



Woven Together by Love: A Look at Company Life in Playback Theatre

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In the community there are always problems, conflict, and sickness. The community is unified (woven together) by love, finding persistent expression in warm affection and physical contact.

The center is the work. So long as the work gets done. Other things are secondary to it. That's where the sovereignty is. With the exception, which makes it free, that the work can be sacrificed at any time when another need takes priority: madness, jealousy, illness, conflict: provided the group survives. Or until it needs to dissolve or transform itself.

Julian Beck, The Living Theatre

A very complicated and difficult problem is the relation of work to life and to this ensemble as a group, and our relationship to each other within it. We have said more or less we are a task group: we work through problems in order to perform a work as a group. We don't meet specifically to confront one another in our lives--our attitudes and interrelationships. We've said individually more or less: "I have a private life of activities and friends who may overlap with the Open Theatre, but it is also separate." Much of the work we do requires taking a lot of risk. The experiences we've had together have built up a lot of trust, which makes taking risks more possible. At the same time, nobody's able to shut out completely the pettiness we indulge in with our landlords when we come here. When we start work here, we aren't able to rise above envy and anxiety in outside personal relationships. We are not immune to flattery.

Our own settlement of work to life and ensemble to community undoubtedly will change, but because we can't close the door on pettiness in ourselves, we must become aware of it in order to subordinate it to the task at hand. This will always be a live problem as it is now, and as it has been in all serious groups.

Joseph Chaikin, Open Theatre

One time a couple in the group showed up at rehearsal arguing and it was one of my rare moments of very clear centeredness; I told them to get out until they could just come to rehearsal and be here, and they went and they straightened it out and came back. I felt it was not appropriate for them to burden us with their arguing. On the other hand I can think of another time when a couple in the group was about to separate, and we decided to spend a whole day helping them.

So when do you tell them to get out and get their shit together and don't lay it on us, and when do you give all your humanity to help them and Playback to help them? And there's no easy answer to that. I can't give you a formula.

Jonathan Fox, Playback Theatre

As I focus my energy on writing this paper, Hudson River Playback Theatre, the company I've been a member of for almost two years, has just had a major transition; a founding member has been asked to leave. For many of us, it is a relief; her presence was challenging, she drained energy, and was emotionally needy. This company isn't and never has been a therapy group--perhaps that is what she needed. I remember her saying, in a group discussion about her commitment to the company, "This isn't a very loving, warm group of people." "It's not supposed to be," she was told. "It's a performing company, we provide a service in the community, we develop ourselves artistically..."

True. But I agree with her. Why couldn't it be a *loving* group of people as well?¹ We do have fun together and support each other in many different ways. Though infrequently, we are resources for each other, such as the time when Che had been in a terrifying car accident. A few of us stayed late at rehearsal to conduct and act for her. This experience was not only useful to her, but also enabled the four of us to reach a new level of contact. But to me, the atmosphere when I enter the room is that of camaraderie, not of intimacy.

The more I spent time visiting different Playback companies, including my attendance at the International PT Conference and my participation in the International PT Women's Company in Beijing, China, the more I realized that one aspect of company life fascinates me: a Playback company as community/family. As I reflected on this, I realized that there are a number of very personal reasons.

From the time I first began participating in theatre, I loved being part of a collective of people who came together to create something. My earliest experience was in fact in my own family: at age three I played Cindy Lou Who with my mother narrating *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, a children's story, and my father playing the grinch at a local English-speaking community center. At age 11, in 5th grade, I remember how a few of

¹As I reread a section of Jonathan's *Company Life* chapter in *Acts of Service* after having written this, I see that I chose the same word as he did: "a Community, Jean Vanier has said, is a group of individuals who yearn to bring each other forth. I like that definition. It fits my sense that a theatre company is a group of individuals who feel themselves a part of an ultimately *loving* whole." p. 175.

the popular girls, who generally hated and ridiculed me, and I miraculously bonded when I directed a skit we performed for parents. I have fond recollections of 'going for a drink' after rehearsals for a community theatre production of *Tom Jones* when I was 17, feeling more flirtatious and at ease than I usually did in social settings.

So much of the pleasure came from the being together, sharing, talking, laughing, flirting, playing. A sense of belonging together, albeit for a limited time and specific purpose. I think it is that sense, perhaps more than any other one element of theatre, that has always drawn me in and nourished me. As Jonathan states in *Acts of Service*, "when a group of actors not only function well on the fictive level, but enjoy being together on the social level, a very strong communication is made."²

After I'd been thinking about this topic, company life, for quite some time, it suddenly dawned on me that what I had been yearning for was the psychodrama core training that I'd been in for a year. This group, led by Jonathan Fox, met one weekend a month from September to May. The year I was in it was its last. It was a community that is now sorely missed by a number of students. This, too, was not a therapy group, we came together for professional psychodrama training, spending each weekend on a specific topic, getting directing practice and supervision. And yet we brought with us our complex and diverse lives. We began each weekend with a sharing go-round which was almost always very deep. To varying degrees, we did personal work (of which I, as one of the beginning psychodrama students, did a lot). We had an unspoken commitment to each other not only to tell our stories, but to tell from our deepest stories and challenge ourselves in some direction in our lives. There was real community, because we stayed overnight together and ate meals together. Sometimes the whole group would be together, other times we would separate into smaller groups. I knew I had somewhere to go each month where I would be moved and stimulated, supported and honored.

Another personal reason for my interest in this topic has to do with my own family background. At age 25, I am moving more solidly into my own life, I am living in my own community, making my own decisions about the future, and financially close to independent. So just by virtue of my age, I am at a time when I am letting go of family of origin as central to my existence. Coupled with this development, however, is the recent divorce of my parents, which has left the family unit we were forever behind. Despite the

² Fox, Jonathan. *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre*. Tusitala Publishing: New Paltz, New York, 1994.

fact that it feels emotionally more healthy for my parents to be living apart, this loss, this change has shaken me. I feel myself in my life now at the opposite end of the spectrum from 'family'. I do not have a family of my own, and the family I'd always been a member of is no longer a family unit.

When I discussed my plans for this essay-project with Jonathan, I told him that I was aware of and in fact drawing on my personal involvement in this topic. He encouraged me to do this. Because company life is a sensitive topic, I have chosen to be as transparent with my own process as possible. Throughout this essay, I offer comments pertaining to my Playback experiences or to my personal life.

Having said this, I would like to stress that company life is a subject of great interest in the Playback community, and one that has not been abundantly written about. It is an important one to look at, as companies expand their work into new arenas, exchange between established and new companies flourishes, and new Playback companies are cropping up all over.

I'm going to begin by offering an explanation of the term company life. This will be followed by a description of my research method and short biographies of each of the four companies I concentrated on. After naming some of the basic similarities in the life of these companies, I will go on to discuss the differences I observed by topic heading, such as artistic development and attention to group process. In conclusion, I will offer my vision of company life, both as it relates to my own life and to the world at large.

The term "Company Life"

As I have spent time with this topic, I have come to believe that a group which is conscious of the life of the group will have a certain level of cohesion. Like in a functional family, members must identify with the family as an entity which is different from any of the individual people or their relationships with each other.

On the other end of the spectrum, I imagine a professional theatre company coming together for a production; the members are 100% work-oriented. Everyone is encouraged to "leave their shit outside the door" when attending rehearsals. There will, of course, *be* company life. For example, the director pays special attention to certain actors, perhaps for personal reasons. This will have its effect on all members of the company and hence

on the work. Or an actor may get sick the day before performance, and certain members will be better equipped to stomach the crisis than others, who shift gears to survival mode. Again, this will have an influence on the product (which is in this case the reason for the group's existence). Occurrences of this nature make up company life yet may go unnoticed or unattended.

However, especially in an ongoing company or group, the awareness of these factors can strongly enhance both the work and the well-being of the members.

In *Acts of Service*, Jonathan devotes a chapter to company life, though he doesn't offer a precise definition. It is, in fact, a difficult term to define, and to my knowledge, is not used outside the Playback framework. It is a phrase with a variety of meanings, depending on who is using it in what context. For the purpose of this essay, I think of company life as referring to any aspect of the life of a company; including members joining and leaving, how rehearsals are conducted, the nature of people's relationships outside the structured meetings--and how this affects the whole company, the nature of conflicts and how are they dealt with.

Project outline

I visited four Playback companies in the Northeastern United States (of the dozen in this region): Community Playback Theatre (CPT) in my own community in Highland, New York, Pentimento Playback Theatre (PPT) in Albany, New York, Playback Philadelphia (PP) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and DC Playback Theater (DC) in Washington, DC. I will also be drawing on my experience as a member of Hudson River Playback Theatre, Kingston, New York, and the International Playback Theatre Women's Company, a temporary company assembled to perform at the NGO Forum on Women in Beijing, China, in August/September 1995, and my conversation with Lori Wynters, who recently founded Northampton Playback Theatre, in Northampton, Massachusetts. Furthermore, I conducted interviews with Jonathan Fox and Judy Swallow discussing the original Playback Theatre, New Paltz, New York, which is no longer in existence.

My goals in focusing on the four companies were as follows:

- * to attend a public performance of each company
- * to conduct short interviews with three members in each company

- * where possible to attend a rehearsal and make observations, while getting a feel for the company by participating in the rehearsal

I attended a public performance of each of the four companies as well as rehearsals of Pentimento PT and Community PT. I was present at Playback Philadelphia's warm-up to the performance, and have participated in their rehearsals in the past. I conducted short interviews with three members of each company, sticking roughly to the same format (see below). Some of the interviews were more rushed than others, some were in person and others over the phone.

My aim was not so much to measure differences scientifically or rate effectiveness in companies as to collect impressions, comments, images, and of course stories, and allow these to enrich my understanding of how companies function and the range of what it means to be in a company.

In each interview, I asked the following questions:

1. a) How did the company originate?
 b) How did you come to be involved in it?
2. What is the purpose of your Playback company?
 a) for yourself personally
 b) in the community/world
3. Looking at the company on the spectrum

Family-----Professional association

- a) Does it feel like a family?
- b) What does/would a family feel like?
- c) What do you do to connect more/build intimacy?
- d) Do you socialize outside official meeting times?

and

- a) What do you do to develop artistically?
- b) How do you give feedback?

4. How do you deal with conflict in your company?
5. Does being in the company bring you joy?
6. Is the company a place where you can be creative?
7. What is the turnover like?

(NB: Questions 4 - 7 were suggestions from Jonathan, after I had already begun the interview process, so they were not answered by each individual.)

Let me briefly introduce the companies themselves (and I'd like to note here that my familiarity with each company varies and in any case is quite limited; also, obviously the rehearsals I attended were affected by the presence of an outsider). I have chosen the following criteria (and excluded many others): history of origin, names of members (not including peripheral members, lighting people, and so on), gender, race, age range, a rough list of professions and leadership style. I mention married couples and nationalities when other than American. In italics, I offer impressions from my visits, hoping to convey a flavor of my experience. I also comment briefly on my previous relationship with companies or company members.

Community Playback Theatre

This company which has its home in Highland, New York, has existed for ten years. At the time when the original Playback Theatre was ending, Judy Swallow sent out flyers to people who had previously attended Playback workshops, inviting them to come together to do Playback with and for each other. Over a period of about five years, the group evolved into a collective committed to performing in the community, namely monthly performances at Boughton Place (Moreno stage), and at commissioned events to which they often travel. Like all the companies I visited, Community PT is a member of the International Playback Theatre Network.

Currently membership is made up of Judy, Toni, Val, Betty and Fred, Lee, and Saul (4 women, 3 men). White. Age range: 39 to 68.

Professions: psychodramatist/therapist, printer/bookbinder, social worker, computer programmer/mediator, artist, psychologist, administrative assistant.

Leadership: Judy Swallow is the business director, rehearsals are run collectively.

Living in New Paltz, I've been attending Community PT performances regularly since I moved here in September '94. I know all the members, and have had experience performing with them in joint Hudson River/Community PT gigs. I've participated in their Playback jams.

Though of course each performance is different, I am delighted by the familiar feeling each time I attend a performance. The performers enter humbly, smiling warmly at the audience. While I have seen actors seduced into being 'hammy' by the audience's laughter, there is generally a sense of ease, of being casual with the audience and with each other.

Visit to a rehearsal: I arrive at Boughton Place a few minutes early. I meet Cathy in the parking lot; she is also an invited guest on 3rd Thursday rehearsals. I know her; we greet and walk in. Betty and Val are there--I am surprised to see only two. Various messages have come through from other company members explaining their absences. Judy comes in late while we are still chatting. It seems that this is the group for tonight. "All women--women's Playback..." We smile at each other and stand in a circle to begin warming up.

I find myself surprised that there aren't more people present. I am struck by the depth in telling as we relate a moment from our recent lives; there is a lot of warmth and support for those who tell deeply, while honoring the pain and difficulty.

Playback Philadelphia

Sarah Halley founded this company, together with Shawn Zevitt, in August 1995 after having monthly Playback meetings for a year. Six of the nine members were part of this core group. Not yet a year old, this company is performing for the public as well as being commissioned, for example at the Philadelphia zoo and at an interim house for women and adolescent girls in recovery.

Membership: Sarah, Lisa, Judy, Kristen, and Shawn, Eric, Tom, Jeremy and Dance. (4 women, 5 men). White. Shawn is Canadian, Dance is part-Cuban. Age range 25 to 57. Eric & Sarah, Kristen & Tom are married couples.

Professions: teacher, therapist, playwright, dance teacher, salesperson, actor, rabbinical student & counselor, fundraiser, landscaper.

Leadership: Sarah Halley is artistic director, leads rehearsals and does organizational work, strong emphasis on collective leadership.

I have been a friend and guest of this company from before it even became a company. Sarah Halley and I have been good friends since we attended the School of PT in 1994, after which she returned to Philadelphia and began teaching Playback. Over the two years, I have attended a number of their rehearsals and done some teaching and given feedback. In May, I performed with them as a guest musician. Meanwhile I have become friends with several company members.

Philadelphia Playback is holding three public performances in a weekend, and I have come to the final show on a Sunday night in April. Spring has just exploded, and audience members arrive glowing. There are a few families, couples, friends and people on their own. The performance is sold-out--mainly, company members have invited friends and family; the event hasn't been publicized.

During introductions, performers say first and last names, which feels formal to me. Some differences I notice are due to the Canadian influence in the company (both Shawn and Sarah have worked with Yes oh Yes Drama Outreach under Annie Stirling in Toronto): along with fluid sculptures, tableau stories and pairs, they perform a form called 'flairs,' which is similar to a fluid sculptures but with the actors all remaining in a straight line and not making physical contact with each other. Also, the conductor's and teller's chairs are stage left and the musician is stage right.

At the end of the performance, the audience claps with delight: we have been to Haiti, Honduras, Thailand and downtown Philadelphia together in the stories. After much applause, Eric, company member and now husband of director Sarah Halley, formally thanks Sarah on behalf of the company for her vision and hard work. She seems pleased but returns the praise to the company members. Someone in the audience says to Sarah:

*"Let it **in!**" After this, the performers retreat into a small backstage room where they have a check-in. I am later told that there is a lot of emotion at this moment, people have struggled with this performance, and it is quite a while before they emerge, one by one, most less than enthusiastically.*

DC Playback Theater

Seven years ago, several people in the DC psychodrama community who had previous Playback experience decided to form a group to do Playback. Jeffrey Yates became the director and remained in that role until he left the company last fall. From the beginning, the group had a focus on personal work and building a community. More recently, the group has engaged in anti-racism/anti-oppression workshops and now has a defined purpose to work for social justice and challenge racism and white supremacy.

Members are Kimberly,³ Susan, Madelyn, Deborah, LaSharn and Gregory, David, John, Pete (5 women, 4 men). Four African-American, five white. Pete is British. Age range 32-52. David & Susan, Deborah & Pete are married couples.

Professions: several psychotherapists, social worker, dance therapist, professional actors, musician/counseling student, psychodramatist.

Leadership: collective (in progress, as Jeffrey's termination was recent)

My friend Sarah Creider and I arrive on the block of 18th Street where the DCAC (District of Columbia Arts Center) is. This is where DC PT performs on the third Sunday of the month. I notice an Ethiopian restaurant, a French restaurant, cafes with chairs and tables set up outside, lots of people on the street. There is a buzz in the air.

The theatre is small, intimate and very dark in contrast to the bright early evening. The audience sits in elevated rows on two sides of the stage. Kimberly Rattley, a member of DC Playback, sits on the side in the back row with her teen Playback company. They are here to watch. The audience is mainly white, and I notice that except for Kimberly's group, the people of color are all sitting in the last row. The tellers of the three stories are all white. After the third story, when the end of the performance has already been

³ In the time since I interviewed Kimberly, she has formally left the company on a one-year hiatus.

invoked, the conductor, Deborah, asks for a feeling about that story. An African American woman sitting behind me bursts out, "I just realized something about myself. Watching his story, I understood a fear I've always had." Unbidden by Deborah, she elaborates and asks, "do you want me to tell about it?" Deborah immediately clarifies that this is in fact the end of the performance and goes on to ask the audience for feelings that had come up during the performance. The company ends the evening with a collective fluid sculpture. I find myself wishing that the conductor had responded to this woman with more warmth, inviting her to come again and tell this story at a later date. Having come to the performance knowing about the company's awareness of racial issues, I feel disappointed and puzzled by this incident.

I had met a few DC Playback members at the PT Conference in Olympia, WA, last year. Since then, I've attended workshops with John Johnson and Barbara Gellert (former member); Kimberly and I have gotten to know each other initially because she was going to join the Women's PT Company in China.

Pentimento Playback Theatre

This company, located in Albany, New York, came into being when Lori Smith who had studied psychodrama with Jonathan held two six-week series of Playback workshops in 1992; a number of the participants were eager to become a company with Lori as their leader. The company performs publicly and is commissioned to conferences, prisons, etc. Lori left the company at the end of last year.

Members: Joan, Janet, Theresa, Dee, and John, Tony (4 women, 2 men). White. Age range 30-52.

Professions: administrator, teacher, therapist, storyteller, social services, arts administrator.

Leadership: collective. Each month a different member leads rehearsals conducts the public performance the following month.

I have a vivid memory of arriving at the Pentimento PT performance with Matt Spitzer (Hudson River PT member and friend) after a quick bite to eat. Their performing space, the main room at the Body Mind Center, was very wide and not terribly deep, so there was only room for two long rows of people. There were only a few people there, and the

actors were milling around greeting people and talking to the audience. I noticed that their dress was casual, in fact did not seem in any way coordinated. Some wore jeans, others leggings. John and I hugged hello; he and I had been students together at the School of PT. (He is the only member I have ever met before.) He introduced Matt and me to others in the company, and there was a buzz because we fellow Playbackers were there to see the performance. At eight o'clock, the audience was still quite small, and we waited. Soon about 20 women arrived from an African dance class, part of a weekend conference, which was being held upstairs. I was struck by both the vibrant energy and the performerishness they brought into the room with them, wearing leotards and draped fabric, their skin shiny with sweat. They proudly took up space as they made their way to chairs and the floor, becoming observers, like us. It felt like an injection of bohemia into the assembled group of local families and couples.

Once the performance began, the audience settled in to this as a shared experience. There was space for people who were in some way different to tell. The tellers of stories were two children, a mousy, introverted woman, a mother estranged from her 12 year old daughter (a contrast to the many families who were there), a lesbian with a coming out story, and a disabled man. I was impressed that the company was able to extend such a warm invitation, especially to people who might rarely feel welcome to tell their story to a group of strangers.

Similarities

Of course in all these companies there are basic similarities. Like Jonathan, I found that "there is something special about a *company*. It is something I can feel in the air the minute I walk into the room. There's an energy, an urgency to make the most out of the moment."⁴ The companies vary greatly from one another, but this sense is something they all share. Also, it seems to me that in all companies, the members have the desire to be of service to the community, to celebrate our stories and through them, our humanity.

When I let the snapshot images of Playback performances in Philadelphia, Albany, Highland, NY, and Washington, DC flash through my mind, there is a simplicity that echoes in each of them. The message is: "we're here, a company of people. We're here to hear your stories and play them back." There is generosity offered by the actors, and

⁴ *Acts of Service*, p. 160.

delight stirring in the audience. There are loyal friends, relatives and strangers in all these audiences. The performers achieve moments of beauty and stumble on moments of confusion. They work together with surprising ease, they struggle with a difficult story. There is tension at some moments, and joy at others.

The companies are ongoing,⁵ while membership fluctuates. They rehearse on a regular basis and hold public performances as well as commissioned ones, for which they are usually paid.

The constellation relationships in and outside of the company is complex and always changing. Company life includes conflict and it includes joy, and of course the sharing each other's stories, and through them, each other's lives.

These companies are, then, *communities*, as Julian Beck describes The Living Theatre, his experimental theatre company:

In the community there are always problems, conflicts, and sickness. The community is unified (woven together) by love, finding persistent expression in warm affection and physical contact.⁶

Differences

In recalling the performances and rehearsals I attended, I can think of many differences. Each company has its own culture, history, language, purpose, and traditions. Of course in this region, where the language and much of the culture is at least externally the same, these differences are more subtle.

Relating to the interview questions, I have chosen to take a closer look at the following topics: attention to group process including conflict, the family/community aspect of a company and social life, artistic development, leadership, and membership (with sub-headings turnover, age range, members' professions, and age of company).

⁵ The International PT Women's Company was an exception: we formed as a temporary company with the sole and one-time purpose of performing at the NGO Forum on Women in Beijing, China (see below for more detail).

⁶Beck, Julian. *The Life of the Theatre*. City Lights, New York, NY: 1972.

Attention to group process

I have learned that the attention or lack of attention to group process is a central issue in group work from the following experiences: my psychodrama training, my participation in Hudson River PT and my participation in the International Women's PT Company. My increasing awareness of what is happening in the group at any given moment and to what degree this is being acknowledged or ignored by the leader(s) has influenced my ideas about teaching and any in fact kind of leadership. In fact, I could write an entire essay on this topic. Therefore I devoted more time to this aspect than to some of the others. At the end of this section, I focus specifically on how companies deal with conflict.

From the beginning of the original Playback Theatre, Jonathan felt that "regular and skilled attention to the actors' well-being is imperative."⁷ He espoused the psychodramatic theory that the constellation of relationships in the group at any given point affects the way the company works as a whole: "far better, it seems to me, is to work *with* the social level rather than ignore it."⁸ So, unlike in other kinds of theatre companies, attention to group process has historically been a part of Playback company life.

I believe that attention to group process is integral to having a well-rounded, healthy Playback company. Ideally it encompasses concern that each individual's needs be at least expressed (if not satisfied), and that members are given space to speak, verbally or otherwise. Jonathan says about the original company:

We learned a way of giving each other space to be heard; I really treasure this. It took us a few years. Where when you're facing something, the more important it is, the more you're not going to go fast, especially without letting the silent ones speak, because often the silent ones have the most feeling or the most to say. And so often in so many contexts, it's kind of a power game going on in those kind of discussions. And we really learned to wait for each other, and that really helped a tremendous amount in terms of basic communication. So that's something we all learned together.

⁷ *Acts of Service*, p. 141

⁸ *Acts of Service*, p. 174

Some companies devote a lot of attention to group process. Kimberly Rattley says of DC Playback, "we are 'the processing company.' We process all the time about racism, and we do a lot of psychodramatic stuff on what the group needs, what it's been like, and working on each other's personal stories and going deeper into personal work."

According to Gregory Ford, DC Playback "consciously engages in whatever the problems are. Here things are directly addressed." For feedback, "we do a discussion the following day. We do that for *everything* we do," Gregory laughs. In both of their responses, I sense irony. It is of course possible to overwhelm members with too much focus on group process, which I feel is the case for some DC Playback members, though not for others.

Community PT has formal processing meetings three to four times a year with an outside facilitator, to "do our group process and clean up unfinished business, not that we don't do it in between times, but this is a time when some things need to be witnessed, or things need to be checked out and it can get very deep and very enriching." (Judy Swallow)

These two companies consciously focus on group process, though of course not exclusively.

John Stevenson of Pentimento PT states that devoting time to building intimacy "was something that was a big focus when we were first starting and what's happened is that as people come and go, we realize at some point that we need to do more of that." Theresa elaborates: "I think that the group itself has identified some need for team-building, other than the context of playing together, the Playback stuff, and doing business." Since I visited them in May, John reported to me recently, there has been a rehearsal in which a conflict between group members and the rehearsal leader precipitated a "hard discussion." Following the discussion, in which the group "entered into something new and learned something new," very rich stories were told and enacted. Generally, John says, "we tell each other our stories, but we tell them to a certain point, but then it's impossible to go beyond. But if we face the difficulties we get beyond that point. Everybody had a story that related to that point."

I was pleased to hear about this discussion, as I had sensed some subtle tension in the group when I visited their rehearsal, though I couldn't exactly put my finger on its source.

Judy Freed is a psychodramatist who was a founding member of DC Playback and is also a founding member of Playback Philadelphia. Of the current situation in PP, she says, "we don't do enough [to create intimacy]. I would really like more time to just connect with each other before we do other things, and other people say, "Yeah, me, too," but it hasn't yet materialized." Along the same lines, Lisa Layne says,

I think we recognize the need to do processing and stuff like that. And there's always a chance to do stories, I think we use that time very well as community time. But we don't spend a lot of time focusing on how people feel in the group, and what's going on in the group, and what's going on in our lives.

As a new company, PP members are spending time on solidifying the forms, practicing non-literal enactment, and so on. In the early stages of company life, there is a natural pull toward attending to "program," rather than "mood."⁹ Nevertheless, the rehearsal is structured so that there is some space in the beginning:

I as director really welcome people to come as who they are. We always check in immediately, one of our first rituals is that we check in where we are in a sound and movement way, and then before we start rehearsal people put out if they have anything that's going on on a personal or physical level... anything from "my back is sore so don't jump on me," to "I'm having a really hard time in this particular relationship in my life, I'm feeling really tender." (Sarah Halley)

I am aware that performing is a priority for Playback Philadelphia. On the complicated spectrum of a company as professional association vs. a community or family, a choice in the 'professional association' direction has already been made, consciously and unconsciously, I suspect. And as is typical in a Playback company, some members, like Judy and Lisa, have strong concerns about group-building, which has been somewhat neglected, while others are less tuned into this and perhaps more concerned about their own adequacy in performing. It is thus a constant tug on the leader to find an appropriate balance. I believe it is healthy to have a structure for members to express these concerns so that there is an open dialogue and the leader can always be taking these responses into account.

⁹ Ibid., p. 92. Jonathan uses these terms to differentiate the practice of following an agenda, for example in the area of artistic development, from that of allowing the needs of the group and its members to dictate an activity at a given moment.

Some of the reasons companies have different ways of addressing group process are obvious. The founding members of DC Playback who are currently in the group are psychodramatists or involved with psychodrama. Another member, John Johnson, is involved in Process Work, a form of group facilitation. With their current focus on anti-racism work, it strikes me as inevitable that deep things will be stirred up for individuals and need to be addressed. However, Kimberly Rattley feels that it is at the expense of artistic development; DC Playback is not a place where she can stretch artistically at the moment and this is frustrating to her (see below).

In Community PT, Judy is a psychodramatist with a number of other members also involved with psychodrama/ therapy/social work. As a company with ten years' experience, members, according to Judy, "are consciously committed to an honest relationship, even if pain comes up or grief or anger or any of those things, willing to move through it for the richness of being in relationship."

Pentimento PT is still adjusting to the loss of the founder/director Lori Smith who had studied psychodrama and was in charge of group process. John reflects: "when there was a conflict it was up to Lori to address it." She also seems to have orchestrated the social component, as Dee alludes to: "my sense is that she tried to keep on top of birthdays, anyway, and we'd do something extra." (Dee)

In Playback Philadelphia, Judy and Lisa who have backgrounds in therapy and social work, are the ones perhaps most attuned to a need for group-building, while many of the other members come from an artistic background.

Because this topic felt so important to me, I have chosen to include some of my observations from my own company experience.

In Hudson River PT, there is very little time spent on group process; we do share through Playback forms about our personal lives, but we don't take time to talk about things that are going in the group, unless, as with the build-up to Deborah's leaving, the situation reaches a crisis level. This is definitely something I miss and feel would enhance our work and our relationships to each other. Last night at our end of year gathering, I mentioned this concern and it seems this is a direction in which we may move.

Lori Wynters of Northampton Playback Theatre told me she uses a lot of psychodramatic exercises in her still new company, for example, inviting each person to ask someone else a question, something the asker is curious about. "It ended up taking three hours, just that one exercise. But we'd realized we really didn't know each other that well yet." In this way, Lori is consciously attending to "mood" -- perhaps almost as much as to "program." This is undoubtedly difficult at times. It requires a lot of time, and a willingness on the part of members both to engage in this kind of exploration and also accept that, at least for the moment, performing is less of a priority.

In the International PT Women's Company which formed to perform at the NGO Forum on Women in China, our focus, especially initially, was entirely on "program." This was a very difficult experience for me and several others. Some of us didn't know each other at all. It was so challenging to feel at all stable and safe on a muddy conference site in rural China with 30,000 other women from all over the world. We all shared a deep sense of chaos and ungroundedness, yet because of the demands on us to perform for others, already during our first warm-up/rehearsal, we didn't express these mutual feelings to each other in the whole group enough. The issue of leadership remained unaddressed till the very end, when some of us in the group demanded a group processing session. Many of us felt isolated and unsupported within the group. Yet, miraculously, when we were in performance, we pulled together. This had something to do with our devotion to the women from all over and their stories and our faith in Playback as a means for communication and healing. It is hard to imagine that we could have sustained this level of cohesion in performing if the conference had gone on much longer than it did.

As I alluded to earlier, the degree to which a leader or a company will engage in attention to group process is partially determined organically by the make-up and purpose of the group. Hopefully, this will also correspond with the leader's and the group's strongest interest, so that it is also a choice. In other words, Playback Theater Schweiz (Switzerland), for example, a group which has its home in the social realm (as opposed to artistic or therapeutic),¹⁰ will make a conscious choice to focus on group process more than on artistic development because that is the area in which company members are most inspired.

Conflict

¹⁰ Jürgen Hermann, July 18, 1996, conversation in PT Leadership

... Conflict is an unavoidable part of company life. ... To do Playback well, we must be open to our process, as well as accept, even if only for the length of the story, the validity of another's. A commitment to addressing differences supports the vision of a theatre and a life of quality and health.¹¹

Basically, I found that companies deal with conflict by talking about it, sometimes in the whole group, other times someone will call the person they have a conflict with on the phone and he/she will respond. Sometimes a dyad will draw in an outside member to mediate. In Playback Philadelphia, leader Sarah Halley does the mediation and plans to have someone else trained to do this to support her. In CPT, the scheduled process meetings (mentioned above) seem to be the primary place for dealing with conflict in the whole group. Pentimento PT will have an open discussion in order to find a resolution, after, according to John, "ignoring the problem for a while, hoping it will go away." In DC Playback, Kimberly tells me, "we address conflict. It's not hidden. Things are very overt now. However, we're not as good at *resolving* things. [The process we use is] discussion, talking in a circle. There's much more talking than action."

I think it is valuable for a company to have a familiar and effective structure for dealing with conflict. At the same time, I think it is good for all members to develop a sense of balance in regard to airing conflict, which may involve coaching from the leader. Each person might ask herself which issues are important to deal with in the whole group, which can be resolved with one other person without using group time, and which can be learned from without delving into them in depth? Playback forms themselves are useful tools for expressing difficulties. In some cases, they might be a warm-up to a conflict resolution process, other times, they might offer an effective means for people to express their experience succinctly without further ado.

Conflict is another large and deep topic which deserves more attention than I give it in this essay. I refer readers to Judy Dolmatch's article *The Full-hearted Path: Conflict in Playback Company Life*.¹²

Company as family & social life

¹¹ Dolmatch, Judy. *The Full-hearted Path: Conflict in Playback Company Life*. INTERPLAY, March 1992.

¹² Ibid.

"A group of individuals in open-ended, intimate relationship sounds very much like a family, and in many ways, the analogy is apt."¹³

The concept of a company as family and a company's social life, i.e. time spent together as a group outside of official meetings, are related but separate. From what I saw, I gather it is possible for a company to have a certain kind of family feeling even if little social time is spent together. However, a some program-free social time together can deepen intimacy in a powerful way.

I believe that the family or community aspect of company life is closely related to attention to group process. When attention is paid to group process, members feel more whole together and are at ease with each other in a way that encourages the feeling of being a family. Of course, many other factors play a part in this. When intimate stories are shared and honored, there is a feeling of going through thick and thin together. When a company keeps going for many years, there is an ongoing sense of commitment which is similar to being in a family.

My sense is that a company can have a strong family feeling while remaining artistically mediocre. However, I don't believe that an artistically refined company can succeed in Playback Theatre without devoting a certain amount of energy to intimacy. None of the companies I visited fell into either of these extremes, but, due to many factors, there was a range.

The family quality of a company is hard to pin down. Often, there are private jokes, familiar role-playing, and openness to love and to conflict that perhaps wouldn't be shown with an outsider present or are hard to detect. For this topic, I drew largely on the interviews.

There was a wide range of responses to my question about a Playback company as family. I was particularly aware of the fact that within the same company, some people would say that it did feel like a family and others that it didn't. The social construct 'family' is a complex one, and one to which, I imagine, each person has their own multi-

¹³ *Acts of Service*, p. 162

layered reaction. Several people associated the word directly with their family of origin, referring to it as problematic or dysfunctional and therefore a undesirable model.

Socializing, for reasons I discussed earlier, was a question of particular interest to me. Do members spend time together outside of formal rehearsals and performances? In all cases, the answer is yes, though to varying degrees, and rarely in the whole company. Generally, people would like to spend more time together but have difficulty finding time to do so.

Do companies socialize as part of a cool-down process? I made the following observations when I visited performances. In all the companies, the audience is invited to stay and chat for a while. In Community PT, there is a strong feeling of community, and audience members often stay for as long as an hour. The company then shifts to "program" mode and has a processing session which usually begins as last audience members are getting ready to leave. In the urban companies, the feeling was more fragmented. When I visited Playback Philadelphia, a few of us went to a cafe after performance, while most of the company left. In Washington DC, my sense was that people took off in different directions fairly quickly (I was holding interviews and was among the last to leave). Pentimento PT members asked each other about going out; I recall hearing John say he needed to be with his son Jamie and therefore couldn't socialize. It seemed like some of the others might have gone out together.

Compared to my experiences in other kinds of theatre, then, Playback companies focus more on processing than on just being together socially and unwinding from the performance "high." Again, my sense is that sharing cool-down time after a Playback performance would be beneficial to the company as a whole.

Of course the nature of relationships members have with each other outside of the company affects company life. In all the companies, some members are friends with others, while others aren't. Connections range from spouse, living together--as partners or not, close friendships, counseling partners, work colleagues/partners, to simply fellow company members. In both DC Playback and Playback Philadelphia, there are two married couples. My guess is that this has its own particular impact on company life, although I did not look into it further or witness any specific incidents.

Also, the history of these relationships before the company has begun is relevant. Some people may have already been close friends, for example. These individuals will bring this history into the group, which will be yet another layer affecting group life.

I have selected a few of the responses to my questions on this subject, to give readers a flavor of the diverse experiences company members have.

"Yeah, yeah, the company very much feels like a family. I'm thinking last night it was Tom's (company member) 57th birthday and he had a big party and all the Playback people with the exception of Shawn were there, we were the last people there and we were singing and making music... we don't just come together and do professional work and leave. There's definitely community." Sarah Halley

"If [Community PT] were any kind of family it would be cousins and brothers and sisters and that kind of thing. And different people can be Mommy once in a while, different people can be Daddy once in a while. ... We [in CPT] say we'd like to hang out more, or do things. The original company, we'd do things, spontaneously all go to a hot tub or something like that. And I think it might have been the times, we all seem to be busier in the 90's, maybe it's our age, maybe the times..."

Judy Swallow

"Sometimes it is, but it's not so much a family. Different things happen where we connect more. My partner and I are fairly involved with Deborah's kids, periodically anyway we've spent some time together, and I've gone to Deborah's bat mitzvah. So there are personal things outside the regular company that we do. People who come to my church [to perform Playback] I get closer to. "

Gregory Ford

There's some members in the company that I don't know anything about, and we've been together for a year. And there are some that I do a lot of activities with that have nothing to do with Playback. But it's really not consistent from person to person. So in that way it doesn't feel like family, because I don't have that connection to everyone in the group. Or that they have that with me. I think that's slowly, slowly now beginning to change and there's beginning to be more of a family feeling. Judy Freed

It's a family of choice. I do feel like I have these siblings. And for me personally, it entails things like having people who can push my buttons. ... There are a lot of advantages to having an adult family of choice, as opposed to one's original family. In telling your stories together year after year and sharing whatever burdens are on you at the time, there's a lot of intimacy required in being a group member over time. Val Wells

"There are people who have gone through intense personal experiences, all of us have, and told stories about it and been really supported. And except for those people who have always had links outside of the group, we really don't talk to each other by and large or see each other when we're not meeting. I think Kimberly has made personal friendships, but for others of us that's not true."

Susan Kulp

"Outside of the group, I feel we have phone conversations and things of that nature, we seem to be able to connect periodically. Joan and I work together. I had friendships with previous company members." Dee Lee

"Now I don't do much of that [seeing people outside of regular meetings], at least not with the group that exists right now, because I've been in the group all along and a number of people... some of the people I've socialized with outside of the group, and I still see them now, but within the group I do very little socializing now." John Stevenson

I think there's a lot that happens within the dynamic of a company, where you're also talking about people you are close to and with whom you share a lot of common goals and objectives so they become a kind of social unit and on some level a kind of family unit. It has a sort of family-like connotation, it's a real social organization, organism. Lee Myer

This has been another great joy: to be part of a family of performers (intentional, not inherited), sharing our work, our jokes, our physicality, our private joys and sorrows, our public testings. ... For me, [the company] was indeed like another

family, satisfying in its particular mix of social and instrumental, private and public, constructive and idiotic.¹⁴ Jonathan Fox

I am aware that creating a feeling of family in a company is a difficult task. With each group of people the leader (or collective) will face different challenges; in any case, this aspect must be tended with skill and awareness, like a garden. And, while there are ways of facilitating the best possible alliance of members, the group cannot be controlled or taken down a path that some or all members are unable or unwilling to follow.

Artistic development

Generally, all of the companies strive to stretch artistically. When I was first beginning to think about the topic, I asked each member of Hudson River PT to tell me what the purpose of the company was for them. Everyone felt that the company was a place where they could be creative and stretch themselves artistically, and that this was in fact part of its purpose, the other part being to provide a service for the community.

The focus in DC Playback seems to me to be more on social justice and the therapeutic aspect of Playback, although Susan asserts that the company wants to develop artistically, "as we get our membership issues done," and Gregory mentions a number of different exercises people have brought in, including yoga, Theatre of the Oppressed, and movement stuff. Kimberly feels that "it's a place to feel comfortable, *not* a place to stretch artistically." DC Playback seems to be at a place where members are struggling to find the right balance between focussing on group process (and processing in general) and artistic development. This transitional point may well be connected to Jeffrey Yates's departure from the company.

In Pentimento PT, I notice a focus on invention of new forms. For example, the company begins a fluid with one actor standing down stage center during the telling who then makes the first offer and others come in to support from behind. This eliminates the suspenseful moment of who is going to come forward. Another example, which is perhaps wide-spread by now (we use it in Hudson River PT) is with pairs. John explains the origin:

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 204

At our first open rehearsal in the winter of 92/93, we had snowstorm. Initially Jeffrey Scott Alexander and I were the only members of the company who showed up and there was a roomful of people who wanted to see Playback, so what we did for a long time was pairs. Now up to that point we had done a little consulting, quickly deciding who would do what, and I said to Jeffrey, "why don't we try this spontaneously without consulting?" And we did that and had a ball, so from then on, it became part of what we do.

While the company has a strong emphasis on developing originality in this way, from my perspective their command of the traditional forms is less sophisticated than in other companies. In the performance I saw, the conductor used a kind of formula for conducting a story which had little flexibility. During the rehearsal I visited, one member commented that she has a strong dislike to what is sometimes called 'workshopping a scene,' i.e. redoing parts or all of an enactment after feedback. It appears that the company rarely engages in that, although they do have a structured feedback session after each story. This reluctance to rework scenes and the fact that most of the members have not seen Playback performances elsewhere or invited outside Playback practitioners to work with them are possible explanations for the company's more gradual artistic development.

CPT, on the other hand, often chooses to rework a scene. I recall being at a rehearsal where a whole story was reenacted after an appointed 'witness' had given extensive feedback. Judy states: "CPT is very serious about artistic development, and the people who plan rehearsals take it quite seriously and introduce us to new things and new ways of doing Playback." Lee comments: "Fred has given us masks to work with sometimes, I did a rehearsal or two with Shakespeare, certainly we've sought out other people. Jo, for instance, with music, Jonathan to come and help us with conducting, Keith Johnstone in terms of improvisational technique." The company recently hosted Keith Johnstone teaching a two-day workshop; in the past they travelled to attend a workshop led by Jean-Claude van Italie.

In Playback Philadelphia, members bring a strong artistic background in physically based acting, dance/movement, and music. However, the potential is as of yet limited by the fact that the company is still getting clear on basic forms and developing a shared vocabulary.

Because we're so new, for the last couple of months our artistic growth has really gone out of performances. After doing a performance, we talk about what happened and then out of the struggle in the performance there end up being places we work on. Feedback is an important part of our work, we definitely need feedback to grow. (Sarah Halley)

Leadership

Initially I didn't want to address the question of leadership in Playback companies, because, for one thing, it is one that gets a great deal of attention already.¹⁵ I was really more interested in the life of the group. Having spent some time with the topic, however, I am aware more profoundly than I was before how integral a part of group life leadership is. It is one of the main foundations the company is built on.

Collective Leadership

In *Acts of Service*, Jonathan devotes a section of the chapter on Company Life to "The Power of the NST Leader." Here he doesn't address collective leadership. His response when I questioned him about this follows:

Now there are many more groups with collective leadership than there were at the beginning. I would lean toward one leader. As a leader, I like to follow a spontaneous process. I'm not sure how much of it is my own personal bias and how much of it is actually that the psychological and spiritual factors are so sensitive that it's really hard to put your finger on the pulse of what needs to be done. And it's all so delicate, and my mind kind of boggles at how a group collectively can be so fine-tuned. Now of course if you have a leader that isn't that fine-tuned, then you're in the shits, if you're following that leader. So I don't now feel that one is better than the other, but I do tend to feel that collective leadership, whether it's the group or even a couple, is hard.

Interestingly, in the four companies I interviewed, two of them have recently begun collective leadership, while the other two have appointed artistic directors who encourage a collective approach.

¹⁵ I refer interested readers to Tim Van Ness's essay *Leadership in PT Companies: The "Director" Approach and the "Group Consensus" Approach*.

Judy Swallow compares Community PT to the original Playback Theatre:

We are much more of a collective than the original company. You know when the original company started, Jonathan had a vision of a performing company, definitely, and even within the first year had a vision of it being all over the world. And I remember a place when I said, well can't we just start in the Hudson Valley? So Jonathan had a very clear future vision and I sort of bumbled into what we're doing, and because they're fine people and we're all a collective... In one way, I'm not a strong charismatic leader. I think that's a strength if we're doing a collective, because everybody in the group has his or her own strengths and it's like the fingers of the hand: all the fingers together can pick up a ball, but each finger can't. This mode suits my personality and style of doing something better.

Val led the CPT rehearsal I attended. This was a good example of inviting someone to take on a role which is a stretch for them and supporting them. I recall Val's struggle and Judy's coaching from the side; for example, she suggested that Val delegate leading a warm-up to someone else. Other members of the group gave a fair amount of input on what to do next, and sometimes made demands quite strongly. This struck me as a potential disadvantage to rotating rehearsal leadership. Because everyone feels such a strong sense of ownership, members will be less likely to go with the temporary leader's suggestions and follow that person's plan through.

Both Pentimento PT and DC Playback have had the founding director/conductor leave within the last nine months and are sharing leadership, trading off monthly for leadership in rehearsals and conducting (similarly to CPT). Jonathan describes the difficulty at such a time: "Because of the leader's central importance, it also follows that his or her leaving is a much harder phenomenon to deal with than an actor's." He suggests that "often an entire company falls when the leader needs a change."

My sense from these two companies in transition is that their members are in fact very dedicated to Playback and each other, though it may be more difficult to grow both in group process and in artistic development without the familiar leadership. Kimberly commented on Jeffrey Yates's effectiveness at balancing intimacy and artistic development; "he's a great therapist, and it takes a lot to corral a group with adult egos."

John remarked: "We wore Lori out as our leader. We don't make it easy on ourselves when we're the leader of rehearsal, [so after our last discussion which had to do with group process,] we resolved to bring the respect we have for our tellers into the rehearsal process [and especially for the person who's leading the rehearsal]."

In DC I wasn't able to attend a rehearsal, so I offer an observation on the conducting in performance. There was a moment after the third story when Deborah, the conductor, looked at the actors and asked them, "shall we do one more story?" They did not respond visibly, so she turned to the audience and said, "so this is the end of our performance." She elaborated, "sometimes at this point it feels very different when you're standing on this side of the room [indicating stage] than when you're in the audience." I was surprised that she consulted the actors directly; I would have preferred her to intuitively know that it was time to end--or not, as the case may be. Letting the actors decide publicly left room for the audience to feel uncomfortable; "they don't want to hear/reenact another story *we* have to tell." On the other hand, in general it can be a strength in Playback when certain parts of the process are transparent.

In Pentimento PT, it so happened that Joan Fuess led both the rehearsal and conducted the performance I saw. At the rehearsal, she held the reins tightly, sticking mainly to "program." When the opening "talk session" (business discussion) in the beginning dragged on she tried to move it toward conclusion, though everyone got to say their piece. During this section of the rehearsal, I sensed friction. Perhaps it was difficult for some members to fully accept Joan's leadership at this rehearsal.

This is certainly a critical time for both companies, and I sense that it is a healthy one if examination, evaluation, and clarification of vision occur.

During Playback Philadelphia's warm-up before a performance, I observed Sarah Halley's practice of the following: "under any circumstances the best idea might come from someone else. ... In daily practice, a good leader will let go of and re-assume authority constantly, as the dynamic of group creativity flows."¹⁶ Sarah took on and gave away her leadership very sensitively and confidently. Other members made strong offers which were accommodated.

¹⁶ *Acts of Service*, p. 170

She herself asserts:

So I think there's places where the leadership is flexible, because I'm clear that I'm not the only expert in the group, we're all experts in different areas, and I really encourage people to be experts in the area that they're in, and basically what I do is notice when the group needs a leader and step in, or if someone else is stepping in to the appropriate thing, I'll step back, make space for someone else to lead."

Lori Wynters is another example of a company founder/leader who places an emphasis on collective leadership. When she and her company and I were recently discussing groups that are run with collective leadership, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and the Quakers, Lori said, "using the collective leadership model is the only way we're going to change the world."

I now think that, like with other elements of company life, the most effective kind of leadership for a given group will be related to the group's history, its purpose and the area of interest of its members. Having one leader, such as Jo Salas in Hudson River PT, can be time- and work-efficient. Jo brings 20 years of experience in Playback to our company which is invaluable. On the other hand, it can breed a kind of dependency, so that the rehearsal schedule nearly breaks down when she is out of town.

I admire the model of Playback Philadelphia and Northampton PT, where the founders who brought Playback to their area are the artistic director and leader respectively, but encourage a substantial amount of input from the group and hence lean toward a collective approach.

Membership

In this section, I explore the following categories: turnover, age range of members, professions of members, and the age of the company. These are more aspects which influence company life and exemplify ways in which companies differ.

Turnover

Turnover in CPT is slow; the last time new members joined was three years ago, and most of the current members have been in the group for at least five years.

People are making a great commitment not to leave altogether, to give up this process which is personally as well as socially so gratifying. ... I think the company on the whole is really tuned into that people can go away and come back, I think that's why the turnover is slow. (Lee Myer)

Currently, Community PT, having "tried an audition mode and tried the osmosis mode [inviting a groupie into the company]," is having once a month invitational rehearsals for a few people. "It's pretty closed as far as I'm concerned," says Judy, "but this is what the company wanted, and I'm willing to give it a try."

In Pentimento PT, the turnover seems to be faster with "a lot of people in the group [since its founding in 1992]; we've had a lot of different experiences of people leaving the group," as John tells me. PPT has the most structured process for admitting new members; following a series of auditions, the company asks newcomers for a year-long commitment and requires a period of apprenticeship before performing publicly. People I interviewed feel strongly that this works:

The best thing that's been created is trust, and we do have a very specific procedure in terms of having more people in, I think it's really important that we follow that, if this person that wants to be part of our company fits in that regard, or if it's somebody we're uncomfortable with, it would need to be something we'd need to question. Because what we've been able to create is a sense of family and a sense of trust. (Dee)

According to Kimberly, for the first six years, DC Playback had a consistent core group with slow turnover, while now there is a lot of turnover. DC is currently in the process of holding auditions for new members. Earlier in the company's life new people were found more through personal connections. Susan and David were invited and recommended through working with people affiliated with DC Playback. After seeing a performance, Gregory kept running into Jeffrey at health food stores and eventually decided to check the group out.

Being such a young company, Playback Philadelphia is at a different stage. Also, there are already nine members in the group. There is a desire to become more diverse when new people do come in. When she founded the group, Sarah tells me,

I didn't go out and hold auditions and look for people with the best skills. I kind of followed my heart and trusted the relationships that I had, and trusted that other piece which is hard to name about who people are and their commitment to serve and do more than just be actors, that piece that's about healing, people who value community, the connection and ensemble work. So I think when we bring people in, it'll be a slower process where we'll invited some people, get to know them, do some workshops or classes and see how they work with the group.

The often slow turnover of members in Playback companies points to the commitment members from all different walks of life bring to the companies. This deep commitment takes various forms; Sarah shares that "Playback will always be a big piece of what I'm doing. It's definitely more for me than just a hobby. It's my life work I'm creating." Val, coming from different perspective, asserts: "right from the first night I saw Playback as something that would be good for me, since I was shy..." Lee describes Playback as the dream of being in theatre he "really desperately wanted, to have a real sense of purpose, both artistically and socially, which was what I really cared about." As Jonathan says, "I could search long for a better god."¹⁷ That, to me, most articulately sums up what Playback in a company can be.

Age range

There seems to be a general tendency for Playback companies to have members aged 30 up to 60's. I have observed that some of the newer companies in the region, Playback Philadelphia, Valley Playback Theatre, founded by Tim Van Ness in Amherst, MA, Northampton Playback Theatre led by Lori Wynters, and Hudson River Playback have a broader range: beginning in early 20's and reaching up to 60. Valley Playback Theatre actually has a teenage member. I think it is enriching to have a wide range, and also, like with any difference, it requires energy and awareness to successfully include everyone.

Professions of members

Something that stands out in Playback companies is the ratio of actors/artists to therapists. Generally, there are more ex-actors than working actors in Playback

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 205.

companies. I found there was a correlation between members' professions and the company's focus. For example, DC Playback has a majority of people working in the therapeutic realm and is group process-oriented. Playback Philadelphia, with a large number of its members involved professionally in the arts, leans toward the artistic.

Age of company

Companies I visited range from not quite one year to almost eleven years old, and of course this is apparent. In Playback Philadelphia, people are still working with refining their skills using the basic Playback forms. In CPT, on the other hand, I get the sense that this company is more than a group, it's a way of life for those who are in it.

Personally, the experience of being in a working relationship with people, especially diverse, very diverse people who are consciously committed to an honest relationship, even if pain comes up or grief or anger or any of those things, willing to move through it for the richness of being in relationship, it's wonderful... You know we share rehearsal leadership, it's a joy for me to come to... after two days of very intense solid work somewhere else when I'm away, I come in and I'm tired, and oh god, I'd love to go home, but I come to Playback rehearsal and I come out much more energized, because I'm plugging into something that's really present. Really there. When somebody needs something... but nobody there is a bottomless pit, we all have our quirks and our neuroses, or bizarre things... it's like being married to someone, who are you and why are we here in this lifetime together? and we are. It's kind of a given. (Judy Swallow)

Both Pentimento PT and DC PT are in the middle range, with four and seven year's experience, respectively. As discussed earlier, the recent departure of the founder/director has left both companies in what may be a kind of mid-life crisis (refer back to p. 27).

This concludes my exploration of differences I observed in the companies I visited. To end this essay, I would like to return to my current personal situation. I will share my vision of Playback company life in my own life; and finally, I'll explain how I feel company life in Playback Theatre relates to the notion of community in the world.

Although I have raised many questions about company life in Hudson River Playback Theatre, I want to assert that being a member in the group is an important part of my life.

Being in this company is a constant source of learning and growth for me. It is very rewarding and often a lot of fun. I would not be as interested in the topic of company life if it weren't for my devotion to the company, my fellow members and the company's growth. As an active member, I feel I contribute to the company on many different levels. Like all companies, we are always changing and evolving, and I can and do influence some of these changes. At the same time, there are a variety of factors, relating to history, purpose, leadership style and membership which are given. Also, because this, like all Playback groups, is not a full-time company, any form of change happens gradually and cannot be rushed. Over time I have learned that my challenge in this situation is to find a balance between pushing (yang) and letting be (yin).

While I strive to achieve this balance, I am also thinking of the future. My vision now, surprisingly, is very much the same as it was three years ago, when I was writing an application for drama school in London, England--before I even knew Playback Theatre existed. I envision a small company of actors from diverse backgrounds, possibly even different nationalities, which travels, perhaps four months out of the year. This company would probably also perform in the community during the rest of the year. In my application, I wrote: "In the tradition of actors touring their plays from place to place, my aim is to use theatre as a means for cultural exchange (i.e. celebrating the differences) and for international understanding (i.e. emphasizing the similarities)." I imagine Playback Theatre, which so simply and effectively achieves those goals, as the main form. I also hope to explore other theatre forms to broaden the scope, spanning disciplines such as education (including social and political education), community building, and therapy.

In this vision, balance is again the key word. Whether or not I am the leader of this future company, I hope to find the balance that suits me best; a balance between achieving artistic excellence and providing a nesting place for the members' deepest stories. I keep Jo's poignant statement in mind:

The most stable companies seem to find a balance between the demands and the attractions of artistic and professional fulfillment, on the one hand, and moving at a pace that allows for inclusiveness, on the other. This does mean letting go of the most vertiginous heights of ambition. You'll never be the toast of the talk shows or rate serious critical attention from the theatre world or earn large sums of

money if you insist on being thoroughly true to the values of community--to "bringing each other forth" in Jean Vanier's definition.¹⁸

All my life I have yearned for community, and I've felt fulfilled when I have been part of a healthy community. My feeling here is the same as Jonathan's:

We want relating that is not one-way (abandonment of self and fusion with a larger body ...), but two-way, which at its best can be called "love." As described by Erich Fromm, love is capable both of giving us a feeling of "uniting with the world" and a sense of "integrity and individualism." Thus we have an ideal that fulfills both our desire for community and personhood.¹⁹

Last night, as I stood on the stoop of one of the Vassar College student apartments here in this community at the School of Playback Theatre, I paused, pondering fellow student Anna Kay France's question "what are your conclusions about company life?" Out of the night sky, it came to me. The mere fact that a Playback Theatre company *exists* is a kind of miracle. Not to mention the fact that many, many companies exist in many parts of the world. The amount of energy, faith and generosity required by the members and leader(s) of any company simply *to be* a company together is almost unfathomable and completely awe-inspiring. I have beheld the vast potential for growth in all these companies, and I have witnessed how much is already there. These companies provide a vital model not only for their own communities, but for the world. As Jonathan says, "the example of community we see on such occasions is as inspiring as the content of the production and is one of the main appeals of theatre."²⁰

These questions about company life, some of which I have addressed and others of which I haven't, should be of strong concern to the international Playback community. Forming, leading and being in a Playback company is not only an effective way to spread Playback Theatre and the philosophies it embodies in the world, it is also a manifestation of cooperation. Its implications are far-reaching: a healthy Playback company is a society which is pacifist, diverse, inclusive, non-violent, non-capitalist, which facilitates communication and healing, and which works against oppression.

¹⁸ Salas, Jo. *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre*. Kendall Hunt: Dubuque, Iowa, 1993.

¹⁹ *Acts of Service*, p. 175

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

To answer the question I asked on page one, then, I believe a Playback company can and hopefully *will* aim to be a loving group of people. Furthermore, based on the model of Playback Theatre companies, we in our "more or less loveless society"²¹ can seek to weave entire communities together through love.

Appendix A

I conducted interviews with:

Judy Swallow, Val Wells, Lee Myer
Sarah Halley, Lisa Layne, Judy Freed
Gregory Ford, Kimberly Rattley, Susan Kulp
John Stevenson, Dee Lee, Theresa Zubretsky
Original Playback Theatre

Community Playback Theatre
Playback Philadelphia
DC Playback Theater
Pentimento Playback Theatre
Judy Swallow, Jonathan Fox

Appendix B

Note: Initially I searched for writing on the subject of company life from an anthropological perspective. I found nothing. I then began looking for material on life in theatre companies in general and was referred to articles and books by experimental theatre directors/pioneers, of which I located a few.

²¹ Beck, Julian.

As there was so little written about the social aspect of a company and company as family, I decided to obtain oral material and conducted interviews with members of three ongoing long-term ensemble theatre companies, David of the UMO Ensemble, Vashon Island, Washington, Lisa Channer of Sleeveless Theatre, Northampton, Massachusetts, and Trudy of Bread and Puppet Theatre, Vermont. Since the premise for all these companies is artistic work, I focused on how much the company feels like a family, what kind of attention is paid to group process, and how conflicts are handled. The most striking fact for me about these interviews is that in all three cases, these performers and company members named "family" as a stage in their social evolution before I had even mentioned the term.

I was referred to Ann Hale's paper *Sociometry of Company Life: A Guide for Playback Theatre company actors and directors* by Paula Patterson only a few days before completion of this paper. It offers many sociometric exercises through which a company can explore many aspects of company life deeply.

Appendix C

Bibliography (to come)

Schechner, Turner, Chaikin, Beck, Hale, Van Ness, Fox, Salas

"I want to work in the theatre because it offers a means of communication and interaction which to my knowledge doesn't exist elsewhere. I value the unique closeness with co-workers and the universal connection with the audience. Involvement in theatre allows me not only to live my life as a whole, complete person, but also to reach a heightened awareness of the world around me and my active role in it.

Along with my enjoyment of this kind of community, I developed a particular interest in sociometry. The examination of relationships underlying any social situation both draws me in and scares me. It is the kind of fear I want to move through.

In Hudson River, I can't remember when we've seen each other as a group outside of meeting times, although a few days ago Mathew suggested an end of year party at his house (we take July and August off), separate from rehearsal time. A few weeks ago, only four of us were at rehearsal on a muggy evening, so we spontaneously decided to go out to dinner. Infrequently we (rarely all of us) go out to a diner after a gig and spend time together unwinding. I am used to this from doing theatre and so miss it happening regularly.

How does it affect company life differently that one company advertises open auditions in the newspaper, whereas another seeks to increase membership by having once a month invitational rehearsals for a few select people? Where on the artistic--therapeutic spectrum is a given company and how is this related to its origin, purpose, and membership?

At the moment in my life, the question of leadership is very important. I feel dissatisfied with many forms of leadership I witness, and I am myself at an important stage in my journey of becoming a leader. I feel that it is time to take on not the responsibility alone (which is easier for me), but also the *presence* or aura of a leader. Perhaps it is all part of my growth, that I should be observing/ and sometimes rejecting the kinds of leadership I encounter.

So perhaps, if I am honest, that is what I am seeking in a Playback company. Maybe deep down the question I'm asking is, does a Playback company exist that could be a family ersatz for me, at least at this time in my life?

(Interview process)

In all the companies I visited, and in others I have experienced as well, Playback performers are eager to talk about their experience and hear about others'. People I asked were generally happy to be interviewed and seemed to enjoy the time spent talking about their company.)

For instance, in the performance I saw, there were a few fluid sculptures where some of the actors took on roles other than that of the teller. After I pointed out that in traditional fluids, all actors are the teller, they decided to name their aberration 'fluid stories' as a new form.

My background growing up in one culture, German-speaking Switzerland, and having a parent from and strong ties to another culture, the United States, is a part of who I am, and I have always been fascinated with the process of moving across cultures, looking at differences and similarities. So it is my sheer curiosity, and again my search for a sense of belonging in a certain culture that has led me to examine these differences more closely.

Julian Beck, speaking of his experimental theatre in the 1970's, says, "the tribe is a group of people bound together by love. Therefore they find ways to survive, and therefore the tribe has a special fascination in a more or less loveless society." May we