



PlaybackCentre

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By Jonathan Fox

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The following is a statement by Jonathan Fox, founder of playback theatre, on the connection between playback theatre to psychodrama, Theatre of the Oppressed, and drama therapy

First, some history. In the early 70's I considered myself an improvisational theatre person. I was the director of a theatre company called "It's All Grace," ex-Peace Corps Nepal, and a student of oral epics, when someone invited me to a psychodrama weekend. What I saw there was close to my deepest vision for the theatre: it was intimate, personal, communal, intense. Psychodrama was built on a paradoxical equilibrium of respecting the individual and valuing the group. In contrast to typical hierarchical social structures, psychodrama, with its concept of spontaneity, allowed any participant to take the creative focus at any one moment. Psychodrama also invited deep emotions. I wanted such balance, flexibility, and catharsis for the theatre.

There has been some confusion about the relationship of playback theatre and psychodrama, however. In general, many have incorrectly considered playback to be an outgrowth of psychodrama, or a branch of it. Moreno, before the evolution of psychodrama, directed a theatre group in Vienna called Stegreiftheater (Spontaneity Theater). I feel more allied to that tradition than what developed later. (Moreno also engaged in theatrical activities once he came over to the USA in 1925.) I have maintained my membership in the psychodrama association, and through a strange set of circumstances, was asked to edit a volume of Moreno's basic writings, which appeared in 1987.

I was influenced early on by reading Freire and Boal. I did not take a Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) workshop or meet Boal until much later.

Both approaches, psychodrama and TO, valued a nonscripted approach, which was close to my heart. As it developed, with input from many collaborators, it became clear, however, that playback theatre was its own approach, diverging significantly from both





Boal and Moreno. In contrast to psychodrama, playback theatre does not position itself in the therapeutic domain, even though it is grounded in the concept of constructive change. Unlike Forum Theatre, playback theatre does not begin with any assumptions of what a particular audience's "oppression" might be, but trusts that the members of a group, through the medium of their personal stories, will always raise issues of importance to them. We do not reject the personal; we accept any story on any subject; and unlike both psychodrama and TO, we accept stories of joy as well as suffering.

TO looks for solutions, but playback theatre enactments do not. Playback stories instead become the vehicle for deep dialogue that does not demand an answer. And yet, I feel that often a kind of folk wisdom emerges. We often feel like we get a lesson from life, even though the stories are not simple – probably because they are not simple.

Furthermore, playback theatre relies less on words than both psychodrama and TO. In a classic playback performance, there will be no sharing, no discussion; and no search for a solution or a cure--just another story. Thus the playback dramatic process, integrally relying on image, sound, and rhythm, embodies narrative at a level that aims to be deeper than conscious thought. Tellers often find themselves impelled to tell a core story for themselves and the witnesses. Such moments, intensely dramatic, provide a kind of creative surprise for performers and audience alike. The result is social change akin to that described by Turner in his concept of social drama.

A spirit of generosity underlies the playback experience. For the most part, the performers belong to groups that develop their skills through regular practice, then perform for their community as a gift (or near gift). The whole process is based on the idea of an exchange. The teller tells a private story publicly as a gift to the spectators. The actors risk failure in the enactment as a gift to the teller. The audience gives their deep attention. Such dialogue, grounded in honest narrative, respectful listening, and creative reflection, encourages the development of integrity and trust. It can be a model for building peace in a fractured world.

To bear witness to the truth can shake us to the core. There are powerful forces – personal, social, and political – urging us to suppress the real story. Yet I believe we need to face the truth of the past in order to imagine a positive future. In that, psychodrama, Theatre of the Oppressed, and playback theatre are fully allied.

Drama therapy is more compatible with playback theatre than psychodrama in certain ways. For one, it does not insist on what I call the primary dramatic metaphor--the ability to discern reality from fantasy--whereas psychodrama is grounded on the technique of role reversal, demanding that the protagonist be able to negotiate the "as if" in a conscious way.





Drama therapy accepts flights into secondary metaphor without demanding prior reference to the primary. In other words, we will dramatize your vision without needing to know where you stand in relation to it, including even whether you know whether it is real or not. Secondly, one of the major theories of drama therapy involves "distancing," with which playback, with its insistence that the teller watch the drama, rather than participate in it, is certainly compatible.

Playback theatre is frequently introduced in psychodrama and drama therapy trainings, and a number of practitioners, recognizing the complementarity of the approaches, have developed a format that includes playback theatre and TO. An example is the Tubiyage Theatre Association of Burundi, which frequently begins a performance with Forum Theatre and ends with playback theatre. (5/04)

