Gathering Voices
Essays on Playback Theatre

Introduction
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Historical Development

As well as serving as the co-editor of this collection, I am also the one who first conceived the playback idea. So I have been intimately involved with playback theatre from the start. It is true that for a few brief moments, the concept resided only with me. But very quickly, playback theatre began to involve others, first Jo Salas, my partner in life and work, then the original playback theatre company, then beyond.

It would be foolish, therefore, for me to try to write any sort of dispassionate account of what playback has accomplished. That must be left to more professional and distanced observers. Rather it seems more fruitful to write a personal history, expressing my own understanding as of approximately 23 years after that day when I sat in a café, drank a cup of chocolate, and it came to me, the idea of my dreams.

It was in 1973, once again in the United States after years overseas, that I had discovered my metier in the theatre. It was theatre of a very particular kind—without scripts, personal, informal. I directed groups in enactments. I worked eagerly with all sorts of groups, including very young children, the handicapped, the elderly, and people on the street. The iconoclasm and anti-elitism fueling the experimental theatre movement fueled me, too. I believed in an immediate theatre. I believed in a theatre that could take place everywhere. I believed in a theatre for any and everybody. These experiments culminated in a theatre company called *It's All Grace*, which performed improvisationally developed pieces in outdoor settings.

But my search was not complete. From my university study in oral epics I knew that stories in preliterate societies were always more than mere entertainment: they contained the knowledge of the tribe, both historical and ethical. If we could only get hold of *that,* I thought.

In 1973 I attended a psychodrama in Beacon, New York, and saw Zerka Moreno in action. She also spoke about J.L. Moreno's Stegreiftheater in Vienna. What I heard from her lips, and what I witnessed under her guidance, felt like a revelation. Here was a true community theatre. Here was theatre that made a difference. Here was emotion. Here was often stunning beauty.

Some months later my café vision came to me of townspeople gathering to watch fellow citizens act out their real stories. In its espousal of modern populist ethos, dramatic improvisation, and the ancient oral tradition, this was the idea I had been waiting for.

A year and a half later, playback theatre was born. I had decided to use psychodrama networks to find actors for this new experiment because I felt they might have the requisite spontaneity and empathy. We rehearsed one evening a week and one Sunday a month. Our first performance was for family and friends, the second on a children's hospital ward, the third at an academic conference. At each we came on stage with nothing but our readiness to enact the thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences of whoever wanted to tell.

Our first five years of practice and performance enabled us to learn that indeed people's everyday concerns could be dramatized with power. As our skill in the form increased, people also shared some of their extraordinary stories. We developed some of the short forms now standard in playback theatre today, such as fluid sculptures and pairs. We learned to appreciate the place of music in our enactments.

We also sought consciously to perform for as many different kinds of audiences as we could. In addition to the general public, these included schoolchildren of all ages, prisoners, the elderly, and the emotionally disturbed. I remember thinking at the time that it was good to be able to bring theatre to people who might never otherwise experience it.

What we felt but could not in those early years articulate was the deep satisfaction of enabling these peoples' stories to be heard, first by the tellers themselves, then by their peers, their helpers, and not least by us. Despite many imperfect performance

experiences, our motivation steadily grew, because we responded to the popular wisdom voiced in these stories and the healing power of empathy.

I tried to bring our work to the attention of critics. I tried to obtain funding from governmental arts bodies on the state and national level, as well as from foundations. But these attempts failed. It seemed that playback theatre did not fit in the category of art, or look enough like theatre (“What is the title of your show?” asked one prospective reviewer. “Send me the script. I need to read the script beforehand,” said another). In the end, I gave up trying to convince the establishment that playback theatre was of interest as avant-garde theatre.

Playback theatre was indeed beyond traditional funding categories. It did cross the boundaries of art, psychology, and education. In retrospect, this was a source of its strength, and my own needs for artistic recognition were insignificant by comparison.

Furthermore, while I did not achieve my goal of having playback theatre recognized, other objectives were eminently satisfied—I had found a way to express my own theatrical creativity with colleagues and friends; to reinforce playfulness and joy in children (and help adults rediscover these innate qualities); to establish a setting where anyone, even the most marginalized, could tell their story and have it not only listened to, but *heard*.

In 1980 a team of four from the original company was invited to teach in four cities in Australia and New Zealand. In each location we performed with selected participants from our workshops, empowering groups to carry on after we had gone. The next year Mary Good from Melbourne spent a month in New York training and observing our work. The result was a flowering of new playback performing companies—in Sydney, 1980; Melbourne, 1981; Auckland, Wellington, and Perth, 1982; Christchurch, 1984.

In 1986 Annette Henne from Switzerland came to study; she would start PT Schweiz two years later. Christina Hagelthorn had previously attended early PT performances while studying psychodrama in the United States and had brought the work back to her native Sweden.

I was invited to Japan for the first time in 1984. In subsequent years companies started in England, Germany, Russia, Hungary, Finland, Italy, France, Argentina, and Brazil. And so it goes.

At present, Asia is the locus for new activity, including Hong Kong and India. As I write, playback teachers from Australia and New Zealand are also conducting major workshops in Fiji and Kiribati.

In 1986 the original company retired. By then other companies had started to spring up in different communities in North America—in Washington (DC), Boston, Seattle, Pittsburgh, Toronto (Canada), Albany (NY), Newport (RI), and San Francisco. By now many others have joined them.

Christina Hagelthorn created an international playback group in 1990, which performed annually in a different European city. This model was adopted by Deborah Pearson, who organized an international women's team to perform at the 1995 Beijing Forum on Women, bringing playback to a new level of attention.

Some of these groups have close ties to psychodrama and some do not, depending on the background of the founders. Because playback theatre is an approach that places considerable emphasis on process and is so totally spontaneous, however, even the unpsychologically-oriented are likely to develop some familiarity with psychodrama as useful learning for their playback practice.

Two factors stimulating the growth of playback theatre have been training and international gatherings. Annual summer courses taught by colleagues, Jo Salas, and myself in New York State grew into the School of Playback Theatre. Currently, a five-week session of courses takes place every July at Vassar College in New York, with additional courses offered throughout the year in other American locations, Europe, and Japan.

Since 1991 when one Swede came to a gathering of Australian/New Zealand playbackers in Melbourne, international conferences have taken place roughly every

year and a half—in Sydney, Australia; Rautalampi, Finland; Olympia, Washington (USA); Perth, Australia; and in 1999, in York, England.

In 1990, I joined Jo Salas, Judy Swallow and seven others from around the globe in establishing the International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN), whose purpose was to facilitate communication between playback practitioners and guide the playback movement.

Even though growth has led to a certain level of formal organization, the ties are kept loose. There remains more emphasis on freedom than control. From the outset, we have encouraged individuals from all kinds of personal and professional backgrounds to try out the playback idea in their contexts. Furthermore, the artistic component of playback theatre defies legislation. Thus for ideological and pragmatic reasons, there is no license or certification for the practice of playback theatre.

At the same time, with experience we have learned that playback theatre can command great power. This power can be utilized for good or ill. Undertaking a playback event takes an unusual collection of skills—thus the need for training. (Playback theatre is the kind of endeavor where those who have ten years of experience behind them still talk about how much they need to learn.) We continue to encourage folk to go back home and try out the idea, but we now expect that as they get serious about continuing with playback theatre, they will apprentice themselves to the elders.

After almost 25 years, playback theatre is practiced in about 30 countries. My vision is marvelously fulfilled. In more than two hundred locations citizen actors are acting out the stories of their communities. A body of knowledge has been developed about the practice of playback theatre in different settings. It seems to me that the period of early experimentation is completed, and it is now time to consolidate what we have learned. The 1997 Symposium in Kassel, documented in this publication, is a beginning step in that direction.

How PT is Used

What are the contexts in which playback theatre is practiced? In this section I will describe some of them. The variety of settings is made possible by the flexibility of the totally improvisational PT form, which can vary with regard to duration, number of actors, and workshop or performance format.

PT as community-based theatre. The original company performed on a box-office basis the first Friday of every month, and this pattern of monthly public performances has been perpetuated widely.

PT in education. From the outset, playback has been performed in schools, providing children with validation of feelings and play. Playback school events have also been tailored to curriculum materials. Current trends include expansion at the university level, with the start-up of student companies and the inclusion of PT in the curriculum. There are also signs that as well as an object of study in its own right, the playback approach may be developed as a pedagogical tool.

PT as social service. Playback teams have worked widely in the social service field, often creating workshops where participants are invited to act in each others' stories. Among other things, these sessions teach listening and communication skills.

PT as marker of transition. Playback teams are used as part of orientations, terminations, annual conferences, and similar events to provide a way for a group to share feelings about change.

PT in organizational development. Most often playback is utilized to help trainees integrate their emotional with their cognitive responses. Playback is also used to model and teach teamwork, as well as to raise consciousness about specific issues, such as diversity and corporate culture.

PT in therapy. Playback theatre is often perceived by clients as non-threatening, since they are invited to tell *any* moment, no matter how small or apparently unimportant (in contrast to psychodrama and other methods, which tend toward emphasizing what are perceived as major problems). Playback is also effective as role training, where the emphasis is placed on clients as actors.

Theoretical Foundations

My first identity in playback was as an artist and member of the American experimental theatre. To this end I read voraciously books by the movement's theorists, Artaud and Grotowski, and managed to take workshops with many of its leading lights on the American scene, such as Richard Schechner and André Gregory.

To this I added my study of story—in particular preliterary story (I had written my undergraduate thesis on a 13th century English poem, *Havelock the Dane*). Two years of living in a village in Nepal gave me first hand knowledge of preindustrial culture.

Although I did not consciously understand it early in the playback years, I was also seeking to embody a transformational ritual that could be a source for hope without whitewashing what is wrong with the world. As a theoretical support for this interest, I turned to the religious existentialists, including Tillich, Buber, and Moreno. (Heinrich Dauber in his Songlines article in this book writes about these and other influences.)

What has inspired my playback work lately has been to investigate the relationship between the personal story enacted in a social setting and the "stories" of the culture, including its history. My hope is that the playback ritual could play a part in healing some of the injustices and upheavals of the past that fester not only in individuals, but in whole societies. Thus my playback concerns are very different now than they were twenty-four years ago. Then I thought about solutions to acting problems. I thought about lighting and stage arrangement. I thought about finding an audience. Now I think about those stories that are untold and untellable and finding a trustworthy context for airing them.

Underlying my playback work from the outset has been a commitment to process. This means creating an atmosphere suitable to share our own stories prior to asking audiences to share theirs; this means striving for a genuinely positive group life as well as enchanting audiences. I always wanted a theatre that was good for the actors.

Playback is a collective activity, and inevitably, its development has been shaped by many beside myself. I can only mention a few here. First on the list are fellow members

of the original company. Jo Salas, a classically-trained violinist originally from New Zealand, influenced the form by her strong aesthetic sense and the nonspecialist ethos that she brought to our work, in which, in a kind of pioneer spirit, anyone might unload the equipment, sew up a shoe, prepare the refreshments, or act in a scene.

Judy Swallow brought a Rogerian value of acceptance and mutual respect that helped deepen our sense of the centrality of empathy in playback work.

Michael Clemente, who died of AIDS in 1992, encouraged us never to lose sight of the underclasses. He also modeled an inspiring level of acting.

Each new playback pioneer brought their own genius and background to the movement. This was especially true when playback theatre began to expand in different countries. Australian and New Zealand practitioners were inspired by (and many actually studied at) the Drama Action Centre (DAC) in Sydney, a school for Commedia dell'Arte, clowning, and community-based theatre. Bridget Brandon and Francis Batten, who was trained in Paris by Jacques Lecoq, founded DAC. Mary Good, a psychotherapist and founder of Melbourne Playback Theatre, was one of their students.

The playback theatre practitioners in Europe have been heavily influenced by a background in psychodrama. Christina Hagelthorn from Sweden, Annette Henne from Switzerland, and participants in Hungary, Finland, Italy, and Russia have all discovered playback via this route. This is also true of the nascent playback theatre movement in South America.

The playback movement in Japan has grown within private sector trainer networks. In the mix of eastern and western influences that underlies the response of the Japanese to playback theatre, it remains to be seen what will emerge as its underlying theoretical foundations. As Kayo Munakata, one of the Japanese playback pioneers, has suggested, playback, with its emphasis on warmth and understanding, may recapture a sense of *amae,* or communal fellow feeling, that was the basis of traditional Japanese culture.

The new blossoming of playback in India and Southeast Asia draws on a strong connection to people's theatre influenced by Augusto Boal and the Philippine Educational Theatre Association.

Playback companies from different cultural and theoretical orientations are likely to approach the "zone of good playback" (see chapters one and seven below) from different directions. Frequently a group overbalances towards artistic or social values. It turns out that while "good playback" can take place under many different conditions, to achieve it is a considerable challenge. We are still learning what it takes.

The playback movement, as exemplified in the operation of its network and its conferences, places a high value on cooperation and simplicity. Correspondingly, personal profit and aggrandizement are disparaged. The benefit has been a body of practitioners with a commitment to collegial connection and respect for the emergent playback tradition.

This book will offer playback practitioners and other interested readers a sense of the current state of playback theatre. It will also point the way to new ideas that extend well beyond the reach of its inventors, including myself. This is as it should be. For while the growth of the playback idea has naturally been gratifying, what remains most important is the hope that our discoveries will increase the possibility for persons, every sort of person, to have their story heard.