

**“De Day We See Wind in Grenada”**  
**Community Dialogue & Healing through Playback Theatre**  
*Tracie Rogers, MA<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract**

The form of Playback Theatre is indispensable to treating with trauma on a community level for a singular and formidable reason - Theatre and Drama have the capacity to connect an individual to a personal experience in the midst of a public forum. Playback Theatre allows individuals to access both the subjective and objective perspectives of a community's experience and therein lies the validity of this form as a means of facilitating community dialogue and healing.

This paper examines the use of Playback Theatre for incident debriefing, and discusses its use as a community-based intervention in a Social Recovery initiative of the Agency for Reconstruction and Development (ARD) in Grenada and Carriacou in the post Hurricane Ivan period. The paper also discusses the ways in which the Playback intervention operates to normalize reactions, review sensory impressions, reduce tension, decrease emotional involvement, offer opportunities for individuals to gain insight and achieve the essential objectives of psychological debriefing.

By weaving of our experiences into stories, Playback Theatre helps individuals 'transmute chaos and restore a sense of belonging and order to their world'<sup>2</sup>. This paper explores treating with traumatic stress through the intentional use of drama and theatre in communities.

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**Introduction**

Hurricane Ivan hit Grenada and Carriacou on September 7<sup>th</sup> 2004 and rained devastation on the island through the night to early afternoon the following day. Ivan met an unprepared Grenada and Carriacou, whose last significant hurricane experience was Janet of 1955. There were few who experienced Ivan's predecessor and fewer who knew what to expect of a Category Four hurricane. While the physical and economic reconstruction of the islands can be measured, prodded, and hastened by policy formation, foreign aid and monetary donations, psychological and emotional restoration is far less corporeal. In an effort to assess social recovery and design and implement programmes to target psychological recovery, the Agency for Reconstruction and Development (ARD), through their Social Recovery Unit has implemented a Community Caravan which travels through the Parishes of the island. The **ARD Playback Theatre**

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Rogers is a Drama Therapist, & Part-time Lecturer at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad

<sup>2</sup> Salas (1999, p19)

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**Company**<sup>3</sup> is a core component of this Community Caravan, which uses Playback Theatre (PT) to address post disaster stress. Three days prior to the Caravan's implementation in the island of Carriacou, Hurricane Emily swept across the country. On this occasion, Carriacou faced the brunt of the devastation.

There have been significant publications documenting the Playback form and its use for community building and psychological healing (Fox 1994, 1999, Fox & Dauber 1999). Building on these contributions, this paper concentrates on Playback as a unique tool to facilitate the psychological recovery of individuals who have experienced critical, life altering disasters. This paper focuses on the community work of the **ARD Playback Theatre Company** with an emphasis on how the PT form serves as a psychological debriefing mechanism, normalizing disaster responses, and promoting unique dialogue about the rebuilding process.

## **Background**

It will be remiss of the author to discuss the work of the **ARD Playback Theatre Company** without citing the impetus for its inclusion in the ARD's Community Caravan.

The ARD is an independent agency formed by the Government of Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique to lead the physical, economical and social recovery endeavours of the country in the wake of Hurricane Ivan. The Social Recovery Unit has designed a Community Caravan which travels throughout communities in Grenada and Carriacou. The Caravan spends two days in each community and offers opportunities to access a range of services from counseling services to housing information. This methodology serves to bring multidimensional trauma management and disaster mitigation resources to the people in their communities - on their turf.

The first day of each Caravan has two components; the PT performance and post-performance workshops. These workshops are facilitated by counselors as a means of engendering dialogue about the accomplishments and challenges that communities have faced in the wake of Hurricane Ivan. The workshops fully utilize the opportunity to address material raised in the PT performances in a psychologically safe environment.

The **ARD Playback Theatre Company** was created specifically for the ARD's Community Caravan. The author was invited to train a group of ten actors, recruited by the ARD, in the PT form and function as the Artistic Director of the Playback Company. The ARD conceptualized

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<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge the **ARD PT Company** is the only Playback theatre Company in the English Speaking Caribbean  
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this initiative as a culturally relevant and informal approach to (1) introduce the Caravan to the community and (2) psychologically prepare the community members for two days of dialogue about the trauma and the rebuilding process.

The preceding is by no means an exhaustive description or discussion of the ARD's Community Caravan. The pertinence of this discussion for the conceptualization of 'Best Practices' for community-based interventions and theory building is indisputable, particularly in light of the ever present and imminent threat which hurricanes pose to the Caribbean. However, the emphasis of this paper is on answering the 'how' question as it relates to PT as a form of community level incident debriefing.

### **Playback Theatre**

PT was developed by Jonathon Fox in the 1970's, during a crest in the popular theatre movement throughout the world. Fox (1994) avers that Playback was born in response to what he perceived as the theatre's growing unavailability to people on all strata of society.

In its very essence, PT is a form through which a group of actors improvises and recreates an audience member's story immediately after hearing it. The actors use a variety of drama and music elements to include sculptures, scenes, monologues, poetry, rap, percussions etc. to reproduce the teller's story with integrity. Upon completion, the teller is asked if the essence of his story was shown. Based on the teller's response, the story is redone or the teller is thanked. This form of non-scripted theatre is premised on non-judgmental interactions; stories are never analyzed, criticized, explained or reworked. The actors simply present the story they have heard as an 'act of service' to the teller.

There are four units involved in the Playback experience, the audience, the musician(s), the actors and the conductor. The conductor is the medium which connects the audience and the actors. The conductor introduces the form to the audience and continues to serve as their guide throughout the performance.

The form has three segments, a warm up segment, a story segment and a closure segment. The warm up segment serves to warm the audience to the theatre form; instead of asking for stories immediately, the conductor asks general questions as 'how was your day today?' or, 'how are you feeling about being here today?' The idea is to elicit descriptive words to describe a specific feeling or mood, or aspect they have experienced. The conductor then says 'Let's

watch!’ and the actors create a short fluid sculpture that depicts a picture of the feeling or experience. The sculptures are less than a minute in duration. A number of similar short forms are used in the warm up segment.

The conductor then invites members of the audience to share stories. The audience member who has volunteered is escorted unto the stage and sits next to the conductor in the ‘teller’s chair’. The teller tells his story, chooses actors to play key roles in the story, may give the story a title and the conductor signals the actors to begin the portrayal with the words ‘Let’s watch’.

Towards the end of the experience, the actors and conductors thank the audience members and offer a closing dramatic presentation to mark the end of the performance.

### **Post Trauma Stress**

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric diagnosis included in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Illnesses which describes a condition which some individuals develop following exposure to an event perceived as life threatening. The clinical condition is marked by a pattern of debilitating responses characterized by hyper-arousal, a tendency to re-experience the event, attempts at avoiding re-experiencing the trauma as well as a variety of physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral reactions which are generated by the trauma. While not all individuals exposed to a traumatic event develop PTSD, post-trauma stress responses are experienced by most persons who experience a traumatic event.

Post trauma stress responses refers to a range of stress symptoms to include external trigger cues (*following the experience of a hurricane, heavy rain may evoke memories of the hurricane experiences, may also elicit emotional and physical responses like anxiety, crying or trembling*), and intrusive images (*mental images of the traumatic event at several times throughout the day*). These stress symptoms can severely impact upon one’s quality of living. Indeed, such emotional distress can make physical and economic reconstruction exceedingly difficult.

### **Psychological Debriefing**

Psychological debriefings are planned structured group activities for individuals who have experienced a critical incident or traumatic event. Such events range from manmade and natural disasters, to organizational change events and military and paramilitary accidents and incidents. Dyregov (1997) notes that debriefings ‘aim to prevent unnecessary aftereffects,

accelerate normal recovery ... normalize reactions, stimulate emotional ventilation and promote a cognitive “grip” on the situation.’(p 590)

The debriefings are conducted with two primary objectives, (1) to review in detail the thoughts, reactions and sensory impressions of the incident and (2) to provide information about typical responses to such events. Individuals often think that their responses to critical incidents are idiosyncratic; however debriefings with individuals who have all experienced the same life threatening event facilitates the conceptualization of their reactions as normal reactions to abnormal events, while simultaneously recognizing the uniqueness of each experience. There have been considerable studies which support that these debriefings are extremely beneficial during the recovery period (Mitchell et al 1983).

The central principle of psychological debriefings is the normalization of responses in service of preventing rumination and blame. When a theatre audience member gazes through the fourth wall and peers into the life of a character grappling with a similar issue to himself, he essentially has a normalizing experience. Theatre and Drama education was built on this notion. As characters are stripped to bare bones and their decisions examined, the axis on which the educative element pivots is the audience member’s identification with the character. The educative theatre practitioner recognizes that it is the ‘act’ of the lesson that surpasses the ‘telling’ of it and concretizes learning in a way chalk and board can never accomplish. On this premise, can a theatre form that invites an audience member to tell his story of a traumatic event and then have that story immediately depicted, serve as an effective debriefing mechanism? This paper makes the argument that not only does the theatre form serve as a psychological debriefing but it also heightens the therapeutic value of the experience through the aesthetic dimension it adds.

### **Reviewing Sensory Experiences**

When an individual comes to the teller’s chair, the conductor follows a methodical line of questioning with the primary objective of uncovering the teller’s sensory impressions. While the events of the story are important, it is the depiction of the teller’s emotional state that allows him to see his story as opposed to another person’s story. In carrying out this function, Playback meets an essential criterion of debriefing.

In the Parish of St. David’s a teller related his distinct post Ivan experience through a story he titled ‘Blue’. The gentleman sat on the teller’s chair and related ‘...since Ivan everything I see in

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St. David is blue. I open my eyes in the morning and look up and I see blue, I walk down the road and I see blue, I went to the doctor and I see blue. Everything Blue and that is my story.' The conductor promptly asks him to describe his feelings about seeing all this 'blue', to which he responds without hesitation, 'blue'. The conductor 'reflects back' to clarify - 'what does this blue do to your body?' He responds, 'The blue is in me, it is stifling me.' Hurricane Ivan took the roofs of nearly every house in Grenada and the colour of the tarpaulin that lined most of the houses are blue. The teller's actor (the actor chosen by the teller to portray himself in the story) portrays the teller's story using a large blue cloth which starts off as his roof and through the story travels over his body, between his arms and legs and around his neck. By the end of the story the blue cloth is hugging his head and covering his face and as he sits in his doctor's office trying to explain his 'blue' ailment, he pulls the doctor to him and covers his (the doctor's) head with the blue cloth. This aesthetic presentation expresses his emotion in a singular and powerful manner. Audience members who were initially puzzled by the teller's description of his story have a clear understanding of the blue ailment.

Like psychological debriefings, PT recognizes that when grappling with a life threatening event, individuals tend to speak about the events of the experience, instead of their emotional responses to the event. The latter tends to be a difficult task because it often involves intimate self disclosure and risk of social judgment. At the core of such self disclosure may be an admission of fear, insecurity, horror, terror, and or intimidation. These are the emotions that can paralyze and immobilize our functioning. An integral element of psychological debriefings is facilitating the expression of these emotions as a means of crippling their power to immobilize ones' psychological functioning. Playback facilitates this self-disclosure in a non-threatening mode and thereby facilitates risk-taking in emotional expression.

### **Creative Control, Emotional Involvement and Tension Reduction**

The PT form places a colossal degree of creative control in the hands of the teller. This empowerment is critical to facilitating the debriefing process. The teller volunteers to come onto the stage. He/she has the power to decide the characters of importance to the story. Furthermore, he/she has the authority to cast the story. Non-verbally, the form repeatedly communicates to the teller that he/she is in charge of the story and can decide the level of disclosure necessary.

At the heart of the experience of drama and theatre is emotional distancing. Landy (1996) describes the essence of an audience's connection to drama as aesthetic distance – this is the

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experiential state where an individual can connect with an 'act' without being overly connected or enmeshed nor detached or disconnected. He can see himself yet still identify that this is another person. The PT form engages the teller in an interaction where he/she can gain aesthetic distance and it is this distance that reduces tension and decreases emotional involvement sufficiently to facilitate his/her debriefing from a traumatic event.

When the teller takes the risk of coming to the teller's chair, he understands that while he is about to divulge intimate parts of himself, he nevertheless can do so with a measure of emotional distance. He is aware that he does not have to embody the essence of his story, be it pain or fear or elation. He understands the actors will perform that task. This understanding facilitates an emotional distance that makes the telling of the story less burdensome.

Every Ivan story **ARD Playback Theatre Company** has portrayed (approximately two dozen to date) has had a humorous element in its telling and depiction. Yet amidst the humour is a clear sense that the experience was a sober event. For many, humour is an instinctual response to discomfort; it is a means of coping that channels our intense emotions into a safe, contained and familiar expression. Without the humour, the experience may very well be too painful to share. In the Parish of St. Mark during the portrayal of an 'Ivan story', an actor stands on a crate and exclaims 'Oh Gawd, a tidal wave just hit Gouyare, we play too much devil Mas last Carnival!' The audience explodes with laughter. The words are taken directly from the teller, who related how traumatizing it was for her to be abroad during the Hurricane and receiving bits and pieces of reports from unreliable sources. While questioning the credibility of the information, the teller expresses her desperate need to hold on to the information because it is the only information available. The panic and devastation of this kind of vicarious traumatization was distinctly delivered in a hilarious story laced with pain and fear.

## **Cultural Relevance**

An element of PT which heightens the aesthetic and therapeutic value of this intervention is its cultural relevance. When Grenadian actors who have all experienced Ivan and who live within the culture's collective consciousness, perform Playback in a school or church in the heart of an urban or rural community, they can access and portray the subtext of stories with utmost potency. When the 'Blue' story referenced above was initially told, as a non-resident of Grenada, I was puzzled and initially did not understand the depth of the story – I only

understood the significance of the blue tarpaulin as the story was depicted. The actors however did not hesitate in their improvisation. By the same token, without understanding the cultural essence of the Gouyare community as the epitome of Carnival and partying and the allusion that God rained a tidal wave in retribution for their love of devil masquerade, the essence of the portrayal may be lost.

### **The Cognitive and the Emotional: Weaving traumatic experiences into stories**

Fox (cited in Fox & Dauber 1999) in 'Gathering Voices – Essays in Playback Theatre' explains that the zone of good Playback is achieved where the triad of art, social interaction and ritual meet. The art of improvisation, expressiveness, originality, and story language must work cohesively with good event management, the creation of a safe atmosphere and a clear framework of order and ceremony. It is within this zone that Playback communicates loudly that traumatic experiences can be contained and woven into a story. Throughout the **ARD Playback Theatre Company** community performances, it has held true that stories about the Ivan experiences are amongst the last told. The audience does not trust us with an Ivan story until we have established that convergence zone betwixt art, social interaction and ritual.

Heinrich Dauber (cited in Fox & Dauber 1999) identifies four dimensions in his answer to the question, 'How does Playback work?' He asserts that Playback is simultaneously an individual, collective, objective and subjective experience operating along content, artistic, ritualistic and social dimensions.

On the content dimension, the teller sees his individual, subjective experience as the actor portrays his story based on the personal perspective he (the teller) has previously shared. On the artistic dimension, the individual sees his personal experience from an objective perspective, that is as a spectator – as an audience member witnessing a performance. While on the ritualistic dimension, there is a collective subjective experience of the story. As a community, the audience looks on at an experience which is part of their collective consciousness - an experience which they have all shared as a group. Finally, on the social dimension, the Playback performance is testimony to a collective objective experience. The audience, the company of actors and the social context in which it is performed have all witnessed the event. Individual stories are integrated into an entire performance and cumulatively leave every individual who has experienced the event with a collective yet distinctive experience.



How does Playback work for rebuilding and recovery in the post-disaster period? The answer lies in the facilitation of an aesthetically distanced process whereby an individual and a community can access both subjective and objective experiences through the content of their stories, its artistic portrayal, the ritual of the theatre-audience interaction and the social contextual meaning which it carries.

Working through trauma involves working through the cognitive and the emotional dimensions of the traumatic event. When the individual is able to acknowledge and grapple with both the feeling and the thoughts of the trauma, he is able to have a cathartic experience and to cognitively place the event into a non-threatening frame of reference. Thereafter, the individual is ready to fully invest in the task of rebuilding and recovery.

## **Conclusion**

### **A Caribbean Society-in-Crisis: Transmuting Chaos and Restoring a sense of belonging and order**

Peter Brook writes that theatre was designed to 'reflect the sacred, universal mysteries and also to comfort the drunken and the lonely man'. Jo Salas (1999) avers that 'the intrinsic value of form in a story can transmute chaos and restore a sense of belonging to the world that is fundamentally purposeful afterall' (p19). For societies-in-crisis, the value and indeed necessity of arts is pertinently captured in the crux of these statements of Brook and Salas. The **ARD Playback Theatre Company** has used the art of theatre, drama, music and dialogue to steer their society in crisis through the process of rebuilding – the process of transmuting chaos and restoring a sense of safety, belonging and order.

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