



Saying Yes: Playback Theatre as a Metaphor for Life

By Karin Gisler

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

C O N T E N T

Prolog

Introduction
Playback as a metaphor for life
Saying yes
Content

Part I

The company and the leader

- I. 1. Start
- I. 2. Going on
- I. 3. New challenges

Part II

II.1.The Conductor

- a) Before performance
- b) During performance

II.2.The actor

- a) Internal yes
- b) External yes

II.3.The audience

- a) Yes-Factors
- b) Yes-Atmosphere

Part III

Yes in stories
Yes in poetry
Yes in pictures
Yes-Song
Yes to ...!

Introduction

The theme of Saying-Yes emerged in a workshop with Deborah Pearson, out of a game. I was immediately fascinated. The capacity to say **yes** (and what is related to it) seemed to me to be a cornerstone within the method of Playback Theatre. The more I started thinking about the theme, I realized that I had touched on a main tool in search for meaningfulness in theatre and in life.

In discussions with friends and colleagues it soon became obvious how complex and intertwined this matter is. Without saying no there is no saying yes. Say yes could mean to say no and vice versa - the power to say yes incapsulates the capacity to say no. Yes and no are magnetic antipodes which mutually attract each other. They represent a part of the life principle of duality: Light - dark, sun - moon, life - death, soft - hard, love - hate, fast - slow, man - woman, yes - no. So, there is no yes without a no.

Nevertheless, I want to keep my focus on saying yes. I found, that in some ways, I had been a No-Sayer for a long time. To discover the power of saying yes is exciting. Writing this essay made me more conscious of my decisions and values. "Deine Rede sei ja ja, nein, nein !" says the bible. Through this reductive and basic way of looking at issues I made empowering discoveries.

Playback as a metaphor for life

Opposite to the traditional theatre forms Playback theatre is free from being prepared, controlled, pre-cooked. Playback theatre spontaneously captures and transforms the moment. By offering meaningfulness to what often seems a mere caprice of fate Playback invites us to connect with other dimensions of our lives. By taking part in other peoples stories we share the collective experiment of human existence deepening the relation to ourselves and to others. Through its nature of trusting and relating to every instant as it happens, Playback theatre both mirrors and embraces life itself. Saying yes to take part in Playback theatre is saying yes to life - which offers its qualities fully to the one open to its challenges, able to act in a creative way.

Saying Yes

Playback theatre with its inherent and significant character of spontaneity (thus being unpredictable for all participants, including audience) can

only work well if it can build on some strong yes-factors. The courage to say yes to launch yourself into an event which by its nature is unpredictable is a "Sine qua non" for Playback theatre. The reward - beneath the unique experience to feel joy and terror within the same moment - is the power to remind and reconcile us with the human condition "Scio ne scio" (Sokrates) I know that I don't know. It is "accepting the ineluctable nature of our ignorance" (Acts of Service, J. Fox)

Saying yes releases creative power. Saying yes also means to take chances. It means to open myself to success and to failure. It is a way to achieve mental and spiritual growth. And it keeps myself vivid and alive. Saying yes to spontaneity and to improvisation is the basic yes for a Playback practitioner. There are many more things to say yes to which in following I would like to look at. Yet, this essay will never be complete. Wanting to make this list complete reminds me of the famous pictures of the mathematician Mandelbrot.(see title) He succeeded in transforming endless mathematic fractions into computerized pictures which resemble paintings of exotic plants made of spirales. A close look shows that every spiral consists of many smaller spirales. And every smaller spirale is made of even more even smaller spirales. And so on - like an endless russian Babuschka: a puppet in a puppet in a puppet. So, trying to collect all yes-factors is like the search for the smallest spirale, the tiniest puppet - endless.

What I will offer is an invitation to take a look at some of the spirales and to unwrap some of the Babuschkas in the exciting and never ending search of yes-factors in life and Playback theatre.

Content

In this essay I am applying the "yes-factor" to Playback theatre, taking a closer look on what we say yes to doing Playback. I want to examine the different areas within Playback theatre where decisions have to be made and therefore saying yes comes into play. I will make a distinction between *internal* and *external* yes-factors. By *internal* yes-factors I mean everything that enables and intensifies inner processes which generate the capacity to say yes. By *external* yes-factors I mean the consequences, the outcome in the outer world, the visible expressions of having said yes: results, actions, consequences, decisions. This essay has three main parts. In the first part of this I will look at the Playback theatre company and at the leader. Some companies want to do public performances, others don't. Some yes-factors are shared by both groups, some are not. I will also look at the group leader. In the second

part I am looking at the roles present in a performing company: The conductor, the actor, the audience. The third part holds my research within the theme of saying yes in my environment and in my own life. I will use my experience as Playback-practitioner, as company founder and as leader as well as my thoughts about the theme.

Part I

I.1. The company and the leader.

I.1. Starting

I was practicing Playback for two years in workshops and then as a member of the Playback-Theater Schweiz led by Annette Henne before I dared to found my own company. It was Annette who encouraged me by saying: "I have the feeling that you want to have your own company. Go for it ! I will help you if you need me."

"You will learn to do it by doing it" agreed Jonathan Fox. So, the womb of my saying yes to my big wish - having my own performing company - was the encouragement and the blessing from my Playback-parents.

Yet, when I started the Playback-Theater Zürich, the only thing I knew was I wanted to explore Playback theatre and I needed people with the same wish to form a team. This may sound simple but the task ahead of me was not only to find people but to explain them about Playback theatre: Up to now this form of theatre still is fairly unknown in Switzerland. I invited friends with an interest in theatre for a meeting. We agreed on three rehearsals where I would demonstrate Playback. About 17 people initially said yes. Looking back now, I wonder what these people were saying yes to since our notions about Playback theatre at this point were quite vague. My guesses about what people were saying yes to are the following: There was the chance to fulfill an old dream, to play theatre ! To be creative and express yourself in a unique and original way. Without having to learn text. By improvising..! Creating theatre out of own stories did probably seem like a treat and a challenge. Many members of the company are educated in arts therapy, so their psychological interest was nurtured as well. Doing this avant-garde style of theatre tickled the spirit of adventure and offered multilayered experiences. And finally there was the comforting feeling of creating something together and being a member of a community with a common purpose. Asking some of the members, I found that most of the guesses

were right although I forgot about the "Yes, but ...!" Franziskas thoughts for example were: "I want to join you and play theatre but I doubt strongly whether this concept will ever work." She is now one of the most engaged members...

However, since so little was known in the beginning of our Playback experiment, the founding members all shared the curiosity and the courage of pioneers. Within people`s spirit there was from the start a collective yes towards diving together into this adventure. This helped to build and maintain strong bonds amongst us. The company could rely on a strong and shared yes-factor.

Besides wanting to explore Playback theatre, there was one other thing I was sure of right from the beginning: I wanted to perform. I wanted us to become a Playback theatre company and to bring out to an audience this new and exciting way of theatre and communication. Since Swiss people are not especially known for their spontaneity nor for their pleasure to share themselves publicly, the idea of offering them an evening of theatre where everything would build on their participation was as scary as exciting. So, to become a *performing* company was another shared yes-factor.

Yes-factors of the company at the start:

Internal yes:

Yes to adventure.

We want to take part in an exciting project., of which the outcome is not sure. We don't quite know what we say yes to.

Yes to improvisation

We will do improvised theatre.

Yes to risk.

We dont know what exactly this is and what the result will be. Maybe it is a flop, maybe not.

Yes to trial.

We are ready to give it a good try.We are ready to commit to something new and risky.

Yes to leadership.

We accept to have a leader. We trust the leader.

External yes:

Yes to commitment.

We agree to meet regularly for a certain period of time.

Yes to the leader.

We accept Karin as the leader.

Yes to performance.

If it works, we will perform one day.

Yes-factors of the leader at the start:

Internal yes:

Yes to responsibility.

I will take responsibility to be a leader. I am in charge for what is going on.

Yes to teach.

I will share what I know so far.

Yes to risk.

I don't know whether this will ever work. I am willing to try, risking success or failure.

Yes to Playback-theatre.

I know, I want to do Playback theatre ! (All the time I just wanted to make it happen. Sometimes when everything seemed to fall apart, I told myself: I want to do it. If this is not going to work, I will just start all over again.)

External yes:

Yes to be the organizer.

I am organizing a room, gathering the people, make an adresslist. I am the connecting element.

Yes to be in charge.

I am leading the trainings, choosing the focus we work on, making decisions as director.

Yes to be the focus.

I am the point of reference - even I am having doubts whether I am really capable.

Yes to development.

I will go to workshops to learn more. We are developing, getting better by doing it, giving this project time.

Yes-factors in the Non-performing-company.

These yes-factors are basically the same whether the company aims for performances or not. It is important though to raise the question about performing and to be clear with what the members and the leader want. Decisions don't have to be forever neither. With tricky decisions I find it helpful to set a time limit with the option of reconsidering. Of course, the leadership can be shared as well. For example at rehearsals : If the skills of Playback are spread within the group, trainings could be lead in turns. This means more variety of method and ideas instead of a worked out schedule to achieve skills in a certain period of time. The London Playback Theatre at this time has three directors who share the tasks of directing and conducting. . Also, the director of the company has not necessarily to be the conductor as well. Yet, as far as I know, this is the case in most of the companies, at least at the beginning.

I.2. Going on

As company life goes on, basic structures have to be established and agreed upon, such as:

- How often do we rehearse?
- What are the contents of rehearsals ?
- Do we have a constant leader for the rehearsals ?
- Is this person being paid ?
- Do we perform ? For whom ? How much do we charge ?
- Who takes leading roles within the company ?
(Runing rehearsals, organizing company life, conducting, directing, managing...)
- When and how are we selecting new members ?
- Which is our way of making decisions ?

- What about members with "special needs" ?

When I started, many of these issues didn't occur to me, only time and situations would bring them up. Not always to my pleasure since - instead of rehearsing - we often spent hours arguing and discussing. I learned how important this time was. Within the process of discussing different and contradictory points of view emerged the different expectations, wishes and needs of the company members. Sometimes we would have to stand stormy times for quite a while, and then it felt like the clean air after a thunderstorm.

In the beginning, every now and then, members left because of different reasons. This most of the time was quite difficult. In the beginning period every loss seemed to be so threatening. Through the intimate work we got to know each other well, so every good-bye felt like losing a friend. It helps if the company takes time to cherish the person leaving. A good-bye session allows to share feelings, to clear and to say what needs to be said. It puts a frame and then company life can go on again. Greeting new members always is a challenge as well. I am still surprised at the time it takes for a newcomer to feel "at home". A very engaged member of ours who is practicing regularly and more present than some of the founding actors after nine months still talks about herself as being the "new one" in the group. To me she feels like an old member... and I sometimes wonder whether there is something I can do to accelerate this process. Having a new member is always a chance to see ourselves in a fresh light. The new member is free from the unconsciously established patterns of the group. He/she can be helpful to clarify group dynamics through his/her observation. Being able to accept very different points of view and very different emotions within the company about the same issue is not always easy. When we talked it was striking how different our views, opinions and feelings often were. I caught myself feeling responsible for everyone's wellbeing. Therefore I wanted to smooth every difference, every conflict and to unify all the different needs and visions. But I believe that a successful leader creates the space where the members can be just as they are. She/he builds the vessel which is filled by the variety of the members.

Sometimes we had to change established rules, which was the harder the longer the rule had been operating. For example: I realized that I wanted to be paid for leading the rehearsals. I was and still am very enthusiastic about Playback. Offering my increasing knowledge, preparing carefully the rehearsals, I expected the same enthusiasm from the members. If they didn't show up I felt exploited and offended. Asking for being paid helped me to detach my personal feelings from what was

happening. I stopped taking it personal if someone missed a rehearsal. It supported me also to take my work serious - being worth being paid for. Changing such a rule (after about one year !) released intense discussions. Money stands as a metaphor for a lot of things and triggers reactions easily. One member left. But even within turbulent conversations we managed to value common yes-factors and hold them in our minds : The purpose of the company and the connection to each other basing on respect; the will to communicate and to find a possible consensus. This made it easier to reconcile opposing needs. We also learned that a certain degree of flexibility would create more possibilities for members to stay in the company and develop our capacity to say yes to each other.

Going on we said yes to:

Internal yes of the company:

Yes to each other.

The Playback work is very personal. Meeting weekly the same people means also that you have to want to meet them. It is important to keep connected and to create together a good atmosphere.

Yes to respect each other.

Of course we had disagreements and arguments due to misunderstandings and wrong interpretation. Personal feelings came up and mingled with other issues. We learned about the crotchets of everyone - to learn to accept these and still taking the person serious is important.

Yes to communication.

Feeling hurt, wanting to leave, being angry - all these human feelings come up in company life. It is essential to communicate well, to take risks in what you share. How do you feel ? What do you need now ? What are you missing ?

Yes to the common purpose.

From the start, we had agreed to perform. Yet, it took us a whole year of weekly rehearsals until we felt ready to confront a performance. This is a very long time for a company that actually wants to perform. Somehow we managed to keep the spirit up. We held the collective confidence, that one day it would happen.

Yes to trial and error.

Yes to the right to try and error creates space to grow for everyone. It is also a yes to tolerance and generosity for every one in the group.

Yes to trust.

Within ups and downs of company life, trust is like the essential fluid that keeps the engine smoothly going. Trust is required in many places: amongst each other, trust to the leader, trust to the purpose, trust to the own capacities.

Yes to changes.

Members left, others took a couple of months off, I left to spend half a year in London. Being a company that works with spontaneity it is appropriate to practice to say yes to changes...

External yes of the company:

Yes to a common mode of communication.

How and when do we deal with problems ? Who is leading speak-outs ? Do we need an external supervision to help us clarify group dynamics ?

Yes to establishing rules.

Being in time, come to every rehearsal, take responsibilities aboard, being reliable: It seemed important to have clear structures about the company organization. This had a stabilizing effect on company life. For example: We established the rule, that if you were missing a rehearsal, you had to inform somebody in advance. We then could spend the time rehearsing instead of waiting for missing members.

Yes to breaking rules.

Having established rules we found that not all could stick to it. It was necessary to allow exceptions. This somehow is a paradox. On one side we created rules to stabilize and clarify the organization of the company. On the other side we had to give allowance to break the rules to make it possible for members to stay within the company.

Yes to flexibility.

To create an open, an encouraging and lively space for everyone we had to say yes to being flexible. We had to adopt the " paradoxical yes" to rules:

1. We have rules. They are valid for everyone.

2. It is possible to break them

This also was adapted on the actual work about the theatrical forms. In order to learn the forms properly, there had to be clear rules about Do's and Don'ts. But then an actor all of a sudden came up with an new contradictory idea and, fascinated, we broke the original rule. Jonathan Fox calls it: "Follow the law of spontaneity."

Yes to the leader.

When I started, I was not very experienced neither as a group leader nor as a Playback Practitioner. The more important was the Yes to the leader which the company held up. It had a mutually encouraging effect. Feeling the companies support I explored more and through feedback the mutual trust grew.

Yes to patience.

Being patient with each other, allowing "mistakes" and detours creates a safe and encouraging space.

The Leader.

Sometimes the leader is the only one who knows about Playback theatre. So her/his task besides gathering the people, organizing a room, getting the whole thing going, is to teach Playback and to motivate the group. Often the leader finds himself in a bunch of different roles: Organizer, artistic director, teacher, conductor, leader of rehearsals, promoter... As the company life gets more settled it is possible to hand roles over to other people in the company. This distributes power and responsibility more equally in the company. It is not always easy to do it. Company members get accustomed to "the way it is"; some are busy in their outside life and don't want to take on other duties. For me as leader it was not easy to let go of "my way of doing things". It is enriching to share roles. But to me, it was important as well to take roles and responsibilities. On one hand, this was stabilizing: everyone knew, who is in charge. And I learned a lot - also, to let go and trust others as well. So I could relax more and concentrate on my job.

This is my "yes-collection" for the leader:

Internal yes:

Say yes to riding a rollercoaster.

Especially in the beginning I found that my state of mind would bounce between enthusiasm and hopelessness. What kept me going was my determination that I just wanted to do Playback theatre with a company and would somehow manage to achieve this goal.

Say yes to myself.

Accept and cherish myself as a leader including both: assets and deficiencies. Accepting and learning to be gentle with myself, trying to adapt the yes-factors about patience and trial and error is still an ongoing process..

Say yes to frustration.

Theatre work sometimes is unpredictable. Not everything that is offered to the company finds approval. To perform Playback theatre it takes various skills and it takes time to learn and time to teach them. It is good to have a vision and it is essential to give it the time to blossom.

External yes:

Say yes to doubt and criticism.

Being strong enough to allow members to express their feelings and observations. Sometimes I felt very hurt and threatened by this. Wanting to "do Playback right", I sometimes also mistook questions and suggestions for criticism on Playback or on myself.

Say yes to making decisions.

Taking leadership also means, to make decisions - which never please everybody - and deal with the results - which never please everybody either.

Say yes to reactions.

Being able to deal with all kinds of reactions, of which many do not relate so much with the leader but with the reacting persons way of dealing with an authority. (Which the leader always represents whether he is aware of it or not.)

Say yes to every member.

Staying in contact and in communication with "difficult members" and members in crisis. Let members have their "tantrums". Sometimes it is good to let time work, not everything has to be cleared right on the spot.

Say yes to (im)patience.

All these yes "didn't grow in one day on the tree..."And somehow, they represent a constant challenge. As I observe our strive for the future I learned about their importance. I am getting better in letting them grow. I also learn to be more patient with my own impatience.

I.3. New challenges

Playback-Theater Zürich exists now for three years. All in all we have been fairly constant: From eleven members right now, eight were in the company from the start. My mother once told me, that marriage to her was like living in the changing seasons. There is spring with curiosity, passion and the wish to grow; there is summer with the warmth and the ripening corn; there is autumn, the time of storm and harvest and there is winter, the time for rest and stillness. Company life as well seems to follow seasons as nature does. We are passing through these transformations with all the joys and pains...Right now we are dealing with quite a challenge. It is the fact that we don't share the same purpose anymore: Some of us want to perform many times, earn money with Playback theatre, ready to rehearse often. Some of us prefer to perform just once a month sharing the pleasure of being together. To me, the two preferences are contradictory, they can hardly be united in one group. So we are approaching a separation. For everyone this possibility is scary and painful. We are having talks and sway from one solution to another, not yet being able to decide. Not even knowing *h o w* we should decide...Our capacity to say yes to changes is truly challenged. There is a tension in the air which is not comfortable and still this process needs time. So the yes to patience and trust is important. But also the yes to my own needs and wishes, the readiness to stand for what I really want, being careful *and* honest.

Yes to let go - of dear members, of the original Playback-family. Yes to a time of turbulence where everyone feels unsettled. Yes to give time to the process. I realize that this is important. Feelings calm down, new ideas grow, members get accustomed to new outlooks. This phase of re-orientation to me has also a clarifying and empowering effect. Every member has the chance to speak and to be heard with his/her wish and thus has to clarify his/her position. Together we want to create a solution that gives space for growth in the different directions.

PART II

The conductor

The actor

The audience

II. The roles within the Playback Theatre Company

In the first part I was looking at Playback companies, performing and non performing, and at the role of the leader. In the second part I would like to look at the roles within performing Playback companies. As main roles I distinguish the conductor, the actors and the audience. There are other possible roles within a company. For example: The artistic director who is responsible for the artistic contents and alignment of rehearsals and show; the commercial director who is in charge of marketing and selling; the stage manager, who takes charge of the needs around performances. Some of the roles can be held by several people (i.e. directors), some can be switched in turns (i.e. stage manager). In the following I want to focus on the main roles of conductor, actor and audience. What are their yes-factors? I am also looking at the elements that help create an inviting, encouraging and opening atmosphere: How can we create a yes-mood ?

II. 1. The Conductor

"Being able to trust others apart, if you have learned to trust yourself, you have accomplished something."

Hazrat Inayat Khan.

II.1. a) Before the performance

The task of the conductor is very complex. The conductor has often many roles which sometimes are conflicting. The two most obvious ones to me are: Being the conductor with a leading role that holds many responsibilities and being myself with my personal feelings. This can bring up a lot of internal tension. For example: As conductor I am responsible for the whole performance, creating the frame around it as well as the vessel for the performance itself. On the other hand, there is my personal self with feelings and reactions to what is happening: I am nervous before a show, it is hard to keep patience to cope with late comers, changing schedules, time delay and all the other surprises. Some events can trigger reactions which are very personal, but have an effect on the company. What happened at one of our performances illustrates this: On a jubilee Playback-Theater Zürich was one event amongst others . There was a delay in the schedule. The actors were quietly enjoying their dinner, calculating, that our show would be late as well. Checking with the organizer I found out that he wanted us to perform at the scheduled time. I hurried back to the actors, telling them and expecting everyone to hurry up so we could start the warm-up in time. A woman looked at me and said: "I have to have my cigarette first". An other actor wanted to have coffee, a third was saying : "Never mind if we are late". No one seemed to move. At this point I felt completely abandoned. I felt angry and helpless, not only dis- respected but rejected. Although all the actors ended up being ready for warm-up - for which we had instead of the scheduled 30 minutes 15 left - I was so upset and angry that I had to leave. Of course, everyones mood then dropped as well. Analyzing why my reaction was so strong, I realized that a personal handicap of mine had interferred strongly with my ability as a conductor to stay calm and supportive: If I have the feeling, that an agreement is broken (if a schedule previously agreed upon is not respected) and that people let me wait I get very easily into emotions. A relict of my childhood where I often had to wait for hours without knowing

the end. In the situation of high-pressure, where I made an effort to be calm and to cope well with the stressful situation - this "refusal" of the actors was just too much. My very personal impulses took over...

Yes-factors before the performance:

Internal yes

Say yes to being in and out.

Saying yes to the tension that arises when as a conductor I am in this duality of being the frame maker and at the same time part of the frame. Being conductor with official tasks, unofficial influence and personal feelings is a constant act of balance. To reconcile the needs of the company given by the situation with my own is not always easy; it is the challenge of reconciling "mood and program" (Acts of Service, J. Fox). It is a challenging moment to practice "Yes to patience" and "Yes to failure".

Yes to share.

Time to share feelings, fears and joys with the company is essential to create a permeable atmosphere where we can welcome our differences in feelings and reactions. After all, it is just this variety that gives the company the richness. Instead of competing and denying each other, it is then possible to let go of some pressure, to feel the support of the group and the comfort of being understood and accepted.

Say yes to cooperate.

Say yes to work in an exploring way to reconcile the different needs. For the conductor, instead of being the "lonely decision-machine" it is more productive to share experiences and ideas in the company, to ask members for their view and ideas how to solve a problem.

Say yes to be weak.

By allowing myself to share my own deficiencies, I free myself from having to live up to the burden of an ideal. If I as the "captain of the ship" show the crew that I am human and need support, I challenge the crew to be inventive. This also opens the way to the support and the creativity of the members, to fruitful sources for solving problems and sorting out disagreements.

Say yes to coherence.

As shown above, actions and emotions from one member have an influence on all of the company. The company reminds me of a delicate web - every vibration can be felt everywhere. To think on how to create a "positive field", how to share responsibilities and accept each other in times of stress brings relief. We are experiencing with an arrival/ warm-up schedule that stays the same for every performance and includes enough time to relax or to cope with surprises. So the beginning before the beginning becomes part of the ritual of the performance.

Say yes to surprise.

I found that with almost every performance I confront new situations. If I thought, I managed this issue - for sure another one is peeping around the corner. In one show we had a very generous teller. In the next one there is a very timid one. Then comes the funny guy who turns every phrase into a joke... The process of learning how to adapt or how to resist - is never finished. (Playback-)Life is always ready to present a new challenge.

Yes to be concerned for the whole.

Preliminary the conductor needs to think about the context and the purpose of the performance, the kind of audience that is expected, the themes that might emerge or will be present. She considers possible sources of power and difficulties for the performance, concerns of the organizer, contents of the warm-up... Yes to investigate, to listen carefully and to integration is essential, as well as yes to keeping the integrity and purpose of Playback theatre.

External yes

Yes to communicate.

As conductor I am sometimes on a lonesome post. Being the bridge between actors and audience puts me in a no-where-land. In order to feel as part of the group it is important to share my situation. Actors do not necessarily understand the loneliness of the conductor. A ritual (before or after the performance) helps me to connect to the company, so I feel I belong and I am supported by the actors.

Yes to be meticulous.

How can we prepare ourselves best before a performance ? What does everyone need ? How can a consensus be found ? Which is a good schedule? How do we warm-up? When do we eat ? How much time do we need to prepare ? To discuss these points together and to make a clear plan ahead helps to bring everyone's attention to these details which can - if neglected - become quite dominant.

Yes to support.

I learn to delegate tasks or to ask for help. Not everything that needs to be taken care of before a performance must lie on my shoulders. We are experimenting for example with handing over parts of the warm-up. It consists of many parts. We need to warm up physically, vocally, personally, as company and to the theme. Not all aspects have to be covered by the conductor. Of course, "yes to support" means "yes to let go" and to trust that the way others do the work - which is not my way - works out all the same.

Say yes to the actors.

Conductor and actors are dependent from each other. I need to trust the actors, trust their capacity to deal with what's coming up. If I am "sitting on ants", watching anxiously every move they make I am rather intimidating the actors than having any good influence. It is too late to change anything done on stage: for this moment, the conductor's task is over. The story is told and handed over to the actors. It is now their turn.

Yes to be curious and careful.

Every performance demands preparation. Within a commissioned performance it is necessary to investigate carefully: What are the expectations ? Who will be the audience ? How can the issue be brought up in an organic and encouraging way ? What will help? What might come into the way ? How do we start? How do we end ?

II.1. b) Yes-factors during the performance.

The conductor has a key-role in the performance. She creates the frame and guards it. He inspires the audience to talk. She cares for the teller and hands over his material to the actors. She holds the reaction of teller and the audience. She waves the many-coloured strings into the carpet

of this very day. She is a "naive enquirer who sees the world as a benign place which is full of diverse treasures to be revealed. The conductor's purpose is to explore and discover other ways of viewing the world." ("How many arrows will I need ?" Mary Good).

When I started the Playback-Theater Zürich I knew that I wanted to perform. Playback-Theatre to me seemed to be the synthesis of art and communication, the bridge from personal to universal, the vessel for the eternity of the moment, the true place for the celebration of life within theatre. I longed to develop the qualities necessary to be the medium, the shaman who catches the essence of relation and helps deepen human encounter. The big handicap was: I wanted to do it in my home country, which is Switzerland. Yes: watches, mountains, chocolate. Yes: Precision, discretion, correctness. Upright people who live in their proper place busy guarding the world's money and watching over their reputation. How on earth would they ever answer in a public performance to questions like: "Give me a feeling for your breakfast ?" It took an awful lot of courage to do our first performance. As I wrote earlier on, we rehearsed for a whole year. It was Deborah Pearson who gave us the final kick : " You are good enough. If you want to grow more, it is now time to perform." Ears of the Swiss culture based on quality standards we needed allowance to perform. The confirmation "You are good enough" was the magic word. We finally dared to say: yes to Playback-Theatre ! Yes to growth ! Yes to us ! We performed. And it went well. Since this first time we have had many different opportunities to perform: Official congress-meetings with 400 people and one hour time; a little village of which 60 inhabitants came, all knowing each other and being very careful of what to tell; a wedding with some "really funny guy", an intimate birthday in a very tiny cottage.

Although the context and the audience of a performance may vary there are some yes-factors for the conductor that remain.

Yes-factors during the performance:

Internal yes.

Yes to being multiple.

The conductor has many roles within one performance. She/he is the host and master of ceremonies, welcoming the audience, warming them up to the event and being present for their wellbeing. She is the guide who leads and structures the performance, setting limits and opening new areas. He is also groupworker who feels the dynamics, knows about

them and (re-) acts accordingly, without being judgmental or sentimental. She is an investigator, collecting and arranging information from the audience and the teller. He is a listener and (meta-)communicator, artistic director and producer of interaction. She can have the role of the trickster who points out the unspoken in a witty way, who dares playing the fools role. This role is related to the one of the shaman who creates the ritual which gives the frame and who has the overview to what is happening to the individual and to the community. Last but not least, the conductor is also show(wo)man - how similar the word showman is to shaman! - who invigorates and stimulates the performance, enjoying her job, eager to enchant and captivate the audience. Covering so many at times even paradoxical roles is a challenge that demands flexibility, clarity, concentration and consciousness.

Yes to imperfection .

Being active includes making mistakes. To fill all these roles perfectly seems superhuman anyway, so the conductor has to live with the yes to imperfection. "Failure is not the poison but the spice of oral composition" writes Jonathan Fox ("Acts of service"). Integrating failure and imperfection as resourcefull parts of Playback transforms our fear and resistance towards it into an open mind. Instead of being cautious and timid and being fixed on "wanting to do it right", we relax and playfully say yes risk. Thus imperfection can become the fertile ground for inner and outer growth.

Yes to humility.

What a Playback theatre company offers is a gift of the moment. It is spontaneously created, new born every time. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the german poete and writer talks about success as being bliss, a gift of the gods. (Gelingen ist Gnade, "Success is bliss") So, we can preapre as best as we can, have the best circumstances, a great audience - everything seems to be perfect for the "gift of the gods." But it is never to be expected. Maybe it will happen and maybe not. To cherish the moments of bliss as well as the moments of imperfection, considering both not being totally in our power is yes to humility and generosity.

Yes to surrender

The conductor opens herself to the audience, to the teller, to the fate of the moment. Surprises of many kinds will happen, pleasant ones and unpleasant ones... To surrender without judgment and animosity is a challenging and rewarding attitude. I remember the dialogue in one of my favorite books, "Illusions" by Richard Bach. The main character,

Richard, happens to meet the Messiah, who, tired of being the Messiah, is working incognito as a pilot of a little aircraft, travelling the U.S., earning money by letting people fly. They decide to travel together and work together. By and by Richard realizes who his new companion is and starts to learn from him. So, one day they are watching the sky.

" Pretty sky" I said.

" Is it a perfect sky ?" asked Don (=the reluctant Messiah)

" Well, it is always a perfect sky, Don."

" Are you telling me, that even though it is changing every second, the sky is always a perfect sky ?"

" Gee, I am smart. Yes !"

Yes to be.

"He gives birth to new ideas because he doesn't try to hold" says Erich Fromm in his book "Haben oder sein"(To have or to be). He describes the attitude of a person who lives *through being* and not through doing: Someone who does not want to shine and impress, but reacts in a "spontaneous and productive way, forgetting himself so neither his knowledge, his position, nor his Ego stand in the way - and this is why he can concentrate and tune in to the other person and her ideas." The ideal conductor is a "Being-Person", not a "Having- Person": " The Being-Person trusts the fact that she is alive and that something new will emerge if only she has the *"courage to let go and to be responsive."* Then, the conversation will "not longer be an exchange of goods (knowledge, information, status) but become a *dialog* where it doesn't matter who is right."

Yes to be an intermediary.

So the conductor gives away her opinion and convictions, puts away her Ego and says yes to offering her service as an intermediary, as a channel for the stories, the themes and the energies that show themselves this very evening. She makes herself available to allow the "what is" to take form and thus to become visible and understandable. And it is through this, that the quality of this very moment can be seen in a larger context and be embedded in the shared story of the community.

Yes to integrity

The attitude mentioned above in some ways doesn't mean that the conductor be a weather-vane. The conductor is in charge and stands for what doing Playback theatre means to her and to the company. She or he will not allow that egocentric needs will usurp the performance. She has the overview to draw the bow of the dramatic art. This in some ways might appear to be paradoxical to the "yes to be". On many levels the

conductor often reconciles what seems to be paradoxical. There might be something "in the air" about usurpation and misuse which needs to be expressed. Yet, the conductor has to guard, so this need for expression doesn't interfere with the frame of Playback. To suggest the appropriate and thus find the right balance to me sometimes feels like walking on a rope.

Yes to insecurity.

Being open, ready to react spontaneously includes giving up security, renouncing to the comfort of being prepared, of knowing every moment what to do and being sure to be right. A performance demands quick decision-making with no possibility to consider ahead or to go back. Doubt, regret and questioning may follow - baring the consequences of saying "yes to insecurity" in dignity, is part of the role of the conductor.

Yes to authority.

There is the "yes to be, to surrender and to humility" Nevertheless the conductor has also to be an authority. An authority that is based on personality, integration, and selffulfillment: impressing through what this person *is*. A false authority is built on power and exploitation - this can never be the base for a successful conductor.

External yes:

The internal yes have their consequences and their mirrors in the concrete. For example:

Yes to presence.

Being present to what is happening and welcoming any story, basically any teller and any event. "Readiness is all" says Alexander, the body-therapist. The capacity to be alert *and* relaxed, ready to answer creatively to what presents itself, grows through training and performing. Yet, no performance is equal and there is no security. After the performance I feel often somehow "disconnected" and like being "high", maybe due to the fact of two hours of "absolute presence". It takes me some time to cool down.

Yes to the process.

Say yes to the process, trusting what is going on makes sense. This means to feel when it is appropriate to be alert and ready to act and when to relax, watching and listening to what happens.

Yes to let go.

Once the story is told it is handed over to the ability and creativity of the actors. Sit back, let go and enjoy the story for me is not always easy. I suffer if I see things which to my opinion could be done more expressive or if the sense of the story isn't captured. If I am uneasy this has an impact on everyone else too and can be destructive. Say yes to the process, allowing to happen what happens...

Say yes to difficult tellers.

Jonathan mentioned a case when he didn't let the teller tell the story - this happen once in his 20 years of Playback. Most of the tellers are not that abusive or disturbing, but just "normally difficult": They want to tell "just a short story" and go on and on and on. Some come to the teller's chair and stay silent or reluctant, some try to be funny. It is the conductor's task to respect every person on the tellers chair and to give the space so she/he can tell the story. In a recent performance, a woman raised her hand during the opening fluids. "Can you do something about overacting, please!" she said. I didn't understand. "Well, I have seen Playback at many places and it is everywhere the same: The acting is just horrible. It is fake and overdone. And it is the same here. If you continue like this, I will leave." For a moment I was just stunned. Then I asked her, what her feelings were, seeing something she didn't like at all. She said that she wanted to leave, but also wanted to give us one more chance. The actors played this back in pairs and then we continued the performance. So far, this was the ultimate challenge for me to accept truly every teller and every statement.

Say yes to leadership.

It is the conductor who in terms of frame setting makes decisions and sets signals. Questions and linking comments deepen the theme and open up new dimensions. As director, the conductor puts a certain focus to the story's meaning, he indicates the form of presentation. With clear decision-making the conductor puts a frame and thus safety for the community. In every moment there are several possibilities where to go and what to decide. It is essential for the conductor to keep the courage and the energy to decide - even if the decision made feels like having done just the wrong thing.

Yes to surprises.

Playback theatre as theatre of spontaneity holds surprises every moment. The company may have a rough schedule what to do (fluids, pair, stories) - but the reaction of the audience is not predictable, some answers invite to change the schedule. Maybe a story evokes a very heavy mood - then the conductor can not go on with "the programm". She has to react and adapt. Jonathan Fox calls this: reconcile mood and programm. ("Acts of Service", J. Fox)

Yes to incompleteness.

Another favorite book of mine is "Stein und Flöte", a beautiful tale about searching, finding and losing. ("Stein und Flöte", Bergmann). It is the tale of a young man, chosen to be the heir of great wisdom and to receive precious gifts enabling him to be a good king. But he makes a lot of mistakes, he gets tempted by superficial glory, he loses sight of what is important, his life - supposed to be filled with clarity and spirit - often is just very messy. What ever happens in the tale, be it good or bad, always the magical phrase is spoken:

"Und das ist noch lange nicht alles..!" = This not all there is, there is always more to it than we can ever capture. Being alive is striving for completeness - and not having it.

The "Yes to incompleteness" will allow me now to close this chapter and move on to the yes-factor for the actor.

I. 2. The Actor

***"An actor should always do
what he has never done before.
Technic is learned to be thrown off.
All you can do in theatre is to stand by yourself,
to search for the truth and to tell stories.
This is all - and it is very hard and very difficult."
Yoshi Oida***

Being a Playback actor means to say yes to launching yourself deliberately and with pleasure into the unexpected. To say yes to being surprised, challenged, terrified. To say yes to play Hitler, a Banana, a Baby, Marilyn Monroe and a wall - in one only performance. What is it

that makes actors to say yes to all this ? A Playback actor needs to want and to be able to "be of service". Being of service means caring for the community *and* caring for the individual (other than the actor himself, as is the case in ordinary theatre where the celebration of the Ego is almost inevitable). It means to be ready to take over any role given and to explore it as deeply as possible. It means to give life to any kind of existence that is present in a tellers' story. Expressing the experience of the individual teller is expressing the experience of the community as well. Doing this the actor discovers new powers, new shadows, new possibilities within her/himself. A process of inner growth and enrichment takes place. Being an actor holds the great challenge to incorporate many and different roles within one performance. This ability, to step into new, unfamiliar, and sometimes uncomfortable roles grows in an actor who constantly searches to open himself up to the unknown within himself, who allows the shadows to be seen, who doesn't ban the dark and frightening parts of being human but bares to see and incorporate them. In many stories and tales the mirror is a symbol for nostalgia, for recognizing and for seeing unknown parts. In Playback theatre the actor becomes the mirror where the teller can recognize her/himself, feel the yearning for completeness and see new dimensions of his own existence.

Actor and conductor have yes factors in common. For example the "yes to surrender", the "yes to failure", the "yes to be in and out". In the following part I will try to be specific about the actors' yes factors.

Internal yes

Yes to be of service.

Say yes to make yourself available to the needs of the audience, to the their visions and projections as well as to the needs of the moment and the story told. Becoming a living mirror who reveals wishes, dreams, facts.

Yes to be a medium.

The actor is "becoming a media between community members and all powerful cosmic powers"(Acts of Service", J. Fox.)

The actor uses her spontaneity and her intuition. When he listens to teller, other than just the five senses are at operation. So the actor receives information, that is not spoken. Sometimes this information is astonishing or unsettling. An actor who learns to listen and to use these

channels has access to a powerful tool to express the story in a more precise and inspired way. She is open to the "spirits present": allowing them to express themselves.

Yes to revelation.

Following my intuition, I give up the need to control the picture I am giving the audience. Giving myself fully to the moment and not holding back means that I do not hide, that I am transparent and do not hold any resistance. This is the ground where I can take on any role, letting go of my Ego and transforming into the role. Viola Spolin writes in her book about improvisation: "Transforming whether it be of character, object or idea seems to be essential what must take place within every scene of improvisation." ("Theaterimprovisation", Viola Spolin.)

Yes to humility.

Say yes to the renunciation to be brilliant. I remember one of our worst performances. It happened after a very successful one. So we got on the stage, thinking: "Oh, well, now we know how to do it. We are good." Well, we weren't. We were slow, inaccurate, superficial. Although the public didn't leave - to us it felt horrible. Within Playback theatre, every performance is opening night !

Yes to fear.

This weakening feeling in the stomach, the sudden urge to hide, the overwhelming question flashing in the brain: Why did I say yes to this ?! - Fright. Fright can be a very good guideline if we don't let it become an obstacle. It keeps all senses awake, turns on creativity, power of action, if we don't let it overwhelm us but take it as a friend, a source of energy. Jonathan Fox distinguishes anxiety and fear (Acts of Service): Anxiety shuts down our spontaneous capacities, we block and stop following our impulses. Fear releases spontaneous capacities, it is a sign "that what we do has value", it is a "green light to go on. Knowing in the moment whether that sinking sensation is anxiety or fear requires quite a high level of self-knowledge for actors who truly want to be agents of transformation."

Yes to everlasting development.

An artist - an even more so an theatre improviser - is never "finished". There is always more to discover, more to learn, more to refine in expression and understanding, more to develop on all levels: as an artist, as a company member, as an individual.

Yes to curiosity.

I think, an actor should be curious about her/himself and about others. Increasing my selfknowledge and understanding, investigating reasons, coherence, background, connection within human relationships nurishes my capacities of understanding and acting. Finding metaphors and analogues in history, literature, art or fairy tales is a main source of inspiration and deepens my sense for what is behind story.

Yes to fun of adventure.

With this I mean to basically have fun and enjoy all these challenges, failures and rewards within Playback. To celebrate the playful, crazy, inventive, explosive, courageous child in me. To celebrate the courage of saying yes to realizing a spontaneous, unpredictable, surprising kind of theatre which truly mirrors the challenges of life.

External yes

Yes to spontaneity.

Spontaneity gives me the choice of action. It is the personal and archetypal source of creativity. Being spontaneous I am in contact with myself *and* others, I realize and *take in* what happens *outside* of me and I realize and *give out* what happens *inside* of me. I am having access to my inner child, "which is free and wants to play" (Philip Gaulier). Of course it is not that easy. Many NO ! arise suddenly and powerfully, not tolerating this anarchical freedom: I censor myself. Instead of the first impulse I take the second - because the first one is too revealing, too frightening and seldomly decent. Keith Johnstone, the Canadian teacher and inventor of Theatre Sports, writes that a main reason why we often block spontaneity is because our first impulses are most of the time obscene or vulgar. (Keith Johnstone, Impro).

Yes to risk.

Improvising is saying yes to risks. Without taking risks, there is no creativity. Taking risks can mean to abandon all rules agreed upon and follow an own impulse - sometimes accompanied by horror about the own courage and about the result. According to Keith Johnstone, unexperienced improvisors tend to avoid troublesome situations. They play around it, trying to stay "safe" (i.e. out of trouble) - which is from the dramatic and storytelling point of view neither efficient nor interesting. The true story - which often is about having been in trouble - doesn't get

played. Saying yes to risk as an actor includes the courage of letting myself getting into trouble on stage.

Yes to cooperation.

Once a friend of mine who is a very expressive solo-performer with a great comical talent joined the company. I was very proud. In the performance we did, he was the star. Everyone laughed at him, everything he did was hilarious. But somehow, the stories got lost. And so did the rest of the company. I wasn't unhappy when he left: He needs to have the stage alone. But a Playback performance needs to be held by a team - not by a star. To cooperate as actors in the play is essential. This means to maintain on the level of acting the relation from actor to actor and to create on the level of the story the relations amongst the roles or characters. Philip Gaulier calls it "complicité". In his teaching complicité (=the playful, supporting, encouraging relationship of the actors amongst each others), is one of the cornerstones for good theatre. It means to make offers but also to give in and pick up offers of other actors; to be present, to act and react; to literally play a game together with your partner.

Yes to incertitude.

Improvising is following the moment and taking risk. Changing roles quickly, making decisions quickly involves doubt and incertitude. If it comes to the worst, the actor feels like he/she has messed up the story completely, ruined the pair, missed the sense of the fluid. Sometimes this might even be the case.

Yes to variety.

Yes to variety is yes to taking any role in any given story.

Some actors are having difficulties to take evil roles: murderer, violater, the mean guy, the bad girl. To me this is the big gift of Playback theatre. To get the chance to literally play everything ! So within me I can experience the whole range of human behaviour - in the safe space of theatre and without the consequences from real life. For the teller it is essential that there is no judgement, no cowardness, no reluctance to his story and to the roles. For the actor though the switche from one role to another can be quite demanding.

Yes to being uncomfortable.

Playback Theatre holds great pleasure. It also holds difficult situations: The chance to fail is always present. The personal frustration when having failed. The incertitude whether the audience likes what we are doing. Not having understood the role or the story well. Being strongly

touched by a role and finding it hard to switch. Not getting direct feedback. Feeling frustrated, angry, sad, helpless, ashamed... To know that this (and more...) can happen is a challenge to learn how to deal with feeling uncomfortable and still being fully present.

Yes to what is.

Getting to know myself well, learning to see myself as a part and as a result of the condition I grew up and am living in helps me to understand others. It helps to accept what is and what shows itself right now - and to let go of the need to change it. To bear this in mind encourages to say yes to any role and any way that the story will be acted out.

Yes to receive and to give.

The actor has to reconcile two very different states of mind. While listening to the story, he/she is receptive, taking in information through all possible channels, letting it vibrate inside, associating, reflecting. After just a couple of minutes though the actor has to be ready to act. That means to turn from the inner world to the outward in order to become the messenger of the role. It means to switch swiftly from the receptive and contemplating inner state to the expressive and dramatic outer state, able to turn into the intermediary artistically transforming the received material.

Yes to pleasure.

The pleasure to be on stage, to play, to have an audience - it is absolutely essential for any actor be it Playback theatre or not. "Le public ne vient pas pour voir votre art mais pour voir votre plaisir. C'est cela ce qu' on achète" says Philip Gaulier, famous teacher at Lecoq School of Mime in Paris, now running his own school in London. It means: "The audience doesn't come to see your art but to see your pleasure. That's what they are paying for." The great pleasure to play the beautiful game of make believe, of "as if" - it is the ground the actor grows on.

II. 3. The Audience

***There is no use in thinking that the world
could be changed through ideologies and messages. The theatre
should be used for what it is:
a place of entertainment, of joy,***

of mystics, of magic and enchantment.

Noel Coward.

Before every performance I am nervous, asking myself: will they participate ? In Playback theatre the audience takes an essential part in the performance. It is not enough that they are just present as in regular theatre. More, they need to participate, to share, to take risks...Without the audience's involvement the actors literally don't have anything to play. . And their participation is not meant to be a non-committal comment to the daily news or the weather. What we want from the audience is a personal contribution: *their stories*. We want to hear how they feel, what they like and don't like, what has happened to them today or yesterday or 10 years ago. We want them to trust enough to tell what they would tell a friend. And only if they dare to tell us we can offer our gift: ***The expressive power of artistic transformation - wrapped in spontaneity and pleasure.***

First I want to look at the internal and external yes of the audience. Then I want to look at the questions: What creates or encourages a "yes-atmosphere" ? What does it need to make people feel safe so they trust and open up ?

II.3.a) Yes-factors

Collecting the yes-factors it becomes clear that again some of them are shared not only between conductor and actors but also between the audience and the company. To avoid repetition I will not mention every shared yes-factor but would like to focus on the most important ones.

Internal yes-factors.

Yes to surprise.

Spontaneity, surprise, risk, failure, adventure, avant-garde - that is what people often associate with the word improvisation. So, a possible audience member has to have a bit of an adventurer-spirit and share the pleasure for the unpredictable. Surprise, good and bad, is essential to adventure; an open mind essential to a good Playback audience.

Yes to risk.

Someone who goes to an impro-show says "yes to risk".. Theatre is direct and physical. It "takes you in". Everybody who goes to any theatre show in some ways says yes to deliver him/herself to the actors and to

the show. To deliver oneself to an *improvised* performance is definitely saying "yes to risk".

Yes to failure.

"Failure is not the poison but the spice of improvisation," says Jonathan Fox ("Acts of service"). In the swiss culture, perfection is a main goal. Mistakes and failure are regarded as almost immoral and therefore should be avoided at any prize - you dare only to show yourself if you are "good". Going to see Playback theatre an audience member has to say "yes to failure" (as the company does), a risky and highly freeing act.

Yes to participation.

Playback theatre depends very much on the audience, not only on the presence but on the interaction. If the audience is silent, nothing will happen. And this is obvious to everyone quite soon. Yes to participation, internal and external, is essential.

External yes-factors.

Yes to be here.

Being present in the theatre, the people in the audience have said "yes to be here". They have come all the way and are ready to spend two hours on something they don't know instead of going to the cinema, going to dine or just relaxing at home. They might have some phantasies ("Playback that word reminds me of music, are they going to play instruments ? Impro - I saw this television show, I wonder whether they do the same?") and fears ("Do I *have* to speak ? Do I even have to *play myself* ? Heavens, let her not pick *me* !"). Yet, they are here.

Yes to watch and listen.

For an audience new to Playback the direct and metaphoric transformation of emotions into theatre sometimes is surprising or even appalling. ("I didn't pay to watch therapy !") It takes some time to "catch them". If they shut down it is really difficult - but if they watch and listen, we can go on.

Yes to participate.

Playback is interactive, the audience takes part in the performance. If they are too timid, too cautious - nothing will happen. To overcome the feelings of shame, shyness, unworthiness and to dare to share is a main step the audience has to accomplish.

Yes to get in touch.

Playback theatre is interactive in many directions. There is the contact with the conductor and the actors, the contact with other members of the audience and the contact with one's own memories and feelings. An audience member is invited to experience all this contacts as fully as possible.

Yes to sharing.

"Getting in touch" is essential for Playback theatre but it is not enough. Telling moments, expressing feelings, recalling a story : without the courage of members of the audience to share themselves publicly, Playback theatre wouldn't be possible.

Yes to theme .

Some companies perform with a given theme, some don't. The theme has to be distinct and yet general. It is the conductors task to "throw out his net wide" (Deborah Pearson) so people find their entry into the theme.

Yes to conductor.

The conductor has to be liked by the audience and she has to appear trustworthy. It is his task to establish a good relationship to the audience and to keep it through all possible calamities. This way the audience will open up and follow the company when the theme is deepened through the performance.

There are more yes-factors for the audience, it would be very difficult to make the list complete. I now want to look at the second part of this chapter: what can help to create or encourage a yes atmosphere ?

II.3.b) Yes-atmosphere

In February 1995 we did a performance with the theme "Say Yes - say No". At the entrance everyone had to pick a paper with either yes or no written on it. Turning it around, you would find the opposite word on it as well. In the corridor and the performing room was a drawing: It was the word "YES" written out of only "no's". After having thanked that everyone had said "yes to coming here", I asked what they did expect to have said yes to. These were some of the answers: "Something funny. Something with dance and music. Something really wild. Something with a lot of feelings and very erotic. Something not so boring like the last theatre

performance I saw and where I left. Something unpredictable and spontaneous."

I told them, that we too didn't know what would happen tonight so we would share a common "yes to adventure". Then I invited the audience to find a moment today when they had said yes to something or somebody. Getting up from bed, walking to the office instead of driving, picking up an unexpected offer... We included moments of having said no as well and expanded the time period, looking farther back in life. We did pairs and fluids. Then the audience was asked to turn around and to share a yes- or a no-story with their neighbor. After the talk of the audience members with each other, we had five yes-stories told and acted out. The first story told about a reluctant yes that turned into joy. The person had to get up early, using an alarmclock and four cups of strong coffee to wake up and up to now she didn't feel great about this new day. On the way to her office she passed a little park in the middle of the city. All of a sudden she noticed that a perfect spring morning was happening to her: There was the fresh light of a cloudless sunrise, a sky of deep blue, the Linden trees growing tiny and incredibly green leaves. Hidden in the branches the birds were having a specially arranged morning concert. Her feelings switched to a clear "yes to life", feeling rewarded for having gotten up.

The second story was about a new born baby boy. To celebrate him his father brought fresh bakery to the school, filled with vanilla cream. The elder brothers comment was: "I am glad it is a boy. If it had been a girl, Daddy wouldn't have brought vanilla-filled bakery." The teller which was the boys teacher was very upset. To her the story meant: "Yes to a boy - no to a girl" .

The next story told about a beloved old godmother living far away and a telephone-phobia: "I want to talk to her - but I can't stand making phone calls." We had a funny and touching scene where the phobia fought with the love to reach the godmother.

The fourth teller recalled her way to come to the performance which was full of obstacles and full of "yes with regrets": A friend talked her into coming to tonight's performance. In spite of feeling utterly tired and dreaming of a quiet evening at home, she said yes. Having to hurry to be in time, she lost her keys on the way and went back: No keys. She hurried back again to the theatre - by then the doors were closed...When she told the story she still wasn't sure whether she regretted the initial yes to come here. After having seen her story, I could feel that now she finally had arrived here. The last story talked about difficult travelling in Nicaragua, about arbitrariness, power and money changing a formerly strict "no!" smoothly into "yes". We ended the performance with questions for the wise being.

Creating a yes atmosphere.

Safety.

Safety is the key-word to me if I think about creating a yes-atmosphere. Feeling safe might encourage audience members to tell very difficult stories. The following points of observation all fit under the big hat of "safety".

Cooperation.

Create Cooperation is the magic word from Heather Robb, company leader in Le Havre, France. Create the lust and the will to cooperation on all levels: actor to actor, actor to conductor and vice versa, conductor to audience, audience to audience. If a performance works well it feels like a stream of energy that flows like the tides to and fro between the company and the audience. To increase the will to cooperate it is necessary to ask the right questions. Question that pick up the theme present in this group, that hits "people's yes-points", so they want to answer. Which is the question everyone can say yes to ? What is connecting this audience members ? What is the open, what is the hidden theme ? To what can this particular audience say yes ? The answers to these questions are the ground on which the conductor builds the theme of the evening.

Purpose, relationship, self.

Deborah Pearson mentions purpose, relationship and self as the three cornerstones of a triangle which during the performance have to stay in balance:

What are we doing ? (Content and frame of Playback theatre) How do we relate ? (Conductor - actors - audience - teller) How am I ? (Feelings, ideas, impulses).

Light.

Of course the first impression of the place has an influence and the performers can try to improve within the room what is necessary and possible. Tidiness, fresh air, arrangement of chairs and cloth on the stage...). The light is an important factor which sometimes is not obvious. I am talking about the light that is in the room as well as the stage light. Of course it is nice to have proper stage light but it is not essential (and you need another person for the lights). What is more important is that there is also proper light for the audience. Since we want them to talk to

each other, they should be able to see each other. The conductor too must make eye-contact with the audience and be able to see who wants to get up.

Welcome and warm-up.

Whether performing with a theme or not - we usually think of how to welcome the audience previous to the performance: with little signs distributed on the way, with a song, with candles, with music. And then also, how we will warm them up to the theme. Maybe through a fluid to the theme from the actors, or a song and surely through what the conductor says and suggests in the introduction. In the performance mentioned above, we linked the theme of the evening (Saying Yes) to the audience's daily life, asking "when did you say *yes today.*"

Size

A big room and a lot of spectators make it more difficult to feel safe. We had a performance in an enormous hall (not built for theatre) with 400 young people. It was impossible to keep eye-contact with all of them. The atmosphere was not intimate, the stories stayed more casual. (If the room is made to hold a lot of people for a show, of course, it is different.) Also can too much relationship interfere. Playing in a little village where everyone knew everyone wasn't easy either: No one wanted to reveal too much. The conductor and the company have to consider this given factors when planning the performance.

Speaking.

The way of speech of the conductor can have a big impact on the audience. In our first performance I was terribly nervous. So my pitch was quite high and my way of questioning sounded at times like a school teacher. I also was very direct and fast, rather picking people then waiting until they would rise by themselves. Now I can be more relaxed, my voice calms down, my words come more quiet. There are people who under stress become even faster, and others even slower. Knowing "my" type, I can work more consciously.

Asking well.

With "Asking well" I mean, to be simple and clear, to make myself understood easily. To choose questions that are open and yet distinct and can be answered easily. To talk the language of the audience which can be understood and is not academic.

Listening well.

The German specialist for communication, Friedemann Schulz von Thun, distinguishes four ways of listening. He calls them the four ears of listening: The fact-ear, listening to the facts of the message. The relation-ear: This one takes everything personal, feels easily attacked and offended. The self-revealing-ear: It listens to what the message says about the message-giver. The request-ear wants to do it right for everybody, fit to even unspoken expectations. Every message is considered to hide a request. If I can distinguish my ways of listening, I can control my reaction.

Setting a frame.

Introducing ourselves, telling what we are going to do and what we want from the audience is part of setting a frame and thus giving safety to the audience. The conductor in the role of M.C. keeps the frame during the show.

Ritual.

The ritual parts in Playback theatre are a supporting element as well. They are like cornerstones in the land of improv. They indicate the passage from one state to the other as well as the beginning or ending.

Contact.

Keeping contact with the audience creates safety. I can see and feel what is happening, what is needed. To encourage the audience to make contact amongst themselves, so they get to know "who is here" is important as well. It builds trust to tell.

Caring .

At a performance was a young woman in the tellers chair who started telling what seemed to be "a holy story" e.g. sentimental and sweet. It was about her and her new husband reading the bible and deciding that they wanted to lead their marriage in harmony with the holy book. At first I couldn't help twitching back inside. The more she got into the story the more I could feel her true concern behind, her urge to live her marriage based on respect and truth. I felt ashamed and very happy that I could finally listen to her openly. Respect and care for every teller - whatever he tells, whatever she does - to me is another key to create safety. No one likes to be exposed or ridiculed. Every person getting up has her own personal reason to do so and asks for the chance to be heard with ears open to the story behind.

Respect and acceptance.

The same attitude of respect towards the audience should be shared within the company. Everyone at any given moment does his/her best. Criticism and apologies during the performance are not appropriate, on any level. They create a climate of power and insecurity: In one performance an actress was very unhappy with what another actor had done on stage. She made a face, her mood dropped. This was contagious: seeing and feeling her bad humour, everyone became unsure and inhibited, the original verve of playing vanished... If we can keep an atmosphere of respect and acceptance there is a common ground for openness and trust.

Imperfection.

We play with the risk of failure. And sometimes we do "fail". But we stay on the stage. "We are not perfect. And we are still good" said Jonathan at a workshop. I think it is touching to see people failing this moment and in the next moment being open again for the next challenge. It is freeing and encouraging. It is a metaphor for the never-ending strive of humanity for completeness.

Feedback.

Feedback to the teller, to the audience as a recognition, an answer to what has been offered, embraces and rewards the interaction. Feedback has not to be verbal, it can be just a glance or a nod.

Humour.

As defined by theorists of humour, laughter is a natural echo of freedom, it "liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great inner censor".(Mikhail Bakhtin, "Laughter and Freedom"). And it builds bridges over cultures, races, meanings, differences, connecting in the common freedom of laughter.

Part III

Yes in stories

My mother Raila is now 91 years old and she is a remarkable woman. I would like to tell two stories about her.

She used to live in a beautiful 5-room flat full with the most gorgeous furnitures and pictures. At the age of about 84 she was starting to think about moving to a home for elderly people. Her nephew runs a beautiful one. So she called him and told him, that she just wanted to have a look. He told her that by chance just now a room was empty. She went. She visited the room, the common rooms, the whole place. Two days later he called her, saying that if she wanted to live there she should decide now, because the waiting list was very long and it could be that there wouldn't be a place for a long time. So she decided: She sold her furniture and moved within two days from the five room flat to the single room in the elderly home. Leaving behind an independent life of her own, saying yes to a more restricted life in a community.

I am now 93 years old and I have become blind. I don't mind living, obviously it is not time to go now. I almost died a couple of years ago - too bad, it didn't happen. With 85 I had to be brought urgently to the hospital. They gave me painkillers and then wanted to operate. I was very happy. My family came to see me, and I thought, that this is a great way to go. I would just die in narcosis, without pain. When I woke up it took me quite a while to realize that I was still alive in this world. I was terribly disappointed.

Told by Raila, 93

A late yes.

After having lived together for 17 years, my mother's partner asked her to marry him. When asked why he waited so long, he said: I was afraid that if I had asked her before she might have said no.

She said yes.

Told by Noldi, my mother's second husband, 52.

When I was 16 I had a true romance which lasted for two years already - in summer-vacation. The third summer he proposed to me - just as I

always had imagined it in my dreams. But instead of being happy, I burst into tears.

Told by Barbara, 39.

It was 2 a.m. I was lying in my bed and sleeping. Ploff, ploff, walk into the bathroom. I washed my hair und filled the bathtub. I enjoyed the warm water. In the house, everything was quiet. My husband Hugo was still sleeping. Lucas, my son was busy with his dreams. My friend Ricarda had her bed in the cellar. Big Wake-up ! 4 o'clock. Hurry. Do we have everything ?

Just keep quiet. Out of the house and off we go.

We came into a beautiful big room. Everything is being checked. *It* was ready and so was I. I pushed and I said yes. Our daughter Lorraine saw the light of day.

Told by Monika, 32.

If it (=saying yes /saying no) comes from the heart, in an essential and existencial way, it means: I stand by myself and it makes me happy - whether it is a "yes" or a "no". Because in any case it is a "yes" to myself - without the fear of consequences because I am strong enough to cope with them. I once said yes to a partner, from all of my heart and deeply convinced. I believed in him and in our relationship. This believe was strong as never felt before. Within the relationship many violations happened. I lacked the courage to say "no" to him. This "no" was a "no" against myself in favor of my projections and illusions. Yes to illusions leads to loss of the self. Yes to myself leads to "no to illusions" and "no to getting hurt", it means aliveness and identity

Told by Chrige, 39.

When my daughter Anna was 16 years old, she wanted to travel to Berlin and marry a crazy guy. This was long before she had learned a profession. I said "no" to her plan. She told me recently that at that time we had spent the whole night sitting in the corridor and argueing. I stayed firm. Anna remembered that a couple of months later she was very happy about my "no".

Told by Bettina, 52.

This story is from General Schwarzkopf, he tells it in his autobiography. When he was in official service in the middle east, he received a formal dinner-invitation. The dignitaries who brought the invitation asked him whether he would like to put on the clothes of the country. Schwarzkopf, a successful General, representing in the country the most powerful nation of the world, didn't think whether he personally preferred to wear

his own uniform with the medals or the very unfamiliar burnus. His thinking was: "They would not ask me that question, if they wouldn't want me to say yes." So he decided to wear the burnus.

Told by Tobias, 27

Saying yes also means to accept one's fate. I think this is one of the most powerful attitudes towards life in general: Saying yes to what life brings to you - to the beautiful as to the heavy. Not suffering passively, but "yes" as an active attitude.

Told by Doris, 64

Ruedi lived for 20 years with his girlfriend who is 25 years younger than himself. They never got married. He is now 76 years old. He had to go to the hospital to operate cancer and was very ill. Now he is out of the hospital. He has proposed to Maria, they will get married in July 95. He said: I want to marry her now, when I am still healthy - so no one can say, that I was out of my mind doing it.

Told by Ruedi, 76

Yes in poetry

Unio mystica

I am here because finally
there is no escape from myself.

I will stay on the run until I reveal myself within your
hearts. Until I can not bear to share my most inner secret
with you
I can not be released from it.

And as long as I am still afraid to be seen through
I can neither recognize myself nor others.
I will remain lonesome.

Where else then on our common ground
can I find such a mirror ?
Here within the community I can meet myself,
not as giant of my dreams and not as dwarf
of my fears, but as human being.

Here I can take root and grow,
not anymore alone like in death but alive for me and you.

Hanna Magdalena

Simple phrases

While I stand the shadow
falls.

The morning sun
sketches the first drawing.

Blooming is a fatal
business.

I have agreed to it.
I live.

(Author unknown)

The three carnations

One stands in the summerwind

one in the garden, one on the lawn.

Bettina, 9 Years

Mistakes

are
just
unexpected
learning experiences.

Richard Bach.

What it is

It is nonsensical
says reason.
It is what it is
says love.
It is disaster
says calculation.
It is nothing but pain
says fear.
It is hopeless
says insight.
It is what it is
says love.
It is ridiculous
says pride.
It is imprudent
says prudence.
It is impossible
says experience.
It is what it is
says love.

Erich Fried

Yes in pictures

Yes-Song

Yes to ... !

***The affirmation of one's own life
- that is, to accept one's own destiny in its manifestation of every
moment -
is the highest act of trust.
It is so incredibly easy.
It is profoundest surrender.
(Paul Williams, Let go)***

In the following chapter I am reflecting on Playback as a philosophy with particular values of integration. I am also looking in a personal way on how Playback and its power of saying yes has influenced my thinking and living.

Philosophy of acceptance

In July 1988 I was sitting on a mountain top in the Ticino, the sunny Italian part of Switzerland, thinking about my work. A strong image came

to me. I visualized a different way of doing theatre. A way that would be spontaneous and improvised, yet be meaningful; a way that would capture every moment in its own special quality. The audience would take an important part in it, creating *together* with the actors the piece to play - no one would know it before. Thus, every performance would be a unique piece of art: improvised, unpredictable, full of surprises: every time new, every time different. Involving everyone in the process of its creation, theatre would become accessible and "touchable" for everyone present. And it would be a true medium of communication, offering a chance to connect to other people and to relate to the context. Theatre would be a mirror of our present lives and a metaphor for human life... A couple of weeks later I shared this phantasy with a friend. She said to me: "Oh, you have to meet Jonathan Fox.!" So I did.

Since then Playback has become an important part of my life. I love the spontaneity of the theatre work, the challenge, the surprise, the participation of the audience, the creativity of it. But to me Playback is not just a style to do theatre. It represents more than professional challenge and personal fulfillment, it holds more than a beautiful way of meeting and relating to each other. To me the philosophy of Playback offers an attitude towards life. It is a philosophy of hope, respect and gentleness. Every person, every story, every attitude is accepted. There is neither a final point of view, nor the dogma of an exclusive truth. Playback is never dogmatic. There are always several answers which are possible and plausible. Playback doesn't deny: death lives with birth, darkness with light, pleasure with anger. Playback doesn't judge: every action and every feeling is mirrored, every person and every story is respected. Through giving choices, Playback offers freedom and through believing in relation, Playback offers meaning.

Power of Reconnecting.

The philosophy of Playback is based on accepting, on saying yes to "what is". Playback honours the moment with what it holds without influencing, altering or judging. It *embraces what is present now* and thus holds great healing power. Through telling a spell is broken. Connecting the individual through it's story to the community Playback gives insight, comfort and support. By experiencing Playback I learn to integrate and to reframe what has happened in my life. The truth has space to appear, freed from the prison of self-deception. It is healing to find the honesty and the courage to let go of the deceiving illusions that were safeguards in childhood but now are obstacles to live my life fully and truly. By remembering and honouring I learn to own my past and

through this I become free for the present. Of course, this act can be regarded as merely therapeutical process which usually takes place in the intimacy of therapy. But through Playback the fate of the individual transcends the personal level and becomes significant for the community that bears witness to the "caterpillar developing into a butterfly." Playback thus not only holds the power to expand the experience of the individual self but also the chance to reconnect the individual to the community whose collective story is always told as well. The truth of the individual stands as a metaphor for the truth of the community.

Freedom of variety.

Playback also offers a choice on how the world can be seen. By honouring the truth of the individual a variety of different ways to experience life and to value its challenges is revealed. When I was thirteen I happened to watch Kurosawa's film "Rashomon" which I have never forgotten since. It tells the story of a murderer. The story is told five times, everytime from a different point of view: The murderer, the victim, the wife of the victim, a witness... - everyone involved tells his/her version of what happened. It is every time an other individual version formed by the teller's personal background, status, needs, expectations and dreams. Every version makes absolutely sense but everytime we seem to hear a completely different story. At the end, we find that even the seemingly neutral witness had coloured the story according to his perception and intention. The spectator leaves the cinema without knowing "the truth". I was deeply touched by the humanity and wisdom of this film - Kurosawa's truth that "there is no truth" has captured my mind ever since. Instead of allowing only one truth and resisting whatever might threaten it, I experience the freedom of choice and thus the richness of being human. The capacity of accepting variety and choosing to give meaning holds the challenge of freedom, hope and creativity.

Personal Reflection

During the time I was thinking about the theme and writing the essay, the power of saying yes - which to me is strongly connected to Playback - became very obvious. In order to complete my work I actually had to say

no many times: I was offered a ride with a ballon and another friend wanted to take me in his plane - it is striking that I renounced on flying to finish my flight with my commitment. So, of course, saying yes includes saying no. It means to dare to decide. Clear decisions are empowering and freeing, I stop considering possibilities and what could have been, but I deal with what is now. So writing about saying yes made me more conscious how I handle decisions, i.e. how often I avoid to decide and actually saying no to my dreams and visions. Thinking about my capacities of saying yes I realized that I had been either very timid or very hard on myself. Through doing Playback I am learning to say yes. This makes me more gentle and more open. I am learning to trust in what is happening, living more fully the truth of the moment, open to life without needing to see it through the deceiving glasses of my illusions. This enables me to experience my own life in a more profound context by connecting my formerly isolated self to what is around me and receiving the gift of meaning. It feels like veil after veil is taken away and I am getting closer and closer to reality, which of course can be seen in the same metaphor as the Mandelbrot picture of the endless spirales. The Sufi say that God (who represents the truth) is veiled by 999 veils and that the path of the Sufi is make disappear one veil after the other until he/she is finally able to see the truth.

To me the philosophy of Playback is the "pathway in action" to inner growth. It's generosity invites me to feel o.k. the way I am. It strenghtens my receptiveness and my capacity to say yes: To gently say yes to my deficiencies and discover the chances they bear; to say yes to leaving the suffocating safety of timid self protection; to say yes to taking part in life, approaching more challenges and risks as I go along. And finally to say

yes to what is happening

yes to what shows itself

yes to incompleteness

yes to my reactions

yes to my feelings, fears and joys

yes to change

yes to growth

yes to be alive

yes to be myself

yes to....?

