



Gathering Voices Essays on Playback Theatre

*How Do I Know Who or Where I Am
Until I Hear What I Say?
Fe Day*

Edited by
Jonathan Fox, M.A. and Heinrich Dauber, Ph.D.

This material is made publicly available by the Centre for Playback Theatre and
remains the intellectual property of its author.

How do I know who or where I am until I hear what I say?

Fe Day

*Kia whakarongo ake au ki te tangi a te manu nei
a te maatui
tui tui tuituia
tuia i runga
tuia i raro
tuia i roto
tuia i waho
tuia i te here tangata
i takea mai i Hawaiki nui, Hawaiki roa, Hawaiki pamamao
ka rongo te po
ka rongo te ao*

*Let me always listen
to the cry of the bird - tui - weaving
weaving together what is above
what is below
what is inside
what is outside
weaving the mooring-line of people
that originated in the great Homeland
the long Homeland, the Homeland far away
the darkness hears/senses/feels
the light hears/senses/feels*

These words of a traditional Maori incantation bring the indigenous language of my home, Aotearoa/New Zealand, into this publication. Another purpose of mine in using them is to facilitate our thinking of the other levels of reality that always lap within and around us as we think and work together. So often in international business/professional culture (that amorphous omnipresent culture located somewhere between a boardroom and a helicopter), these dimensions of our meeting together go unrecognized. Of course, these are levels of being that playback theatre acknowledges and enables people to activate. Still, by referring to them at this point, I am invoking a kind of protection for myself and for you, the reader, as well.

So, I place myself in this discussion as a Pakeha/European New Zealander. This is not a simple position. The two words, "Maori," meaning the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and "Pakeha," meaning people of European descent in Aotearoa, are terms which came into being when the two groups of people encountered each other.

Prior to the advent of Europeans Maori people had no single term for themselves. People were distinguished from one another by their tribal names, but with the coming of the whalers, sealers and traders, the word Pakeha was used to designate the strangers. The word is derived from pakepakeha or pakehakeha, "imaginary beings resembling men [sic] with fair skins." The word 'maori' means 'normal', 'usual', or 'ordinary', which through usage has become capitalized to refer to the Maori people collectively.¹

So our ancestors named themselves in relation to one another! Moreover, I experience the Pakeha part of me very much in relation to Maori people, issues, and language, in deeply rewarding and sometimes challenging ways.

The European part of me is also complex, and I expect that many European-descent inhabitants of what were (are?) colonies experience the love/hate relationship I have lived through with regard to Europe. As a child, the incantations that accompanied me through the New Zealand landscape were lines of English poetry. I could draw a map of the High Street in Oxford because my mother had so often drawn us a map with a fork, on the tablecloth at dinner, to accompany some story of her hometown. I lived over and

over again the journeys of my father when as a prisoner of war in Italy he escaped over the Dolomites into Switzerland. Later I married into a family of Hungarian Jews who continue to inhabit New Zealand as if it were somewhere just out of Budapest. Yet, while loving Europe in some ways, I remain distinct. When I am in Europe, I am definitely *not* a European.

There are many other ways I could position myself, many other systems of classification I could use. I am positioned as woman, mother, sole parent, lesbian; as person of middle class origin; as a member of the helping professions; an educator. I have chosen to elucidate the placing of myself as regards geography, culture, ancestry because that is to me the potential of a “gathering in thought” such as this book (and, indeed of a playback theatre performance)—that people from very different “places” of all kinds can be visible and be heard. All of these positions influence what I want to say about our practice of Playback. These are *my* truths, not *the* truth!

Theory is OK

Playback can be viewed from many theoretical viewpoints, and in fact to begin to talk about it at all we have to use a theoretical template. However, our society often discourages us from becoming aware of what kind of theory we are applying to discussions of our activities (in New Zealand certainly). Again, we are deeply saturated in certain kinds of theoretical viewpoints, expressed in the media, in our professional disciplines, and in other discourses we engage in. Often the hardest thing to identify is the theory one is most deeply imbued with. Another complication for us as playback practitioners is that I suspect many of us are strongly kinesthetic learners and operators. Perhaps we have to be in order to be drawn to the work in the first place. Therefore we operate strongly in our bodies, in movement, and in action. The idea of theory may be one that comes quite strangely to us.

Yet, everything we do expresses a theory, what the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* calls “a supposition or system of ideas explaining something.” For what you see when you look at something depends on what kind of window you look out of. Often it is very difficult to

see the shape of your window when you are looking out of it. It is only when you can get some distance and look back at it that you gain an idea of its shape. This essay is an attempt on my part to do just that and to offer you the chance to do so as well.

I have found it very helpful to put theory into three main groupings, which I have gratefully taken from my colleague at the Auckland Institute of Technology, Mary Melrose. In her chapter, “Got a Philosophical Match? Does it Matter?” in Ortrun Zuber-Skerrit’s *New Directions in Action Research*, Melrose focuses on “three paradigms—functional, transactional, and critical—and their underlying philosophical bases, commonly recognized in many fields of education, including educational research, program development, program evaluation and educational leadership.” (I am aware that I am using here paradigms of educational theory. Few of us would dispute the important educational dimension of playback workshops and performances. As an educator involved in playback, I have found such an exploration productive and a helpful contrast to the perhaps more common psychology- or aesthetics-based approach to theorizing about our work in playback. In any case, these paradigm groupings can be identified in many other discourses. I am hoping that it will be useful to look at these three paradigms and highlight what are some of the key emphases and questions that each gives rise to in terms of playback development and practice. It seems to me clear that when we come together to talk about playback, we do so often through the functional/technical and transactional/interpretist paradigms, as I will outline below. While acknowledging the usefulness of these ways of seeing and describing, I would like to go on to explore what insights the critical/emancipatory paradigm can bring to our work.

The functional, also known as the technical or logical positivist, paradigm, values “concrete and factual bodies of technical knowledge and generalizations” in a curriculum “based on previous ‘moral’ curriculum codes which trained ‘the masses’ for their duties to the state and which produced highly skilled workers to assist the economy.” Leadership in this paradigm is hierarchical and is likely to value efficiency in terms of the present goals and values of an institution.

In the functional paradigm we will be asking things like, What is playback? How should it be done? When we do playback training we will be "reproductive, technical, task- and skills-based..."²

In the transactional/interpretist paradigm we will be looking at individuals and asking about their values and interpretations of the world. Leaders in this paradigm will "practice negotiation and encourage... development to maximize contributions to the team."

We will be concerned chiefly with such things as, Who are the individuals doing playback? What attitudes and values are we expressing? When we train performers or engage in discussion of playback, our work will be "based on the needs of the individual students or group... process, rather than product-orientated... people-centered..."

Critical theory, however, creates a paradigm that asks different kinds of questions. It was a situation full of irony and significance for me to talk about critical theory at the University in Kassel, which is so close to where the group of writers who originated critical theory worked (at the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, founded in 1923). Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were the best known members of this school. However, "it is vital to grasp that there is no such thing as unified critical theory. Rather, there are critical theories."³ Critical theory is intensely interested in theory itself and in unearthing the hidden theory in actions and practices. It rejects the idea of 'naturalness' or 'human nature' and scrutinizes the situations in which such statements are made to see whether the views of one group are dominating over those of others. It is concerned above all with emancipation. It critiques the obsession of industrialized societies with "efficiency" and has named it "instrumental rationality" which it sees as "the dominant feature of the modern world. It is the feature that most requires criticism and challenge, the feature from whose malformations and constraints we need emancipation... Instrumental rationality limits itself to 'How to do it?' questions rather than 'Why do it?' or 'Where are we going?' questions." In the critical paradigm, we will be looking at groups of individuals and asking ourselves and each other: What is *happening* in a playback performance? How does it relate to social change? How can we critique it? Our discussions will be "based on visions of a better, fairer world... asking critical

questions, shaking previously held beliefs, querying current systems, acting as change agent." ⁴

Let me place myself within the critical paradigm and begin by asking, What is happening in a playback performance? In answering this question, I want to focus particularly on three of the myriad of answers that could be given to this question.

First, *someone is talking and other people are listening*. Does it matter who talks? Who tells? It is my contention that it matters *very much*, because the chance to tell one's story is part of what a playback theatre performance has to offer.

Imagine Your Ancestor

I would like to ask you to take some time and think about the life of an ancestor of yours who was born in the nineteenth century. Particularly think, if you will, of the role of speech and personal communication in that person's life. (Whichever gender you have chosen, now add a person of the other sex so that now you are considering the lives of both a man and a woman.) Give some time to thinking about different times of day when the family or community gathered. What kinds of things are happening?

Now think of your own family and community. What similarities do you see with how things were 100 years ago? What differences? It seems clear, doesn't it, that in the atomized industrial setting, opportunities to present our accounts of ourselves and our lives have been drastically reduced? People strenuously resist this erosion and continue to exchange narratives: indeed it is one of our main needs because in the communion that comes with sharing our stories all kinds of healing may take place. In any workplace or gathering, people negotiate their own network of people to whom they can tell their stories. This is the informal knitting together of any enterprise that often goes completely unregarded and unvalued.

However, many people certainly live without the sense of a hearth, a campfire, a meeting house or communal space within which individual stories can be told and heard. This may represent a much more serious attack on our humanness than we have yet fully registered. We are denied the chance to experience individual and group catharsis,

that crisis of pity and fear. In fact the most common experiences of catharsis in many contemporary settings may be in the dehumanized disembodied arena of the information media and electronic technology. We experience ourselves as individuals alone or in darkness, hiding our reactions from each other.

What a contrast this is to earth-based communal cultures where, as Rose Pere, a Maori educator and thinker, writes in a section headed "Whatumanawa" (the emotional aspect):

Sustenance and an understanding of the individual and the family as a whole is considered important. Children are encouraged to express their emotions so that the people who are involved with the parenting know how to support, encourage and guide the children. Crying for joy or sadness by both sexes is regarded as natural and healthy by the Maori. This form of expression is not regarded as a weakness. Emotional involvement and interaction are regarded as important meeting points for human beings.⁵

An important addition is that, by losing communal venues for speaking and being heard, we also lose the chance to experience the clash and renegotiation of cultures in a group small enough for us to humanly manage.

Each person "as a positioned subject, grasps certain human phenomena better than others. He or she occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision..."⁶ Yet, without the chance to speak and externalize the insights that emerge from our angle of vision, we are unable to experience our own positioning, far less to make any sort of comparison or negotiation with other people who are positioned differently. Without the disjunction and disruption that comes from hearing those who are not like ourselves, we are never able to gain a picture of who in fact we are and what structural location we see and speak from. For "all interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others."⁷ The hope is that a playback performance will open up the repertoire of the things the audience members are "prepared to know."

In terms of our practice of playback then, these insights lead us to particularly value the time during which members of the audience talk to each other; the greatest diversity possible in the tellers; participation of as many people as possible in the performance rather than the domination of the performance by a certain group or type of people. The conductor needs to develop a sense of the subgroups in the audience and the society and to nourish an awareness of the kinds of people so far represented by the tellers who have volunteered. The conductor indicates how inclusive or exclusive the world of the performance will be.

A second thing that is happening in a playback performance is that *narratives are being enacted upon the body*. Tellers often present half-formed and tentative formulations of their own feeling and experience. To tell is one step, involving their own use of the language available to them. Then to see the narrative expanded, through a deepened use of language, characterization, sound and movement, allows them to gain another kind of understanding, as they apprehend elements and aspects of the story which they have not seen before.

This is a moment in which critical theory also has insights to offer. Michel Foucault's concern "to show how power was 'inscribed on the body' can best be understood by considering his notions of surveillance and sexuality." He described Jeremy Bentham's model prison, the Panopticon, in which each "prisoner is totally, permanently visible to an observer who is himself unseen" ⁸ and suggested that Western society has extended this disciplinary system into the fabric of daily life with its introjected obsession about measuring, comparing, and surveying our bodies and ourselves. Here, the playback company can also explode and evade the discipline which surveillance in the form of stereotypes and rigid aesthetic expectations has placed upon the body in our time and in many of the industrialized countries we come from. We are able to reclaim a ritual space of enactment and incantation which subverts the tendency of the Western industrialized state to pass everything (especially those things to do with the body) "through the endless mill of speech."

This point will lead us in our practice to positively value different body shapes, abilities and disabilities, ages and capacities, emphasizing physical and fitness training, to

encourage daring, skilled, and audacious expressiveness in all performers and to critically disrupt stereotypes of "dance" or "the beautiful."

Honoring Complexity

Thirdly, *representations of the world are being made*. To make them, the actors bring not only their performance skills but also all of their knowledge, hunches, heartbreaks, and illuminations.

We often say that we are going for the "essence" of a story. Yet, even (especially?) in saying that, we have to make sure that we are not de-politicizing the narrative and turning it into a myth that "abolishes the complexity of human acts... does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible organizes a world that is without contradictions because it is without depth..."⁹

We have all seen playback enactments like this and I know I have even (occasionally) been part of them, though I hate to admit it! Recently, I was part of a performance focussing on harassment in the workplace where I am employed. The first really effective fluid sculpture was when a teller told of the way the people who are privileged in the hierarchy impose their views of the world on everyone else. The actors (community members who had received minimal training) simply repeated the teller's words in rather lusterless impersonal ways and imprecise, wavy movements. Then one of them took the bold step of enacting the leaders who not only putting forward a bland view of events but also suppressing the other views. A large, beautiful woman, she simply started sitting on the other actors. They were amazed and so was the audience. Then the moment took off in gales of laughter, as the audience recognized the truth of what she was suggesting—the contradiction between the bland, patronizing words being used and the oblivious suppression actually being carried out. By going for the contradiction she had got us straight into the deep story with all its contradictions and energy. It is true that, playback being an imperfect art, sometimes the story seems to elude us and become even less in the retelling. Yet, if we can find in the story the contradictions that give it its internal conflict, we will find our way to its drama, paradox,

and richness. I would contend it is possible for us to learn to read these contradictions if we are willing to challenge ourselves and each other to read the contradictions in the worldviews we are being presented with and are presenting.

To do this, we need to positively value our own and our playback company's internal contradictions. And we need to seek company members with divergent worldviews as well as developed performance skills. To be a playback theatre actor is sometimes challenging for professional theatre practitioners, perhaps because it is configured not so much in the model of the skilled luminary but more in that of the "citizen actor, who performs as needed by the community, then melts back into the social fabric..."¹⁰

As I look at playback theatre, a key question from the critical theoretical paradigm is, "How does this (the performance) relate to social change?" My sense is that playback is as related to social change as the practitioners performing it are. It is possible to perform playback satisfyingly within the transactional/interpretist paradigm in which individuals' ideas and interpretations of the world will be explored. Many practitioners with an interest in aesthetics will site their performances in this worldview. Yet it is equally possible to perform playback in the context of social concerns and social change and to do this with no less commitment to the highest possible artistic standards.

The 1997 International Playback Theatre Conference in Perth located itself fair and square in the territory of this question by its conference theme, Cultural Diversity. At that conference, I coordinated an afternoon discussion about ways in which the playback theatre forms can be made to relate more explicitly to social change. I was curious to hear from anyone using Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in conjunction with playback, as we in Auckland sometimes have. When there is a story where clearly the teller has been and feels oppressed, we gain their permission to re-enact the story, with, this time, the option for anyone in the audience to break the enactment by saying "stop" and then to suggest new strategies to the teller. (No other character may be instructed to behave differently, but they do react differently to the new behaviors of the teller.) We have only ever used this method in commissioned performances, but as a conductor, it is an option I value having. It enables us to very explicitly introduce the idea of social change. For the most part, playback's relationship with this idea is oblique and subtle.

However, I would suggest it is no less powerful for that—if (and sometimes it seems a big if) the company is aware of the social stresses and sites of struggle in its own society, and is prepared to be in conscious relationship with them and not be afraid to bring out the harsh realities embodied in many of our stories.

Also at Perth, an experiment was carried out in one of the conference sessions of doing a PT scene by making present in the action many of the social groupings which impacted on the story. I watched spellbound and yet deeply concerned as I observed the figure of the teller becoming more and more diminished by the complex canvas surrounding her. I observed a greater and greater engagement by the conductor in the fascinating internal structure of the story and a diminishing of the conductor's awareness of the teller. This represented to me a serious breach of the contract made with the audience in a playback performance, which is that tellers will be cared for responsibly by both the conductor and by other audience members.

I feel we, as a community, are in process with this aspect of playback. More and more I have come to see that if we have actors from diverse communities working in companies, and if we mandate those company members to explore together the different ways in which we see power, control, suppression, emancipation, then we will be able to bring these elements of our lives and knowing into our work. We will see these forms of literacy and self awareness as being just as valid as currently we value emotional/social competence and artistic skill.

A final key question is, "How can we critique what happens in a playback theatre performance?" The answer to this is short—by *wanting* to. We need to want to find ways to continue to critically reflect on what we are doing and to keep pushing ourselves to take on board the need to be engaged in social and political dialogue with ourselves, each other, our audiences, and our world. If we do this, if the actors and musicians *will*, if the conductor succeeds in creating an environment in which personal safety and group exploration can occur, then playback theatre has the potential to be a profoundly humane theatre form, subverting the categories imposed on people by an increasingly authoritarian and invasive economic hegemony. In seeing how they are positioned and have been constructed, tellers take possession of their own narratives; they, their

communities and we, their performers, escape, even for a short time, but with promises of potential emancipation hinted at, from the rigid dehumanizing ersatz narratives of popular culture. We emerge as neither consumers nor customers but citizens of the world, with our own sense of power and agency.

I have given you an idea of some of the things I think are going on in a playback performance. To do this I have used the insights of critical theory, “a mode of thought which never loses sight of the question, 'What is it *for*?' and which acknowledges values, moral problems, and consequences in every aspect of human conduct and its study.”¹¹ I have explored some ideas of what all of this may have to do with social change and tried to encourage all of us to continue to critique our work in this way.

References

Barthes, R. *Mythologies*. London: Paladin, 1973.

Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality: Vol 1: An Introduction*. London: Tavistock, 1979.

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

Gibson, R. *Critical Theory and Education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986.

Rosaldo, R. *Culture and Truth the Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

Walker, R. *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou—Struggle Without End*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1990.

Ywhahoo, D. *Voices of Our Ancestors*. Boston: Shambhala, 1987.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. *New Directions in Action Research*. London: Falmer Press, 1996.

Notes

¹ Walker, *Struggle*, 94.

² See Melrose in Zuber-Skerritt, *New Directions*, 50, 53-61.

³ Gibson, *Critical Theory*, 3.

⁴ *Critical Theory*, 7.

⁵ Pere Pere, R., “*Te Wheke: Whaia te Matauranga me te Aroha*,” in S. Middleton, ed., *Women and Education in Aotearoa* (Wellington: Port Nicholson Press, 1988), 17.

‘Whatumanawa’ literally means ‘the eye [whatu] of the heart [manawa].’

⁶ Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, 19.

⁷ *Culture and Truth*, 8.

⁸ Gibson, *Critical Theory*, 132.

⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 156.

¹⁰ Fox, *Acts of Service*, 214.

¹¹ Gibson, *Critical Theory*, 35.