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# Being a Playback Performer.

By Robyn Bett

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This paper is about some of the benefits of being a playback performer. It starts off in a whimsical, personal way, and becomes more formal. My way intentions are to engage in the “pleasure of narrative”, and careful thinking.

In 1999 I wrote a thesis about a playback group as part of the requirement for an honours degree in psychology. I interviewed the leader of the group, and transcribed a performance complete with sketches of the short forms. Then I conducted a workshop with this playback group, inviting them explore in action a model put forward by Heinrich Dauber in *Gathering Voices* (Fox & Dauber, 1998), the collection of papers from the 1st Playback Theatre Symposium held in Kassell in 1997.

I enjoyed the processes of researching but the writing process did not progress smoothly. During the writing up time, my partner and I decided to get married, and I had all the excitement of my wedding during the writing up time. Things were not progressing so harmoniously in the relationship with my academic supervisor. Often when we met at 10am over his first beer of the day, he seemed to have difficulty remembering the gist of my project. However it was completed and submitted. When the markers' report came back it said “we could find no evidence that playback worked for anyone other than the people who were performers in it”. I felt ashamed and put my thesis away. But recently, I pulled it out, and thought well in what way did being part of a playback group for one year work for these young people.

I came across an interesting quote from Eugenio Barba.

He writes

“Among the various forms of ethnocentrism which veil our vision is one which does not depend on geographical and cultural location but rather on the roles created by the theatrical relationship. It is that ethnocentrism which only considers the theatre from the point of view of the spectator and neglects the entire question of the other side : the ensemble, the network of relationships, knowledge and ways of thinking – of which the performance is the fruit (Barba, 1990).

So the markers of my thesis had considered the playback theatre group I had presented from the point of view of the spectator, and did not consider that it had worked. And I had believed them. It had always been important to me that playback “worked”, whatever that was for a wider community than the playback team. Actually, this very issue was the core of the struggle that the playback group I wrote about was struggling with. In the workshop, this is what Esperanza, one of the young actors said

Are we fulfilling our potential in the wider community or are we in fact just “forming an all star team of playback”.

I want to make a few things clear about my purpose here. Many other people have written and spoken about the benefits of being a playback performer. So this is not ground breaking information. Jonathan wrote that one of his aims in creating playback theatre was always to make a theatre that was as

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good for the actors as it was for the audience. Nor do I have the opinion that benefit to the performers is the most important thing. Peter Wright and Rea Dennis, Australian playback colleagues have done extensive research with playback audience members about what they got from their experience of playback.

But in research – part of the deal is, you can't tell what results you will find. And what I found was a group who were pursuing their life goals through being part of a playback group, and that's what I want to tell you about.

First, something about me, the person making this investigation. I have been in the one Playback Company in Perth since I was 18 years old. Our Company is 23 years old, and although we no longer rehearse regularly together, we do approximately 25 commissioned performances a year, and enjoy each other's company. I also run a playback practice group at Edith Cowan University where I co-ordinate a drama therapy programme.

I found the quote from Eugenio Barber in an anthropological PhD thesis written by my former partner Mana Waite. He used to make sense of the way he went about his research of the Trinidad Carnival which was to get completely involved with "makin' mas" for two carnivals. Until recently I had not read his thesis. Although I lived in Trinidad for the 15 months his field research took, our relationship ended before the thesis was completed. And although I have had a bound copy on my bookshelf since 1995 ever since, I have never read it.

I have no patience for stories of serendipity and coincidence – but I like it when things that have seemed to have only strained connections can start being part of the story. Jerome Bruner puts this beautifully when he writes that the "negotiation and renegotiation of meaning through narrative is one of the crowning achievements of human development" (1990, p.67). And this is one thing I love about Playback stories. As a playback actor I am at liberty to hear anything the teller is saying and, if I choose, I can play with it, put it in, bring together the past and right now in performance, collapse whole scenes so that they play on top of each other. If I was acting this story I could bring these two shamed theses out of hiding, one hidden in the shame of academic failure, the other hidden in the shame of a failed relationship and have them dance with me, and belong to me.

Let me introduce to you OOPS Playback. I am going to do this in some detail. As I have worked in Playback Theatre with many different groups I appreciate again and again how important context is in groups.

OOPS is an acronym for the Opiate Overdose Prevention Strategy. It's also a noise you make when you make a mistake, "oops". This strategy was an initiative of the state government to assist heroin users avoid overdose and to raise overdose awareness in the community. Practically, this meant that OOPS volunteers attended overdose admissions at emergency departments where they helped the medical staff and the patient through the process of

surviving an overdose. OOPS also had an educational focus in which project officers targeted workers in agencies that dealt with opiate users.

OOPS Playback was formed by Damien Roper who was employed as a project officer for OOPS. He met Playback through a men's playback theatre company in Perth called Playback Jack. When he got the job at OOPS he proposed to his line manager that they invest a small amount of money in training a playback theatre team which could become a valuable resource for the work of the strategy. Volunteers who attended overdose admissions became members of the team, and some other members were recruited by advertising in a local youth culture magazine. The group started with a series of workshops led by members of the Perth Playback Theatre Company. They met each Saturday morning and by the time I worked with them the team had been together for a year. For Damien it was part of his job, the rest of the team were volunteering.

When I met OOPS, they had formed into a cohesive group. They had faced some challenges together including asking one member to leave. The group had just begun to do some performances in public places, one at a night club, and one at a training day. This was their first steps towards fulfilling the educational potential of OOPS Playback.

I talked with Damien over a number of weeks, and recorded these conversations. I read through these transcripts and became interested in the way Playback made sense for Damien.

One of Damien's strong frameworks for understanding his own life, and the life of the people he worked with was that of being on a personal journey.

"I come from a drug using background. As I got educated, I got empowered and I didn't need to use. For me, education and understanding came from talking to people. Then, when I got into the drug field, I found it was very academic – give me the stats or it's not happening... When I went to work for OOPS I didn't want to know the numbers I wanted to hear the stories."

So for Damien, it was sharing stories with people that was what he valued in the process of his changing from being a drug user to another phase in his life. He hoped by creating OOPS Playback within the agency, to recreate that form of education – talking, stories.

So Damien was already involved in valuing the learning that came from being with people. This is what he said about Playback

"Playback helped me along my own journey. It didn't change my journey, but it helped it down the road. It's like there's this highway we're all travelling along, but playback theatre is like being picked up by a fast car."

I loved this image. It became the title of my thesis – Playback Theatre is like being picked up by a fast car. I had a personal reason for loving Damien's analogy. Because I'd started Playback when I was 18 I'd often regretted

spending all those weekends doing playback theatre intensives when all my girlfriends were out with boys riding around in fast cars. But maybe....

Damien's personal history of the style of education he found useful, and his challenge to institutional lack of concern, set the stage for his belief in the usefulness of playback theatre as part of the Opiate Overdose Prevention Strategy. The methods of change which Damien values are inherent in playback theatre. Playback theatre is a peer based system which values human experience by listening to stories. As a form it contains the potential for change because playback invites anyone to speak out. This capacity may or may not be fulfilled during a playback performance as Fe Day describe so eloquently in her chapter in Gathering Voices.

At the time of the interview these benefits were potentials which Damien saw. The benefits he had actually observed, and been a part of, was connected to membership o the performing team.

"It's in the playback group itself there's been the most movement. I didn't advertise for people who had something to do with the drug culture, but they're all involved in some way. They're an extremely diverse group, and they work really well together. They use their networks to spread info about safer drug use. Also the volunteers who belong to playback deal with call-outs the best. It's like they know they can come along on Saturday morning and tell the story that they were part of. They're also sort of developing philosophies about life you know, so it's not just education about drugs, because drugs are part of a much wider thing".

When I asked the team of young actors what was important to them the first thing they talked about was creativity,

Tim said, "I would say that the most fulfilling part about PT for me would be the creativity (claps) aspect of it like being able to grab anything from the back of your mind and spit it out".

However for these performers it is not just the aspect of creativity which is important to them but the combination of creativity with sensitivity or with stories. This aspect of playback, in which people are simultaneously involved in creative improvised play and are sensitively involved with the stories of others is one way that playback works. This topic in a feature of Nick Rowe's presentation at this conference, which I believe you are missing if you are here. But this tension between joint creativity on stage and working with the story you are given is a feature of playback that Nick explores.

Secondly the actors described exploration at something that was important to them about playback. This exploration was set in terms of learning about themselves and learning about others. Specifically people talked about playback exploration as being personal, emotional and spiritual. For example one of the actors Ketura says,

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"I think playback brings out a lot of emotions in us in totally different ways, whether you're telling your own story or doing something really good to feeling like what you just did was crap. It makes me more aware of my own emotions, what I feel about what I've done or the stories I've heard or stuff like that."

The third discourse the actors were involved in, which was the most contentious, was about the potential for changing culture in the wider community.

But Damien, their leader was very sanguine about this

"But I see serving the community as like, we are a community. And what we do in becoming more aware of what people's stories are and becoming more generous about those stories, impacts on the community around us as well. This group has given me a lot of things around femininity and how I can relate to women without power plays and sexual overtones and all that kind of stuff, and for me that's a real gift that the women in the group have given me. This impacts on the women that I integrate with in the community and this gift will impact on my daughter as she gets older."

And it is from these things that the markers decided that playback only worked for the people who took part. And I think they were right – that is what I found out – and that is just fine. We are a community, and gatherings like this give us the chance to celebrate that.

So, this was my research. A young playback group on the edge of taking the work beyond what they had managed to achieve for themselves into the wider world. It seems that the potential for action in the wider world is important, even if the group is not taking that action explicitly, but the forming of their intentions through their work in playback was very important. Now, as a university lecturer and counsellor for young people I see how very important that opportunity to struggle with meaning in the world is.

I have asked people involved in other playback endeavours what is important about being part of a playback team for them. One of my colleagues in the Perth Company, a jobbing actor in a city with a very small theatre community – said "To me it's because what I say in a Playback performance is important", it's serious. A young woman who is training to be a drama therapist in the playback group I run for the University said that being in a playback group is an opportunity for her to practice the roles of engagement and creativity that she is trying to learn as a drama therapy student.

So these are two more examples of how playback supports people in their personal journey – as though one hitch hiker through life and at times, has the luck to be picked up by a fast car.

There are many things I have not focussed on in this talk – and the value of friendship and community of the playback group is one glaring admission.

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I often think that there is someone else who could live my life better, someone more articulate who could give this paper better, someone wiser who could run the playback group, someone better looking who could whatever. But playback refuses to the end of the support me in this fantasy. Playback supports me to be involved with my own life and the life of those around me, in widening circles of community. This is one of the ways in which playback works.

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