



Playback Theatre, Diversity, And The Two Economies

By Jo Salas

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Sometimes in my company's school performances we vary the usual playback format by getting the kids to help us create a composite story, knowing that every detail they contribute will come from their own experience. I want to tell you a composite story, drawn from the experiences of many different playback theatre groups including mine. There are other stories on this theme which could be told, of course. But this one is common and may sound familiar to some of you.

Jerome is a 28-year-old African-American man. He has a job as a stock manager in a big warehouse—he's worked there for five years and has been promoted every year. He is proud of this, and proud of having a steady job that pays enough to cover at least basic living expenses—a lot more security than Jerome grew up with. His father left his family when Jerome was five, and his mother found it so hard to manage that she had to let her parents take care of her three children for several years. When Jerome finished high school, college wasn't even a possibility. His whole family needed him to start earning as quickly as possible. Now, ten years later, his sisters are working too, but his mother has never quite got herself on her feet. Jerome sends part of his paycheck to her every two weeks.

Jerome is usually too tired after work to do much besides watch television. But one Friday night his friend Anne insists that he come with her to some kind of theatre show. "I don't know, Jerome, but I think you'll like it," she says. "It's really different—not like regular theatre at all. They act out stories that people in the audience tell." Jerome is intrigued, and he likes Anne. So he goes.

From the very beginning of the performance he's riveted. He's never seen or imagined anything like this. The actors seem like real people. They face the audience, and ask them questions, and listen to what people say. And then they act out the stories that they hear and it's like magic—

suddenly there's a play, and music, and the audience is laughing or sometimes crying, and it's all been made up right on the spot. Jerome finds himself wondering what it might be like to go up onto the stage and tell a story. He even starts imagining what it would be like to be one of those actors, acting out a story. They seem like nice people though they're all very different from him. All of them are white.

As the show is coming to an end, the leader says: "We're looking for new actors, and we're especially interested in people of color. Let us know if you'd like to come and visit a rehearsal."

Jerome doesn't say anything to Anne or to the performers, who are chatting with audience members over tea and brownies, but he slips one of their brochures into his pocket.

Two weeks later he calls the director. "I don't have any experience as an actor," he tells her. "That's not necessarily a problem," she says. "We can train you, if you feel and we feel that playback theatre is something you can do."

Jerome goes to a rehearsal. They don't call it an audition, but obviously they're checking him out. The rehearsal is fun, though somewhat strange. Everyone is amazingly friendly. They praise Jerome warmly when he plays a main character in someone's story. He feels, too, that he did it well. He remembers what it was like seeing the show, and again has the conviction, deep inside, that he can do this, he *wants* to do this. He wonders how he could explain it to his co-workers, and decides he wouldn't even try.

Jerome starts going to weekly rehearsals. He is thrilled to be learning this work, to become an actor, an artist. He's never been around such a warm-hearted, playful group of people. They talk a lot about their feelings. He knows they're sincere, but it's not totally comfortable for him. Being the only black person makes it harder. But he loves listening to the stories, and the challenge of making theatre out of a fragment of a life. He loves the give-and-take of this kind of acting.

He starts performing, very nervous at first, though the others shower him with praise and encouragement. By now Jerome knows and likes all the company members as individuals, not just as an amorphous body of kindly white people. He's become good friends with John, one of the actors, a social worker. John's the one he calls when he can't get to rehearsal because of overtime or yet another crisis with his mother.

Jerome is anxious about something that's coming up: the company is going to do some shows in schools. He knows that Katherine, the director, is very eager for him to take part. "It will really help the kids of color to have an African-American actor," she says. They talk about race a lot in the company. They want to "increase their diversity," as they put it. Jerome appreciates what they're trying to do—it's a lot better than the casual racism that's part of daily life for him and every other black person he knows—but it still feels awkward.

Jerome hates to disappoint Katherine and the company, but there's no way he can take time off from his job to do daytime shows. Most of the other performers can arrange to be available—they either work part-time or they have full-time jobs where they can occasionally take a day for something else. But the warehouse doesn't operate like that. You either show up or you're fired.

Katherine is understanding though regretful. She raises something else: she wants Jerome to take a five-day playback theatre training in the summer. "All of us have gone to this training program, Jerome, and it's great. It really deepens our skills." She tells him that if it's hard to pay for it, the program offers scholarships. All he'd have to do is fill out an application. Jerome doesn't know what to tell her. He would love to do the training. He loves the idea of learning more, and meeting other people who do playback theatre. But July is the busiest time at the warehouse. No one takes their vacation in July. Besides, he only gets ten vacation days a year and he usually takes this time to see his family in Virginia.

It's hard to tell this to Katherine. She's so nice, and she's been so helpful. "I'll try," he says, but it's just a way of delaying the moment of telling her it's impossible.

Summer is approaching. At rehearsal the company talks about the school shows, which are going well, though very demanding. Jerome listens, sad that he isn't part of it. Sometimes they talk about the workshops that several of them are planning to attend. They all think that Jerome is going too, because he still hasn't been able to tell them that he's not.

"See you in July!" they say, when they have their final rehearsal for the season. Jerome feels guilty. He's also begun to feel resentful. It seems so easy for them all. None of them have parents who need their help. None of them have jobs that keep you on your feet for eight or ten hours a day and pay barely enough to get by.

During the summer he thinks of the company less and less. He's vaguely aware when the time for the workshop comes and goes. He's too busy to wonder for more than a moment what it would have been like to be there.

In the fall he doesn't make it to the first rehearsal, or the second or third. His phone rings with concerned messages from company members. "Jerome? Are you OK? We miss you." After a while the calls stop.

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That's Jerome's story. A promising young actor of color, a welcoming company, and he leaves after less than a year. What's going on here, and what can we do to make this a less common playback story? To explore these questions, we need to look at aspects of our history, our current directions, and our assumptions about ourselves as a field.

I want to talk first about what the writer Lewis Hyde called the "gift economy," and how this idea relates to playback theatre. His idea, which he explores very fully and wonderfully in his book *The Gift*, is that alongside the market economy, in which goods and services are bought and sold—the whole basis of western economic life—there is and always has been an economy in which things are valued in non-monetary ways and exchanged only or significantly as gifts. He makes his point in part by talking about odd pockets of western culture where the gift economy

is unchanged—for example, the conviction shared by most people and reflected in the law that kidneys and livers and other organs can only be donated, not sold. But, more relevantly for our purposes, he talks about how the gift economy also still exists in the areas of art and healing.

Here's part of what he says about art in the introduction: "It is the assumption of this book that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity. Or, to state the modern case with more precision, that works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art." He goes on to say: "...That art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience—that work is received by us as a gift is received. Even if we have paid a fee at the door of the museum or concert hall, when we are touched by a work of art something comes to us which has nothing to do with price."

I imagine that you recognize this from your own experience as artists, your own drive to make art both within playback theatre and beyond and to offer it regardless of monetary compensation. And you recognize it as well as from your own experience of looking at paintings, watching performances, listening to music, reading literature. When art moves us, we feel given to.

Hyde also talks about healing in relation to the gift economy—and about health care, which in most ways is extremely commodified these days, in the US more than anywhere else in the world. In more traditional societies, healing, like art, was given and not sold. The healer was called to his or her work, and gave it as a service. This work was valued and supported by the community. But it was not quantified and traded like tangible goods. It was not separated from the altruistic impulse of the healer.

That understanding is lost, to some degree, in our modern times. But in some ways it persists. The health care professions are still full of people who have chosen their work because of a deep calling to help others. They expect and need to earn money too, but if money was their main priority they would have chosen other careers.

There is no clear dividing line between gift and market economy work. Many professions combine both—they lie somewhere on a spectrum between work that is given unconditionally, with no expectation or possibility of financial recompense, at one end, and work in which the idea of service is irrelevant, at the other. As Hyde says: “Few jobs are pure gift labors, of course—although a nurse is committed to healing, she is also an actor in the marketplace—but any portion of gift labor in a job will tend to pull it out of the market and make it a less lucrative profession.”

I first encountered Hyde’s ideas in 1983 in an article called “The Gift Must Always Move.” It made a huge impression on me. I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t until I read his book many years later that I realized the profound relevance to the work we are doing in playback theatre. Suddenly, much of what had felt like frustrating, stubborn contradictions made sense in a new way.

As we all know, doing playback theatre brings all kinds of gift-economy rewards that have nothing to do with money: artistic satisfaction, belonging, a sense of usefulness, recognition, the gratitude and admiration of audiences, spiritual meaning, and more. As Hyde says, “unlike the sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved.” Sometimes all this is enough. Sometimes it is not.

When we began playback theatre, back in 1975, it was with the artist’s impetus to create theatre, along with the activist’s impetus to create change. It was, obviously, not about making money. Jonathan and I—a young couple with a small child—and our fellow members of the original company came together as idealists and explorers, operating completely within the gift economy. We started performing, occasionally at first, and then more often. Our early performances, still mostly during evenings or weekends, were manageable even for those who had fulltime jobs. But the burgeoning behind-the-scenes work, carried out mostly by Jonathan and to some degree by me, soon brought the two of us to what I’ll call the “volunteer viability” point: the point where the gift economy comes right up against the market economy.

The “volunteer viability” point isn’t a fixed place. It varies from one person to another and from one culture to another. It’s the point where your unpaid activity simply has to become remunerative or you will starve. Or you give it up. If you are someone who has support from a well-paid spouse, or you have some inherited wealth, you may never get to this point—you can spend all your life working without financial compensation. If you’re middle class, you can probably take the risk of a very low or uncertain income, at least for a while, knowing that if things get too tight you can step back and get a regular job, and if some kind of emergency happens to you, your family and friends can help you out. Your volunteer viability point will depend on how long you can put up with lack of security and material comfort, as well as other factors. For someone who lives from paycheck to paycheck, or who is working two jobs just to meet basic needs, who has no safety net from extended family, the volunteer viability point comes up very quickly.

Jonathan and I were in the middle class category—we had no money other than what we earned, and we did not own property, but we had the kind of education and family backgrounds that would, if necessary, protect us from destitution. Jonathan, particularly, had a deep drive and commitment to keep developing playback in spite of the hardship. As a young family, we lived for many years below the poverty line in order to stay with our art. Some other company members were sufficiently passionate about playback to make similar sacrifices, so we had a team that could say yes to whatever work came up. We all got paid just enough to survive, but never enough to relax.

When I started a new company in 1990, after the first one ended, it was with the clear intention that we would not go this route. I just wanted to do playback theatre. I did not want all this worry about money. But there is an inherent and inevitable drive to grow, like the force within a plant that impels it to become tall and strong and fruitful. If you suppress this force you might stagnate and die. We embraced it, and at this point, my 15-year-old company is very active and very engaged. We have accepted the challenge to be as available to our community as we can. Along with all the excitement and satisfactions, it means considerable financial responsibility, considerable stress, and dilemmas that are so far unsolved.

It has been helpful to have the conceptual framework of the two economies, which we did not have back in the original company days. My company needs to earn money, but we accept that our basis is in the impulse of art, healing, and social change. Ultimately, we all do playback because we love it and believe in its power for good, and because we find it deeply rewarding to create theatre together. Much of our work is contracted and paid, but weekly rehearsals and monthly public shows are not, and it is important to us to maintain this level of gift-economy functioning. We feel that there would be a danger in putting *all* of our work on a paid basis, even if we could. “If I am right to say that where there is no gift there is no art,” writes Lewis Hyde, “then it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity.”

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We’re going to turn now toward another very important focus for many playback theatre groups, and that is the growth of social awareness and responsibility. This dimension was part of the original vision, but the focus during playback theatre’s first 15 or 20 years was primarily on the significance of the story for the teller and the immediate audience, rather than attending to the relationship of the stories to the broadest and deepest social/ political realities. More recently, playbackers all over the world have expanded their sphere of attention to the larger social context, seeing that all stories, all groups, exist in relation to it. And that our wonderful theatre, though always based in the primacy of the subjective story, can be offered as a means of dialogue and connection in ways that go far beyond the simply personal.

An important part of that focus, at least here in the US, has been the interwoven issues of race, racism, and class—or rank and privilege, as some people refer to it. Many of us by now have realized—and it’s a learning process often characterized by reluctance and pain as well as exhilaration—that the playback community itself has been unintentionally exclusive of people who are not white or middle class. No one ever wanted it to be this way, but in a society as contaminated by racism and the enduring legacy of slavery as ours is, social entities that originate in the white middle class are almost certain to remain there unless there is a concerted and conscious commitment to change.

A consequence of this courageous and growing awareness is that many playback theatre companies are working hard to increase their diversity—to recruit people of different racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. As many of us have discovered, it's a long, hard, confusing, and complex path. It involves far more than simply announcing that we're looking for African-American or Hispanic or Native American performers. It requires us to look hard and unblinkingly at our own histories in relation to race and class, to tell our own stories and learn from them, to educate ourselves about the history of our country and our region and its often hidden injustices. It requires us to have the compassion and fortitude to work with conflicts around race and class that will inevitably arise when we are lucky enough to find people of color who want to join our companies. It may require us to be flexible about the requirements of company membership, and yet to be clear about what's not negotiable. It requires us as companies to be fundamentally unified in our commitment to this kind of expansion and inclusiveness.

In fact, it's a very tall order. And many companies give up.

The story is not over, of course. We are in a long-term process and some of our achievement so far is not as visible as having black or brown faces in the room or in the line-up. It is a sign of success that many people are talking and writing and holding workshops about this topic. Compared to ten years ago, there are far more people worldwide whose playback work takes place in a context of commitment to justice, inclusiveness, and change. Playback theatre is growing vigorously in African and Asian countries, and the international playback community is stimulated and enriched by their work.

I've been talking from the point of view of someone who's already in the playback world, as most of us here today are. But let's think for a few minutes about the point of view of someone who's not in it—let's think about Jerome, whose story I began with today. Someone who came across playback theatre and was drawn to it, and tried it out, and liked it even more, and then found that it just didn't fit into his life, and left it behind. Jerome was different from everyone else in that company, and not just because of the color of his skin. Unlike everyone else, he'd never gone to college. The work that he could get with a high school diploma was at best

moderately paid and physically taxing. What financial security he had came only from his paycheck. No one in his family could possibly help him out if he lost his job.

Katherine, the director, sometimes complimented the company on the way that money seemed to be unimportant to them—people often forgot even to ask if a new gig was paid. The performers were delighted to get a check, of course, but as they often reminded each other, they were not doing playback for the money. In the beginning it never occurred to Jerome, either, to do playback theatre for the money. He found it rewarding in exactly the same ways as the rest of the company, and he loved the idea of simply offering a service to the community. It reminded him of the way his mother did volunteer work with her church. But with the company growing and getting more invitations to perform, the gulf widened between him and everyone else. On the rare occasions that he could take part in a contracted show, it did make a difference to him if he got paid or not. Most uncomfortable of all was just the way that the others took certain things for granted—having time and money for training; having families and savings accounts and investments and houses that were a bulwark against poverty.

As I said earlier, our stories are always part of much larger stories, the great tides of history. If we take another step back to look at why things were so different for Jerome, we see the history of our society: we see hundreds of years where Jerome's forebears worked without pay, without the possibility of accumulating property and wealth to pass on to their descendants. We see repressive forces in post-slavery times that used more covert means of preventing African-Americans from becoming fully and equally rewarded citizens—discrimination, intimidation, red-lining, and the pernicious stresses of racism that can erode a person's will and ambition.

This is not the place for a full discussion of race and privilege. There is far more to be said, far more complexity and history that we need to explore. What I am concerned to do here is to look as honestly as I can at how our treasured and well-merited place in the gift economy may work against our goal of increasing access and diversity. If playback theatre is still significantly a volunteer activity, is it possible to include people whose economic reality makes volunteerism on this scale out of reach?

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To explore these questions, I sent a short survey to all the companies in the US and Canada that were listed in the IPTN directory. For simplicity's sake I limited this inquiry to North America. Much of what I'm saying here applies, more or less, to the other western countries. (In nonwestern countries, the story is often quite different and I'll say a bit more about that later.) I contacted about thirty groups and received responses from sixteen.

My questions were aimed at discovering where a company was positioned in relation to the gift and market economies, and how this might relate to the question of diversity within their company. Here's a summary of the responses I received:

- Company age ranged from two and half years to 20 years. Average company age was 8.5 years.
- Six companies were nonprofits, four operated under a nonprofit umbrella, two were considering becoming nonprofit, one operated within a nonprofit institution. Three said they had no plans to become nonprofit.
- One company had done 32 shows in 2004, one had done 35, and one had done 60. For the remaining 13 companies the average number of shows was 12.
- Yearly budgets varied greatly, from \$400 to \$85,000. Six companies had budgets of 10K or less. Two companies did not know their yearly budget. Four companies had budgets of 25K or more. Budget did not necessarily correlate to the number of shows per year.
- The average number of company members was 9.5. The smallest group, in transition at the time of responding, had only three members. The largest group was 15.
- I asked about payment—who gets paid and for what. The responses ranged from one of the new companies where no one gets paid for anything to a 20-year-old company in which all performances, rehearsals, and administration are paid. The degree to which people are paid did not always correlate to age of the company. Most companies paid for contracted gigs, and minimally or not at all for administration. Except for the groups at either end of the spectrum, either fully volunteer or fully paid, most responders indicated

some discontent with the lack of money to pay performers and administrators adequately, at the same emphasizing that rewards came in other forms beside money.

- The next question asked about the composition of the company in terms of gender, race, age, and class, followed by a question about the degree to which the company's diversity matched that of their region. Two groups were all women. In fourteen of the other groups, women outnumbered men, in some cases substantially. One group was evenly divided and one group had more men. Five groups were all white. Six groups had one person of color. The other five groups had between two and five members of color. Only two of the companies felt that their racial/cultural mix matched that of their local region. Ages varied widely, often within companies, with the overall majority between late thirties and fifties. One company which is itself white, middle class, and middle aged has engendered four teen companies which are 50% Hispanic and 50% white
- I asked about the company's leadership in terms of gender, race, age, and class. Nine companies were led by a white woman, or by a team of two white women, all but one self-described as middle or upper class, and mostly middle-aged. Two companies were led by white middle class men, one young, one early 40s. Several others were led by teams of men and women. One team of three women included an African-American, the only person of color in a leadership role among all the responders. One group said that all company members shared leadership.
- The tenth question was "How important is diversity to your company's vision? What kinds of diversity?" Eleven companies said emphatically that diversity was extremely important. Some mentioned diversity of ability and sexual orientation as well as race, age, gender, and class. Several spoke of the importance of diversity but said that not everyone in the company was in agreement about this.
- Question eleven asked "What is your company's attitude and vision in relation to monetary payment?" Eight companies were clear that they would like to be able to pay better for performing and administration. Others were more at peace with their status quo, either earning and paying very little, or using any money earned by the company for training, or, in one case, being able to pay fully for all work. Two mature companies said they had pulled back from trying to earn money as a group.

The last question invited any further comments about diversity and/or compensation. Here are some of the responses:

“There are those in the company that are artists first and foremost and want to grow the company and make as much of a living from it as possible. There are others who have another livelihood and see playback as a fun, extra thing--they are dedicated but don't need it to grow for their livelihood. We need to empower those new and old members who want it to grow to do networking, marketing and curriculum building and become leaders in the company.”

“We feel that the homogeneity that we have as a group has been a strength as well as having limitations on our outreach capacity. We are very tight as a group, the keepers of one another's stories, and we are able to take personal risks in our company life but the issue of new members is difficult as we do not want to increase in size or leave a certain comfort level that we have attained.”

“Not needing money is a privilege that limits who can join the company.”

“Pursuing ethnic diversity seems a luxury at this point; we don't have enough income to pay members.”

“It is difficult to draw an interest from the groups of population that we want to diversify with for our history has been playing to a predominately Caucasian audience. We must diversify who we perform for as well. We visit compensation on and off, lightly touching it for we haven't made serious money to pay members. It is also a difficult topic to explore.”

“Although everyone seems very enthusiastic about the form, it is a simple matter of hand to mouth survival—living expenses are high and most people have to work very hard to make ends meet. It's an issue especially for the people of color and those with less income in the company (the last two often linked). But also, we hope that new people will stick around long enough to feel the other, non-monetary rewards, which they have so far.”

“Ideally I would like to see all the company members paid for performances and workshops. I think it is a way in which people feel value. Currently the company in existence is willing to work for no money as the value of Playback in itself is enough. We meet weekly whether or not we have a gig and the deepening in that process is priceless.”

“It is often educated Caucasians who have the luxury of doing volunteer work. The actors appear compensated by the reward of hearing a patient say; ‘That’s it! You got it!’ The community provided by troupe life is also a compensation.” (A group that works within a hospital)

Three members of a company:

First voice: “We have had to talk about issues around diversity as a company as they come up - in stories; in recruitment; with groups that we work with and with themes that we have. It is crucial to having an open, loving and respectful group. We have laughed, cried and gotten angry and hurt but we are committed to continuing the discussion whenever it is needed. Telling each other our stories so we understand who we are, where we came from and what matters to us is fundamental.”

Second voice: “The more diverse (in all areas) a playback theater group is, the easier it will be for the group to serve our diverse world.”

Third voice: “Although we like to hassle our artistic director about getting a raise, I feel we are gracious for what we do receive in terms of compensation.”

First voice again: “Regarding [racial] diversity, I believe we value it and make sure the group is diverse not just because it’s the p.c. thing to do or to get more grants or look good, but because our core values are about respect, listening, honoring, and knowing we don’t grow as humans without diversity. It’s important to be clear about that, and unfortunately pressure can get put on the people of color in our group. If we’re doing a gig on “diversity” then a couple of people in the group know they especially are going to be asked to be there. It’s kind of a double-edged sword, on the one hand we want to be diverse because we’re going to do stories about diversity, on the other hand it’s not fair to subliminally put the pressure on people of color that they somehow “represent” diversity -- just how one African American or Native American does not represent their entire race. So it’s a delicate dance that requires much nurturing, attention, clear

communication, and openness to learning. But the benefits of understanding, compassion, advocacy and camaraderie are well worth it.”

“We are trying to build a sustainable organization, which means we can't run on good will forever. Thus, I aspire to gradually increase the degree to which we can compensate ourselves. That said, up until now we have been successful because of the intrinsic value of the work to our own personal and professional growth. The challenge is to maintain the inspiring nature of the work for everyone involved.”

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I imagine that as you listen, you recognize your own experience in some of these responses.

What are the red threads here? A few things emerge for me: most of the groups struggle with questions about compensation, about where they are and where they want to be in relation to the gift and market economies. Most of the groups seek to serve the diversity of their community by having diversity among their own membership, and most are not satisfied with the degree to which they've fulfilled this goal. Some are very aware of the contradictions between the goal of diversity and the implications of operating significantly as volunteers. (Three responders referred to doing playback as a luxury or privilege which is less accessible to people of color, while another person referred to *seeking* diversity as a luxury—an interesting difference.)

The picture that emerges is of a network of mostly middle class people, two thirds of them women, 95% white, devoted to each other and to playback theatre, trying without a lot of success to bring in people of different backgrounds, and searching for a foothold in the world of paid work in order to grow but most often working for non-monetary rewards like satisfaction and companionship. The majority of the sixteen groups operate on low or very low budgets; and most carry out relatively few performances per year—apart from three busiest groups, the average number of shows was 12.

There's food for thought here. I would have said, and I think many of you would concur, that playback theatre is fundamentally about serving our communities through our art. In any town or city, even small ones, there are hundreds or thousands of people with stories to tell and in need of a place to tell them. How many of them will have this chance if their local playback group performs only six or eight or twelve times a year? Of course, in some cases this figure has to do with being relatively new. For others it is the result of a conscious and valid choice to remain small. But what does it mean if the majority of playback theatre groups operate at this level? What does it tell us about underlying assumptions and expectations? If playback theatre is an act of service, who are we really serving? Could it be that as a network of people we are primarily serving ourselves? For me that is a disturbing thought.

This year, 2005, playback theatre itself is 30 years old. We've come a long, long way since the pioneering days: we've deepened and refined our understanding of playback theatre, we've developed our skills and our training resources, we've extended our outreach to all parts of the world, we've continued to polish our work as a dynamic and beautiful theatre form. Perhaps where we grow next, for the next 30 years, or the next ten, is toward becoming an active, valued, recognized player in the life of our local communities.

As the artistic and executive director of a busy company committed to paying performers and administrators, I know all too well what it entails and how extraordinarily difficult this path is. Even with a gifted and committed ensemble, with great support and encouragement from our community, and with all my own years of experience, I wonder if it's possible.

I know of another well-established and extremely active company—not one of the 16 responders—whose work is carried out on a fully professional basis and has been from the outset because of the founder-director's conviction that artists should not work for nothing. This group could teach us a lot about being viable in the market economy. But, like other less professional groups, its success has also depended to a significant degree on the personal sacrifices of the director, who for years worked 80 to 100 hours a week before scaling back the group's operations.

I am beginning to think that the challenge of truly fulfilling playback's potential role is not something that a company can or should meet alone. What can we do as a collective? What changes can we consider, what steps can we take? We may have to re-examine our relationship to the gift economy; those of us who are trainers may have to begin teaching the practical skills and knowledge needed to build viable companies; we may need to become more stringent about standards so that there is, at least to some degree, a recognizable consistency of practice between one company and another; we may have to develop further systems of communication and accountability amongst ourselves.

And most of us want to do all this without leaving the gift economy behind. We are artists, healers, activists. We need to pay our rent and buy our food but our work will always spring from the impulse of gift.

In other countries, it is perhaps an easier task than here. Unless we perform for private corporations, our audiences or clients can't support us. We need funding for our projects and for our general operations as well. The United States gives less money to the arts, proportionately, than any other industrialized country. As many of us know to our chagrin, even after 30 years we are still likely to be denied funding by arts councils because they don't recognize our work as art; and by social services funders because we're too arts-oriented.

The recent growth of playback in nonwestern countries has often taken a different path, in part because it's simply not an option to use the mixed-economy model that we're used to. Training, rehearsing, and performing without guaranteed pay in Burundi, for example, is out of the question because of pervasive poverty. There is no volunteer viability point. So the playback theatre company there has been on a paid basis from the beginning, with funds from several NGOs. In their first 18 months they did over 70 performances, and the spirit of gift seemed to thrive alongside the compensation. In India and other Asian countries some groups are part of larger social institutions: employees do playback as part of their regular work.

Those of you who are "company partners" with the School of Playback Theatre recently received Jonathan's article inspired by a Rockefeller Foundation report on their PACT program:

Partnerships Affirming Community Transformation. This report has a couple of very interesting implications for playback theatre. One is the concept of what the authors call “community cultural-development workers,” meaning, in fact, people just like us: artists who offer their vision and skills and labors for the wellbeing of their communities. Not art-for-arts-sake artists; not arts therapists; not arts-in-education specialists, but a category all our own, with its own long traditions and values. When I read the Rockefeller report I felt relieved and affirmed. The idea that there is a place for us, that we may not have to endlessly rationalize our work in the terms of other fields, was tremendously validating. The other point which had a strong impact on me was the authors’ blunt assessment of the completely inadequate funding available for community cultural development. Whereas this field of the arts is well-recognized and supported in other countries, here it is not. And so we compete for scarce funds with all the other kinds of arts, and we often lose.

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Well, here we are, looking back and looking ahead, exploring the paradox that playback theatre’s inherent generosity may limit the scope of its gift and may restrict the inclusion of people from different racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. How many Jeromes will come and go before we solve these dilemmas?

I do not have answers. We need creativity and new dreams from many people before we can truly discern the directions we might take. But if, as a field, we succeed in creating a more professionally based and fairly compensated practice, we may at last find ourselves with the diversity we have longed for. We may at last become an active network of dynamic and diverse community cultural-development teams, securely funded so that we can serve our communities regardless of our personal wealth, making places for stories every day.

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Appendix

Questions for companies:

1. How long has your company been in existence?
2. Is your company a nonprofit or not, and if not, are you considering becoming a nonprofit?
3. How many performances did you do in 2003 and how many will you have done in 2004?
4. What is your budget for 2003, 2004 and 2005? (a figure that is roughly your total income and expenses)
5. How many people in the company?
6. Who gets paid and for what? (eg performing, administration, rehearsing, leading rehearsals, conducting)
7. Please describe company members in terms of gender, race, age, and class. (Example: 5 women, 2 men; ages 25-55 with most in 40s; five white/Caucasian, one African-American, one Asian; four self-described as middle class, one self-described as wealthy, two self-described as poor)
8. To what degree does your company's racial/cultural diversity reflect that of your town or city?
9. Please describe your company's leadership in terms of gender, race, age, and class.
10. How important is diversity to your company's vision? What kinds of diversity?
11. What is your company's attitude and vision in relation to monetary payment?
12. Anything else you'd like to say about diversity and/or compensation within your company?