



Theater that Keeps Darkness at Bay Arts Now Conference Presentation Oct 2, 1999

By Joel Plotkin

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(paper read by Joel Plotkin after pt performance at Arts Now conference, SUNY, New Paltz, October, 1999)

Thank you to Jo Salas for altering one of the desired outcomes for Playback – the mingling of an audience that has newly discovered itself as a community. I'll try to keep my remarks in the spirit of mingling and conversation.

Playback

The power of Playback to me is rooted in its gentleness, in the evident love for the audience and their stories, in the players' delight in the tellers' revealing something of their selves. The roots of Playback are deep in the origins of theater, so what seems like simplicity is actually a return to practices we as a species have known for millennia.

People like to create stories about the origins of theater, usually involving people around a fire, telling stories, stories about a hero, or how the world began, or how the earth brings forth good things to eat. But always beyond the firelight is the darkness – and for me the origin of theater is in the darkness. We use stories – art – to control the darkness.

For you as visual artists as well, the Altamira bison and the palm-sized Venus of Willendorf statuette are not simply pictures. They are tools born of wonder and of fear. The structured action we call art begins as a tool, a community's shared tool.

Jonathan Fox, one of the co-founders of Playback Theater writes of this and other interactive theater forms that they are acts of service, not acts of expression. He sees the ritual origins of theater as a tool with four qualities: trance – possession of the actor by an outside force; communal interaction – all the tribe had roles that had to be performed correctly; redressive outcome – the ritual would make the world or the harvest or the hunt or the sick person better; and environmental adaptation – rite is held in a sacred place or a place becomes sacred because of the ritual.

Even though the history of theater is dominated by the literary tradition, the spirit of ritual interweaves and reasserts itself continuously. Trance becomes improvisation or affective memory. Redressive outcome flavors the morality play of Brecht's political passion. Playing with environment drives theater artists to perform in village squares, picture frames, arenas, guerilla theater in the streets. Community interaction reasserts itself when artists like Robbie McCauley work with people to create their own plays about their lives, their struggles.

Playback today is one form of interactive theater among a growing number; this is not a movement, so much as a cluster. It is not a mainstream activity, not in the forefront of theater studies. Mainstream artists, such as Ann Bogart, might even look down on it as 'not really theater.' In this whole conference we have not seen or discussed much work in which the aesthetic experience was not paramount, where in fact, art was a tool, not the end in itself.

Interactive Theater

Some of the forms of interactive theater I find fascinating: · The British tradition of Theater in Education, where children explore the disciplines with structured improvisation, sometimes led by professional actors. An example might be NYU's Creative Arts Team. · Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed. Boal, a Brazilian Marxist, is seen as the man who fulfilled Brecht's desire to use theater to send the audience into the streets. Using a combination of improvisation exercises and storytelling, a kind of Viola Spolin for revolution, Boal's facilitators, called 'jokers,' help communities see themselves as 'spectactors' to define and confront their oppression.

Dramatherapists and psychodramatists use enactment techniques to heal psychological and social dysfunction through body and heart awareness instead of talk therapy. They work with institutionalized patients, as well as in communities: the battered as well as the batterers, the incarcerated, the mentally ill, the partially or wholly shattered, as well as those seeking personal growth. Jacob Moreno, the originator of psychodrama spoke of his work as 'sociatry' -healing the illness or the pain of being human. ·

Workplace theater brings the techniques of improv to organizational development in corporations and institutions to help people practice conflict management skills, diversity tensions, team building. ·

Community issues workers tour plays that spring into discussion forums about issues such as AIDS awareness, substance abuse, domestic violence. · In the Southern or Third World, theater in development sends teams to villages beyond the reach of media to perform plays that teach well-digging, sanitation, the importance of breast-feeding.

This is not elite art, not museum art, as we heard described in the opening evening discussion. It is applied or redressive theater; the forms exist for a purpose beyond self-expression—to bring awareness (Aristotle in his Poetics calls this *anagnoresis*) and to cause change (Aristotle calls this *peripeteia*).

Anna Deavere Smith has been mentioned several times during this conference. As a performance artist she began her work as a kind of conflict manager, coming into polarized situations and playing the words of participants back to them. In an interview, she is quoted as saying that she "looks for the poem behind the words,... for a person's language to move out of the way for the poem to come forward." To compare her work with Playback's is instructive, I think. Both begin with story, both

have respect, even love for the teller, both look into story to find an essence. But Smith moves into the literary realm and freezes a portion of story to form a product, one which she takes ownership of through virtuoso acting (and later copyright); Playback preserves the ephemeral, fleeting nature of story. When Smith performs we, and the teller, are captivated by her performance; when Playback performs, the presenters can be corrected, can be touched – they ask us as tellers whether we saw our own stories.

As I have said, this is a side trunk of the art; it stands in relation to mainstream theater as art therapy or afterschool art programs for youth-at-risk stand in relation to the worlds which have dominated the attention of this conference.

But this is a growing movement and one in which audience is an honored partner in creation. This is bare theater – stripped of technology, tasting story without freezing it, occurring in the hard-beaten earth of a place made sacred by our presence. But this is theater that keeps the darkness at bay.