



# Leadership in Playback Theatre Companies: The "Director" Approach and the "Group Consensus" Approach

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"As a leader, it is important to take risks and proclaim your inspiration" Susan Skjei

"A leader and a tyrant are polar opposites."

James MacGregor Burns

"A leader is best when people barely know he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worse when they despise him. 'Fail to honor people, they fail to honor you'; But of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim is fulfilled, they will say 'We did it ourselves.'"

Lao-Tzu

Playback Theatre has grown dramatically in its popularity and acceptance worldwide. There are as many different applications as there are different forms of groups. These range from performing companies with very specific goals and/or audiences to community groups which are more for the enjoyment of its members, to groups who work with a therapeutic orientation with specific communities. Some groups meet one or more times a week, others meet once a month or even every six months. But for all the different kinds of groups, there seem to be two main structures: groups which operate with a defined leader or director and groups which run as a consensus based organization. I have been fortunate enough to be a part of both kinds and in this paper I offer some insight into the differences and similarities. This will be done by looking at a history of my background in PT, for the purposes of offering an understanding of my orientation, a discussion of the nature of PT and the elements needed for a successful company, a look at some information on the nature of groups and of leadership, and an exploration of two of the approaches used by most companies. I hope to arrive at some understanding of the usefulness of each approach.<sup>i</sup>

I have been a member of three PT companies, each with different approaches to leadership. They all had different purposes and I played different roles in each. These varieties of experiences have led me to some conclusions about how I will choose to be a part of and organize the next company I find myself in. For now, here is a brief history of these different groups.

My first experience of PT was in 1986 with Boulder PT in Boulder, Colorado. Marc Weiss was the director. I was invited to a rehearsal by a woman who was sitting next to me at a Unitarian Universalist church one Sunday morning. She was a member of the company and thought, just by noticing me in church, that I would like PT. That's the way it often happens. People just fall into it when they are in the right place at the right time. After that first night I was hooked and was invited back for more. I stayed with the company for the rest of the time I was in Colorado, about a year in a half.

During my time there I learned the basics of PT, developed my skills as a playback actor and musician, and had many amazing experiences performing for the public. I also learned a lot about groups of people and group process. It was there that I first heard of psychodrama.

Marc Weiss was clearly the leader of the group. Not only did he lead rehearsals, he was also the conductor most of the time. Periodically he would have someone else lead a warm up or exercise or perhaps conduct a story, fluid or pair. He was also

primarily responsible for business decisions and booking rehearsal and performance space. His phone number was on the fliers for people to call for more information.

Marc was very good at teaching the basics. For the most part he was clear about what he wanted. His style was to follow his own vision of PT which he learned from Jonathan Fox. He believed in sticking to the original form and believed that if you do, you will succeed. Getting the essence of the story interested him and he agreed with the concept that "less is more". This is a concept which maintains that you don't need to re-play every detail of a story or of some one's feeling. Rather you simply try to play, in an abbreviated way, the core of what the person experienced.

When there was conflict in the group, or if someone questioned his choice about how to do something, it was not easy for him to handle. He had a very gentle way about him but he was also stubborn and stuck to his guns most of the time. He wanted to please people as much as possible and that got in the way at times. I learned a lot from Marc and I appreciate his contributions to the world of PT.

Two years after leaving Colorado, in the summer of 1989, I found myself in my home town of New Paltz, NY at a performance of the original company. In the parking lot of the Unison Learning Center I met two women who, like me were living in the Boston area. That fall we formed Boston Playback Theatre (BPT). A friend of mine with whom I had worked in Boulder also joined us. After rehearsing for about six months, we began performing for schools and homeless shelters. Eventually, we developed a regular schedule of performing, both for the public and for specific communities such as the elderly, homeless adults and teens, and others.

I did a great deal of the training because I had the most experience of actually doing PT, . We all led rehearsals together, each offering our ideas about what we thought should happen. The leadership style developed that way, working as a team. When we invited new members the four or five of us who started together saw ourselves as a core group. We made most of the artistic decisions and certain business decisions but we always attempted to have each person be involved. I soon found myself in a leadership role, because of my previous experience, my willingness and eagerness to teach what I knew, and my natural tendency towards taking responsibility for things I care a lot about.

There was very little formal discussion of power or leadership issues. There seemed to be a fear of dealing with this difficult topic, so it was usually avoided. After a time it became clear to me that there were two camps which held a certain amount of sway or power or influence over decision making. I was one and the other two founding members were the other. Over the four years I was with the group one of them left and came back several times, sometimes just for a couple of months, sometimes for six, and

once for a whole year. During the year she was away, we began working on the organizational structure of the group. We began to have serious and open discussions of what people were feeling and how we needed to mold ourselves to truly be both inclusive and efficient. There had never been a formal structure in place to deal with issues of all kinds, especially decision making. We had always been able to make things work by figuring it out as we went along. As the group dwindled to a skeleton crew we knew we had a lot of work to do. Because of the lack of structure there was also a lack of productivity and our sense of what we were doing often faded.

We never knew for sure if that person was going to return to the group. When she did her eagerness to get things rolling like it once had, in terms of performing regularly, threw a proverbial wrench into the works. We were in grappling with our identity and it was disruptive to that process. No one was able to articulate that well and we had not yet succeeded in creating a framework within which to express our concerns. The power struggle grew with the same intensity with which it was avoided. When I attempted to make a move towards processing what was happening I was met with resistance. When I voiced my interest in working with the group as an artistic director, there was even more objection. Certain members wanted to maintain the collective approach to running things and they were threatened by the possibility of power being in one place. There were others who were very interested in learning from me, as I had been continuing my training with Jonathan Fox and was the only member of our group taking the time and money to do so.

I finally gave up trying to voice my opinions about what I thought was needed and agreed to work within what was being called consensus. There was still no structure within which to organize ourselves. Safety had not been created and there was no apparent willingness to communicate clearly about what we were feeling. As a result, making decisions was excruciating, at least for me. The quality of work we were doing was poor in my eyes. We set up performance dates for which we had little or no time scheduled to prepare. The idea was that we knew what we were doing, had been doing it for a long time and could wing it. This did not work for me. I was unwilling to compromise my standards both for artistic excellence and truth in communication. I also discovered that I had a real need to find an outlet for my leadership skills. I announced to the group that I was leaving in late July, 1993 and officially left at the end of August the same year.

In 1991, I was invited by Jeanette Knapp to be a founding member of SOS Playback in RI. Jeanette had been hired by Stop Over Services, an agency which runs an outreach program for "at risk" teens, to start a PT company with both teens and adults.

She had no experience with PT but had a strong background in theatre, dance and psychology. I was recommended to her because of my background and practical experience in PT.

The focus of the group was working with teens at risk of drug/alcohol abuse, dropping out, etc. The form was not strictly PT even though that was its basis. They did scripted scenarios that deal with such issues as drugs, sex and violence more than "classic" PT. Playback was used as a supplement to this other work.

I first met Jeannette at a weekend training on conducting held in New Paltz. It was her first hands on exposure to PT. None of the people starting the company had done any PT before either. I was the PT aficionado and worked with her to train the company members. She was an experienced group leader, had directed dance and theatre, and was the business director for SOS PT. Jeannette was clearly the director of that company. She was very strong and very direct. It was awkward sometimes because I was so much more experienced than she in PT. But she maintained her role clearly as the leader and she respected me for what I was there to contribute.

After a year or so I decided I had fulfilled my initial role as trainer and was not interested in continuing to work with the scenarios and other approaches they were utilizing. It was also a long commute for me and being a company member took a lot of time and energy I wanted to put in other directions. I was subsequently hired to do more PT training for that group during the time Jeannette was on maternity leave.

My experiences have been vast. I have learned a lot from the different people I have worked with. I intend that these experiences will be helpful in looking at the roles of leaders in other situations.

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1. I am assuming that most readers know the basic premise behind PT. In my opinion, it is in part about creating community through sharing our stories. There are many different forms, applications and reasons for doing PT and in this section I offer some of the peculiarities and elements inherent in the task of doing PT in any of them.

PT is, by nature, both an improvisational and an ensemble method. People have to work well together as a group and be able to think on their feet. They must be creative under any circumstance. Group members have to trust each other. This requires that there be a certain amount of group process that strengthens the "magic of the ensemble".<sup>ii</sup> Spontaneity is also an important factor. You never know what issues or feelings are going to arise that need to be worked on, both personally and professionally. A group needs to have the ability to respond to many different situations quickly and tactfully,

both as individuals and as part of the group. People's personal processes are an integral part of the work of PT. After all, that is where we get the material for practice.

In order to understand the intricacies of the PT process, a discussion of groups in general will be helpful here. It is the nature of humans to organize themselves into groups, often for the purpose of performing a specific task.<sup>iii</sup> It is the nature of groups to create some form of hierarchical structure to meet the goals of the group. According to B. Aubrey Fisher:

Some groups, who naturally admire the ideal of democracy like to think that there are no status distinctions among their members. Such an attitude is not only unrealistic; it is utter nonsense!... a status hierarchy will exist in any group regardless of the extent to which the members employ democratic methods.<sup>iv</sup>

Some who would strive for a pure consensus approach may hope for a certain level of "structurelessness" in an attempt to contradict traditional hierarchical structures of most organizations and societies.

This is particularly true of PT. One of the goals of PT is to create a new sense of community where we are all acknowledged as inherently "good" people who have common experiences regardless of our race, class, or stature, and can relate to each other through the sharing of our stories. On some level we hope to work against the hierarchical structure of our societies which keeps us apart as individuals and holds us back from understanding ourselves as a global collective. However, doing this within the framework of running a company is not easy. Any group is going to have its own power struggles. Joreen expresses strong feelings about this in her article, The Tyranny of Structurelessness. I believe they have value here.

Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a structureless group. Any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The structure may be flexible; it may vary over time; it may evenly or unevenly distribute tasks, power, and resources over the members of the group. But it will be formed regardless of the abilities, personalities, or intentions of the people involved.<sup>v</sup>

It is important to keep this in mind when attempting to work together as a group. As I will explain later, the form of PT can help create a structure for dealing with this concern

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In groups that have no specified or nominated leader, one may be born out of the need for structure and guidance, even if they are not so named. We might call these "unofficial leaders". When this happens, as in the case of BPT, if an "unofficial leader" attempts to move the group along to a new level of productivity or expertise, or tries to



instigate change, there will, of course be some resistance. This will be the case with a designated leader as well. James MacGregor Burns explains,

... the group is assumed to be a collection of persons in a state of equilibrium. In this state, efforts to change the group to a new level or type of activity will bring pressures to return the group to its former equilibrium. The effort to change may generate hostility toward the leaders as the initiator of change for it is their role to maintain a balance between the individual needs of group members and the goal-oriented activity of the group as a whole.<sup>vi</sup>

Regardless of the form of leadership, change is difficult to achieve. There are a number of qualities that will help a leader or leaders move through times of change within a group process. These will be discussed in the forthcoming section on leadership. For now, let us look at some of the elements necessary for any PT company to be successful, regardless of the purpose or intention of the group.

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There are many aspects of forming or running a company which must be juggled cleverly so that everything is accomplished successfully. They include but are not limited to: creating a clear vision, a mechanism for decision making, the creation of an organizational structure, the enhancement of artistic ability, a plan for making business choices, and a methodology for group process.

It is important for any group to have a clear vision of their existence. It is inevitable that at some point we may lose sight of why we are doing what we are doing. This can happen in PT troupes as well. A specified vision or statement of purpose of the groups goals and how it hopes to achieve them can be very helpful during those times of lost vision. It will help them stay on track in their day to day work. It is also important to be flexible. If the members of a group are too stubborn about what they are willing to accept as part of their vision, moving through the process of realizing it may be painful.

Decision making is perhaps the most important and challenging aspect of any small group, especially PT companies, which require such a deep sense of working together. I have found that in order for decision making to go smoothly, there needs to be a very clear structure in place for doing so. This in itself can take a great deal of time to set up and requires a lot of decision making. In the March 1992 issue of INTERPLAY, Judy Dolmatch describes how a company in Bellingen Australia handles decision making, particularly in regard to conflict in the group, "When a concern is aired... the troupe sits in a circle, taking the time to hear each person's opinion, without interruptions".<sup>vii</sup> This is a common process which I have also used in the past and found quite helpful. In my experience, by the end of the second time around, the group has reached its decision. Regardless of what form it takes, each group has to find out for

itself what structure for making decisions works for them. Without it there will be frustration and confusion. I was surprised to see in that article on "Conflict in Playback Company Life", much of the conflict mentioned had to do with structure, leadership and decision making.

The artistic element is often the first thing people notice and want to work on. What we do is called "theatre" and people have certain assumptions about what that means. We envision different stage presentations we have seen or been a part of. PT has a certain set of artistic elements, some of which are similar and some that are different from traditional theatre. Actor training involves enhancing creativity, spontaneity and improvisation. This can be achieved with the use of warm ups and exercises and by using the PT form with each other. The skill of the conductor involves listening carefully to the teller and using her intuition to frame the story in a way that the actors will be able to play meaningfully. There are choices about defining artistic excellence and how to achieve it. Other decisions include how to put together a performance so that it flows smoothly and is an effective experience for everyone involved. This requires deciding how much time should be spent on different forms (fluids, pairs, stories), as well as how to integrate the use of cloth, boxes, music and lighting. There is sometimes a crossover between the artistic elements and theoretical or philosophical concerns. For example, how to get to the essence of a story, and at what level to play the story. Stories can be played back literally or mythically. There could be transformations or changes to the end of the story. A company could choose to work towards more drama or the idea that less is more. These are all things that a group has to make choices about.

For any group there are also going to be a certain number of business choices to make. Even for groups which only meet for the sake of having fun doing PT together, there are choices regarding the number of meetings or rehearsals to have, and when and where to hold them. For companies which are more performance oriented, there are decisions to be made about booking performances, how to present yourself to the public from a marketing perspective, how to interact with the greater community, where to rent space for rehearsal and performance, and how much money to charge. Another consideration is who in the group gets paid and how much? Money is perhaps the most challenging area of business decisions but I will refrain from analyzing that here. Groups also have to deal with new members and members leaving. Some groups are involved in grant writing. All of these, and more, are areas that need a good deal of discussion. It is often helpful to set aside time, separate from rehearsal time, for planning and business meetings.

All groups have a need for a certain amount of group process. Decision making is a part of this, but in groups which do PT, there are other factors as well. The life of the group is, on some level, an entity in itself. Like a relationship, this life needs attention to its own process. There are elements that can be noted here which help this along.

Clear communication is paramount. According to Fisher, "A group, however large or small, cannot and does not exist without communication among its members...Communication and only communication allows group members to fulfill the group purposes."<sup>viii</sup> Kevin Gray from Playback Theatre West says, "Communication is essential!". The process of communication, or the way it is delivered is also important. Communication must be delivered clearly so a person really understands what you are trying to say.

Safety is another important element to group process. A safe place must be created for everyone to both share feelings and ideas, as well as explore creativity and spontaneity. Doing this also provides space for people to learn and explore something new about themselves. This is done in part by communication. Respect is another aspect of this. It is often created by simply doing the process of PT; sharing feelings, thoughts and stories and enacting them for each other. The form itself begets understanding, empathy, sympathy and trust. But it has to be monitored. It is helpful to have a form for "checking in" with each other. The go around in a circle as was mentioned above is helpful for this. When individuals in a group have an experience of success in terms of doing a Playback, there is a further feeling of unity and camaraderie. This has to happen first among group members. Once that is established, safety can be conveyed to the larger community which comes together for a performance.

One thing to be careful about in any type of PT group which has worked together for a while, particularly in a consensus based organization, is what Irving Janis described as Groupthink, here described by B. Aubrey Fisher:

The independent judgments of individual members are affected by the groups level of cohesiveness. Members seek the group's judgments in the belief that the judgments on which group members concur are inevitably superior to judgments made by any one member. In this way, members employ group thought as the basis or standard for determining their own individual thinking. Members thus suspend their own critical thinking in favor of the thinking which stems from concurrence.<sup>ix</sup>

When this happens and group members become afraid to say what they really think it is time for some help. Community PT in Poughkeepsie, NY utilizes an outside psychodramatist or sociometrist three to four times a year. They all pitch in money and hire someone to work with them in an attempt to clear out any "garbage" or unspoken

issues. This can be valuable to the company's sense of identity and safety. It is much more effective when the facilitator is not a group member, and especially not someone in the leadership role.

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What is leadership? As defined by Webster's College Dictionary leadership is: "an Act or instance of leading; guidance; direction".<sup>x</sup> According to Kevin Gray, leadership is offering structure, keeping a safe space.<sup>xi</sup> I tend to agree. I see the main purpose of leadership in PT as offering direction and organization to a group with a goal that would otherwise be a collection of people with ideas but no way of making them happen. I also see leadership as providing and creating balance in all aspects of company life. The importance of balance can be seen in every element of leadership.

Leadership comes in many forms. I am mainly interested with how it relates to PT groups. I will be exploring two approaches, the group consensus or ensemble approach and the single leader or director approach. The following are some fundamental elements any person or group needs in for effective leadership.

There cannot be a great gap between a leader and those she leads. As in group process there needs to be communication between the leaders and the followers. Another important element to successful leadership, whether a group employs the ensemble approach or a more hierarchical director approach is a very clear vision. It is important for a leader or leaders to have a clear vision of what they expect and hope for. If a leader is able to express her ideas cleanly and is able to convey her excitement about what she is doing people will most likely be eager to join her, particularly if she is willing to allow them to have their voice heard as well. Herein lies the balance. A style of leadership can come out of that vision, "...Leadership is nothing if not linked to collective purpose".<sup>xii</sup>

There may be times when a strong and clear decision needs to be made, one which requires swiftness, clarity and courage. Yet it is also important to be flexible. A tree whose branch is not flexible will break in the gentlest breeze: "I take my cue from the willow tree, for it won't break from just one storm. It bends with a strength that keeps it free".<sup>xiii</sup> A leader who is not flexible will be unsuccessful.

In teaching, the balance includes giving directions and teaching what you know as well as allowing for individual group members to exercise their talents. For instance one person in a company may have a dance background, something unfamiliar to the leader. A facile leader may draw on that person for their ability to lead warm up exercises and increase people's awareness and use of their bodies. A leader also provides continuity from one week to the next. Particularly in the early stages of a company when training is

a focus and people are learning something new each time, the continuity brought by the leaders can strengthen the material being learned. Another place balance is useful is in structuring rehearsal time. When leading a rehearsal it is always helpful to have a plan in mind and equally important to be ready to throw it out the window.

A leader is the facilitator of group process. It is a leader's responsibility to be sure the process is happening smoothly so that communication occurs and the group functions as an ensemble. Leaders must be strong listeners. They must listen to the needs of the group and to their own intuition and wisdom about which choices to make.

Authority is perhaps the trickiest aspect of leadership. Authority is often accompanied by power. Both are usually present, especially in individual leaders, whether or not they are acknowledged. These are not necessarily bad things but one has to be careful of how they are handled. Our culture is all too aware of the horrors experienced when power is abused. The stories of leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini still echo in our consciousness. Authority, however, can be related to in a healthy way. It can be seen as a force which can motivate people and help structure process. If there is respect and accountability, authority can be something which is no longer feared. If the individual or small group which is in the position of authority is aware that they hold the power, and the members of the community are able to communicate clearly about how they relate to that, I believe the "charge" around authority and power can be diminished and the immobilizing fear, eradicated. Leaders must also recognize that their power comes from the group. A leader is not a leader if she has nothing to lead. The power, then does not come *from* the leader. If this is recognized, mutual respect can occur and a bond can be forged, creating a strong ensemble.

I close this section with a comment about leadership from Susan Skjei.

Being a leader is lonely. Not just because it's 'lonely at the top', but because we are willing to stay open to problems, experience them fully, and see how we are contributing to them rather than blaming anyone else ... We can understand fully because we are engaged and not separate"<sup>xiv</sup>

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The group consensus or ensemble approach refers to an approach to leadership and organizational structure. A group which works as a consensus based organization is not necessarily a group without leadership.

Effective ensemble leadership seems to come about through evolution. A company may start with a specified leader or director and after a time the group may decide to change, or the leader may leave forcing the remaining members to come to a consensus about how to proceed. This happened in Perth Australia as Judy Dolmatch

describes: "They weathered the seas of change by letting leadership evolve from company process rather than imposing it.... The end result was a structure that company members find 'freeing'".<sup>xv</sup> Playback Theatre West went through a similar process. In speaking with Kevin Gray, who started the company and was its first director, I learned that after the company was led by a couple of different directors the group decided they didn't want to have a leader. They worked very hard to create a situation where everyone has input and truly works together as an ensemble. This was done, in part, by creating methods for giving feedback. It required large amounts of time devoted to processing.

It may be difficult to *start* a company which uses the consensus or ensemble approach, at least one which plans to be a performing troupe. The following are some of the elements needed for successful use of the ensemble approach:

The importance of having a clear vision has already been discussed. In the consensus approach, the vision must be born out of the whole group. It cannot come from one person's vision. It may begin that way but will need to evolve and change to include each person's goals, both personally and for the group. It will also have to be flexible for as a group grows and changes, so may its vision or goal.

In a collective, perhaps even more so than in a group with a defined leader or director, the structure of the group needs to be very clear. A collective structure does not preclude a group from having people in leadership roles. Judy Swallow says her group is very much a consensus based group yet she acts as the "business director" while someone else acts as the "artistic director". The latter role is held by someone doing it temporarily as part of his own leadership and artistic training. Kevin Gray offers that in PTW, which has a very strong ensemble leadership, "with each problem that arises someone in the group will have the resources and strength to deal with it. If there is a conflict between two people, someone will rise as the conflict resolution facilitator".

One potential obstacle in starting or running a company with the consensus approach is in the area of artistic development. Training actors is an element that requires continuity as mentioned above. It requires a clear structure for training. Some groups attempt to have someone different lead or teach each week. This is only effective with a structure in place for everyone to follow. Other artistic decisions can easily be made and perhaps need to be made by the whole group to insure that everyone is participating in a way that makes them feel included. For the purposes of maintaining a certain level of artistic excellence, the criteria for which is decided by the whole group, an individual or small group can be named to oversee artistic direction for a set amount of time. It can then rotate to others in the group. The use of constructive criticism is also valuable for maintaining artistic excellence.

Most major business decisions are made by the group. It is, however, sometimes helpful to have one or more persons managing all the tasks that need to be completed.

Group process is easily the most important element of successful ensemble leadership. Since most of the decisions arise from the group as a whole, the need for structure here is evident, as is the need for clear communication. Taking plenty of time for group processing is equally as important. Making sure everyone feels safe and included is part of that process. PTW has effectively created a methodology for giving feedback, including such things as the use of "I statements". For instance, saying "I really liked how you did that", or "it was really difficult for me when this happened". They find that also, staying away from the use of the word "But" is helpful. For example, "You did that really well, **but...**" Instead, the word "and" can be used, or other ways can be found to phrase criticism so that members, especially newer members, feel acknowledged for what they do.<sup>xvi</sup> The group cohesion necessary for this approach to work well requires that members really know each other on a personal level, to the extent to which it is appropriate for their work. They all must support each other in their process as members. This is sometimes a lengthy process.

Proponents of this process say that there are great rewards in performing with an ensemble approach. A group whose leadership comes from the troupe will perform together as a powerful ensemble and have great successes in public. This process really facilitates growth and forward movement both individually and for the group. It is an opportunity for all to grow and learn together. The ensemble approach empowers everyone to be a leader. The group becomes a collective leader. You therefore have a strong leader because every one's inert ability for leadership is utilized. Further, as a group you set realistic goals, ones you can easily meet. When you do it provides the troupe with an important sense of accomplishment, leading to fulfillment and growth.

One of the down sides to the ensemble approach is that the process which needs to take place in order for decision making to be effective, a lot of time is required. Sometimes whole rehearsals are taken to process what people are feeling and what their views are about a particular choice. The other potential difficulty is that this approach is not easy for everyone. Finding the right combination of people to make it work is sometimes tricky and also time consuming. Further, there is sometimes a lack of continuity from one rehearsal to another, particularly when someone different is leading each time. This takes away from the process of building a structure and the evolution of the ensemble feel.

This approach can be useful in a number of different settings. A community group whose purpose is to give as many different people as possible an experience of PT

could use this approach effectively if there is a clear structure set up for including new people. The effectiveness of this approach for performing groups has been demonstrated by PTW which works a lot in the private sector, doing consulting work for large corporations.

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A good director will encompass all of the elements before mentioned as an effective leader. There are primarily two different orientations to being a director of a company. In one, the director is like a monarch. They set up everything the way they want it to be and everyone must adhere to their way of doing things. This may be useful when working with behavior disordered young people, or certain communities where one has to be very directive. But this approach will not be very effective for most PT companies because of the nature of PT as discussed earlier.

The other orientation requires an inclusive demeanor, where all the people involved are taken seriously and listened to and seen as part of the whole. From this perspective, the director approach to leadership does not mean that there is no room for anyone else. Rather, a director needs to be sensitive to the needs and interests of the group members. A good director will exercise the balance of justice in every aspect of company life. This is the orientation I will be focusing on. The following is a look at how the elements of a group are handled in the director approach.

Just as having a clear vision is important to consensus based groups, so too is it paramount for a director to put forth her vision neatly so that people know what to expect and can decide if they are willing to be a part of it. A clear vision does not always mean that you know exactly what you are going to do for the next five years. Flexibility is equally important here. But with one person in charge there will tend to be a clear direction for the group. Hopefully it will include the interests of all involved. This tends to create less confusion about the purpose of the group and much less time is spent on decision making.

Decision making is perhaps the most different feature of this approach as compared to the collective consensus approach. This is not to say that no one has input on decisions. In fact, it is essential to have every one's ideas out on the table. But in the end, when a decision has to be made and the group can't decide, there is someone who will make the choice. In terms of structure, everyone knows that there is someone else running the show. This may reduce anxiety in the company and increase focus and concentration among members on their roles as actors, musicians, and conductors. It can also help create an ensemble feeling in the company because people only have to focus



on their individual roles. As a result they may feel free to experience how they fit in and work towards their part in the ensemble.

Artistic decisions are made and criteria are set by the director. She is there to oversee the progress of the group and give feedback to enhance artistic excellence. However it is entirely possible that the director may choose to let someone else be an artistic director for a period of time. This would particularly be the case in a workshop or training situation.

Business decisions also usually the responsibility of the director. When a decision needs to be made there is someone there to make it, freeing up the other members of the troupe to concentrate on artistic elements. Again a clever director will delegate responsibility so that she will not be overwhelmed by the amount of work needed to keep a company going, especially one which performs regularly. Armand Volkas in California believes that if you get people to take a certain amount of responsibility for business related tasks, they will have more of an investment in the company which in turn strengthens the ensemble.<sup>xvii</sup>

It is difficult to run a group if one person, as the director, is only concerned with her ego, wanting something in her image that is solely for her own fulfillment. Not many people would be interested in joining her. PT is by nature a group process. The process needed for a PT group to survive requires that a director be a facilitator and a listener. The tools of PT: improvisation, creativity, spontaneity, listening, ensemble, etc., can be utilized by the director for facilitating the group process. They can be the vehicle through which she can help members feel acknowledged as part of the ensemble. Giving people a say in what they are doing and the ability to listen, not just hear, and honor what they have to say is crucial for the survival of a director based group. Further, if the director is really good and the ensemble is really strong, a new person coming in might have an easier time assimilating to the peculiarities of a particular group. It may take them less time to feel as though they are a part of troupe. All this talk about group process is for the purpose of creating a safe place for people to feel free to be themselves and discover new levels of their experience as humans. A skillful director can be a wonderful role model and facilitator of this exploration.

The advantages of working with a single director start with continuity. Because the director usually leads rehearsals each time, there is the probability of continuity between rehearsals. This provides the group, especially during the training process, with the experience of building on what they have already learned. Marc Weiss was good at this as was Jeannette Knapp. Decision making is the next important advantage, for a director can take the initiative when others cannot and greatly reduce the time needed for

this process. Other advantages have already been named: the clarity of vision, the streamlined approach to artistic integrity, the overseeing of business choices, and the focus offered to group process.

The down side of the director approach is the tendency for the director to become too powerful and unable to strike the balance I spoke of before. She may not clearly and willingly hear the voices of group members. Abuse of the authority inherent in individual leaders becomes a distinct possibility. This could lead to all kinds of problems, especially losing the vision of the ensemble. Another down side to the director approach is that since people and groups tend to grow and evolve, there is the possibility that people will feel as though they have learned as much as they can from a particular director and decide to move on. If this happened frequently it could lead to the need to continually training new members. This might inhibit the solidity of the ensemble feel of the group and diminish the quality of drama being created. Such was sometimes the case in Boulder PT. As is true with the ensemble approach, having the right group of people who are willing to work within this structure will be important to it's success. With the wrong group of people, this approach may not work.

This approach is effective in workshop type situations where there is a limited time frame and specified goal that a group is working with. I would say that this is the only approach that would work in this situation. Any company could use this approach effectively, given the right person as leader and the right mix of people in the company.

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Each group of people who embark on the journey of practicing PT, for whatever purpose and to whatever end, will have to choose which approach to leadership best suits them and their situation. It all comes down to the people involved and what works for them.

Judy Dolmatch sums up different approaches to leadership in PT companies rather nicely, saying,

Playback companies now pursue a gamut of management approaches from a consensus approach designed to engender a sense of empowered teamwork to a hierarchical approach designed to reduce ambiguity and permit a maximally efficient and aesthetic way of doing business. Ultimately, there's no "right" way... but what seems to matter is clarity of approach and explicit expectations. And when there is change, there needs to be some format to address it.<sup>xviii</sup>

I would add that maintaining balance is a key element. As a guideline to leadership, I turn again to Susan Skjei:

... I realize again that there is no formula for good leadership. We don't have to manipulate anything; we simply have to liberate any fixation that is occurring moment to moment. It is a dance, not a march.<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Some notes about style and delivery. I have used female pronouns in place of the more commonly used male. This is done for the purposes of balancing thousands of years of linguistic exclusion and as an experiment to see what it feels like. No offense is intended. Also, I have abbreviated Playback Theatre to "PT" in most places and refer to companies by their acronyms, ex. Boston Playback Theatre = BPT, Playback Theatre West = PTW or at least Boulder PT. Thirdly, in the beginning I offer a bit about my history and experiences with different groups over the eight or so years I have been involved with PT. This is intended to offer clarity about some of my views as well as material for referring back to when supporting claims.

<sup>ii</sup> Swallow, Judy, Personal conversation, 19 June, 1994

<sup>iii</sup> Fisher, B. Aubrey, Small Group Decision Making, p. 14

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, p. 191

<sup>v</sup> Joreen, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", Radical Feminism, p. 286

<sup>vi</sup> Burns, James MacGregor, Leadership, p. 290

<sup>vii</sup> Dolmatch, Judy "The Full Hearted Path: Conflict in Playback Company Life".

INTERPLAY. pp 1&4.

<sup>viii</sup> Fisher, p. 14

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid, p. 45

<sup>x</sup> Webster's College Dictionary, Random House, Inc, New York, 1991

<sup>xi</sup> Gray, Kevin, Personal communication, 14 June, 1994

<sup>xii</sup> Burns, p. 3

<sup>xiii</sup> Ferron "The Return", Shadows on a Dime, Side 2, track 2, 1983

<sup>xiv</sup> Skjei, Susan, "Ordinary Leadership", Shambhala Sun, p. 44

<sup>xv</sup> Dolmatch, p. 1

<sup>xvi</sup> Gray, Kevin, 14 June, 1994

<sup>xvii</sup> Volkas Armand, Personal communication, 4 July, 1994

<sup>xviii</sup> Dolmatch, Judy, p. 4

<sup>xix</sup> Skjei, Susan, p.44