journey with a clear and resolute Intention (this is the Heart of the Story if truth be told), maintain this throughout the Journey and re-tell their Journey faithfully and without their own spin on what they have been shown.

Similarly the PT actor, having listened on a deep level, must trust the images and metaphors that present themselves in the mind, body and heart of the actor. As with the Journeying Shaman this must be done without censorship. Certain images may arise for which the PT actor can, consciously, see no relevance but spirit may be leading them to the Heart of the Story. Identifying the Heart of the Story, during the Interview stage or via any clarification on the part of the Conductor (also listening in the same deep way) constitutes the emergence of the actor's intention in the Enactment phase. It is adherence to the Heart of the Story that gives meaning to the range of, perhaps, disparate images that have arisen for all of the Playback performers of that Story.

Related to the trust of what spirit shows is the necessity for the Shaman/PT Actor to **confront their own fears or blocks** which may prevent their success as a conduit to spirit.

I have referred above to the discerning conscious mind that may judge the images and metaphors which appear. The fear emerges from a lack of trust; it is the flipside of the coin. The fear coalesces around a number of things:

- Fear of 'getting it wrong' and therefore ourselves being judged as not good enough and thereby rejected
- Fear that we might induce powerful emotions (or indeed trauma) within the Teller/Client which will not be containable thus leading us to be blamed and therefore, 'wrong', not good enough and thereby rejected.

- Fear that we might release powerful emotions of our own which have been triggered by the Story of the Teller/Client and are diverting from the Heart of the Teller/Client's Story - also potentially non-containable – leading us, again, to be considered in the 'wrong', not good enough and consequently rejected.

It is imperative that the Shaman/PT Actor maintains their intention (in the case of the PT Actor defines the Heart of the Story) and trusts the images/metaphors, etc. presented by spirit. These two things have to work in tandem and the Shaman/PT Actor must also believe that they are and are only, a conduit to spirit – they work in service to the community.

Here I draw a thread back to my initial story of the Playback performance in Devon, UK, 2001. My emotional state, following the break-up of my relationship, put me in an extremely emotionally vulnerable place. This meant that my conscious mind had less control. Its ability to judge and to censor was under attack from powerful emotions affecting my body as well as my mind. This laid me bare. My 'fight or flight' response mechanism was somewhat disengaged and any attack via criticism, for example, would have easily penetrated my defences.

However, the fear factor concerned with being 'wrong' and not good enough was also less engaged. I already felt 'not good enough' as a result of my recent separation. This, I believe, enabled me to transcend my fear and work more effectively as a conduit to spirit because my conscious mind was less concerned with judgement and censorship.

There was, of course, the necessity to adhere to the ritual emotional container of the Playback forms and performance in order to carry out the functions I have outlined above. Without this focus I was in danger of either being overwhelmed by my own emotions, which had pre-occupied me right up to the start of the session, or of neglecting the Heart of the Story by allowing the Stories told to become my story with all the associations related to the break-up and my emotional state.

I contend, therefore, that it is a necessary attribute of the Shaman/PT Actor to operate in this state of vulnerability; of 'openness'.

“To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong.”²³

Which brings me to the **enactment**; making manifest the Journey or the Teller's Story. This is where the images and metaphors from spirit are given aesthetic shape in our material world. In the case of the Shaman the Story of the Journey is told to the Client or to a witnessing Circle of people. In Playback it is the enactment phase of the performance.

Here there is some divergence. The Shaman re-tells the Journey without interpretation for the Client to find their own meaning in the images/metaphors, etc. They do not attempt to embellish this. The intention is to provide a faithful rendering of the Journey as it happened. There is no attempt to use the language of Story or the

²³ Joseph Chilton Pearce

structure of traditional story with its attendant plot development – equilibrium-disruption-transformation-climax-resolution-new equilibrium.²⁴

Playback Theatre, of course, is somewhat different. The intention is to make manifest the Teller's Story and the Playback Actor in collaboration with fellow actors and musician, use their skills in the language of theatre to deliberately give the Story aesthetic shape. This involves an understanding of character, focus, dramatic tension, etc. Within this shape the Heart of the Story is essential as the magnet for the selection, editing and shaping of images, metaphors, words, etc. that have become manifest in the bodies, hearts and minds of the whole Playback Company. Adherence to the Heart of the Story is accompanied by the intention *not* to interpret.

“...the effectiveness of a Playback scene depends a great deal on the actors' sense of story, that aesthetic feel for form and the archetypal story shape. And this aesthetic sense must be in service to an empathic, almost intuitive understanding of the essence of the teller's experience.”²⁵

There are *four* key similarities within this phase of the Shaman/PT Actor's role.

- Firstly, it is imperative that there is adherence to the Shaman's initial intention when commencing the Journey. In the case of the PT Actor this is, again, the recognition of the “essence of the teller's experience” – the Heart of the Story. These give shape to all parts of the Shaman/PT Actor's process as detailed above. They provide the holding frame for the recognition by spirit of what is relevant to channel from non-ordinary reality, via the Shaman/PT Actor, into the physical material world. They continue to provide that function for the aesthetic shaping of the enactment/re-telling.
- Secondly, the enactment/re-telling is a passing of guidance/healing from spirit via the conduit to the Teller/Client. In shamanic experience the Shaman will actually ‘blow’ a power animal or returning soul part into the body of the Client via the crown of the head and the heart. In Playback the enactment concludes with the fourth stage of a scene, the Acknowledgement, in which the actors look at the Teller to signify their thanks for the gift of the Teller's story and request acceptance for their gift of the re-telling of it,

“It's an expression of humility, respect, and the courage to own their enactment, imperfect though it may be.”²⁶

- Thirdly, the emphasis switches to the Teller/Client for their comment(s) on what they have seen/heard. In both instances they may comment on the immediate relevance that they discern from the enactment phase or where it leaves them now. They are then able to work with any healing or guidance from spirit themselves at a later stage.

²⁴ My recent shamanic practice suggests that this might actually be desirable and my inclination is that Shamans have and probably still do give *aesthetic* shape to any guidance/information they ‘bring back’.

²⁵ Salas, J 1993 *Improvising Real Life*, p.51

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.37

- Finally, there is the social dimension. It is crucial that the enactment and the Teller/Client's response to it is witnessed by the community whether that be the audience to the Playback performance or the Shamanic Circle (in individual work with shamanic clients it may be that the Shaman provides this witness. However, a tenet of the shamanic practice in which I was trained involves the invitation of a close friend/supporter as a witness and joint celebrant to a soul retrieval). The witnessing is important as it gives value to the Teller/Client's experience via the very fact of concentrated space and attention being given to that experience. It also promotes community via 'connectiveness' – the realisation that others undergo similar experiences reduces our feelings of isolation.

Conclusion

At the start of this essay I quoted Heather Robb on Playback Actors promoting the idea that, "they 'feel and know' things and are able to communicate them to the audience in a riveting way..."²⁷

I hope to have raised debate about the similarities in both role and processes of the Shaman and the Playback Actor. I have made passing reference to the fact of the Playback Company, in its entirety, as equivalent to the Shaman with the Conductor (arguably the figure of the Shaman her/himself) and the Musician undertaking a part of the shamanic role. Certainly the whole ritual of a Playback Performance functions as a Shamanic ritual in terms of assisting "the community to commune with spirit using song, prayer, drum and dance" as Saaille put it.

Nonetheless, the Playback Actor sits in the heart of the Playback ritual and is crucial as the conduit to spirit – the hollow bone.

"If the actor as shaman can embrace awareness that there is a choreography of universal energy that exists outside the self, and that we are all a part of it, he or she can possibly begin to re-ignite the same link.

For many actors this is a totally alien concept, but when rediscovered, the actor becomes a conductor for spirit, something greater speaks through him and we glimpse a being dancing the great web."²⁸

²⁷ Robb, H *Playback Theatre and the Popular Theatre Tradition*, in *Interplay*, Vol xii no.3 April 2002

²⁸ Saaille, R. p.24

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