Gathering Voices
Essays on Playback Theatre

What is "Good" Playback Theatre?
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Jo Salas

As guest conductor, I took part in a performance with London Playback Theatre at a weekend celebration held in support of the Beijing Women's Conference. About 80 people crowded into the performance space, an oddly shaped room upstairs at the Royal Festival Hall. The audience was very diverse: women attending the weekend festival, individuals and families who had come especially to see playback, some elderly couples strolling by the Thames who wandered in out of curiosity. I had been warned that British audiences were not easy to engage, so I was relieved when they responded as fully as any other audience. Within minutes strong feelings had been expressed and enacted, people were laughing and crying, and the actors, musician and I were working smoothly together in spite of our unfamiliarity with each other. As the show went on there were some inspired moments of acting, as well as occasional awkwardness or confusion. At the end of the show the applause was warm. People lingered talking to us and to each other before dispersing into the afternoon.

The other performers and I came together before we too went our separate ways. Most of them shared my feeling that it had gone well. But one young woman was in tears of frustration. "I *hated* it!" she said. She felt that the actors had missed opportunities to be as sophisticated as they could be, and, particularly, that she had failed to show the scope of her own skill.

How to account for the radical difference in our perception? My judgment of success was based on my feeling that the performers, myself included, had achieved an acceptable level of performance. Our scenes and so on had been generally well-shaped, and accurate in embodying the essence of the teller's experience. The audience had participated fully from the outset, in spite of the diversity of background,

age, ideology, and contact with playback. The familiar phenomenon of audience members lingering afterwards, connected to each other as they had not been before, was another sign to me that what we had done had succeeded.

But for Chloë, the unhappy actor, the audience's satisfaction meant nothing. She hadn't even noticed it. She had been focused on artistic issues to the complete exclusion of the show as a social event. To her, success was something that happened only on stage, not in the room as a whole.

Playback theatre is theatre, and theatre is art.

Playback is theatre not simply because that is how it has been named, but because what we do in playback fulfills the very essence of theatre's intention: to convey human experience by enacting it in distilled form; to embody narrative and meaning in the realm of space and time.

It is also an interactive social process with the purpose of service to its audience; a purpose that most other kinds of theatre do not share.

Since playback's earliest days, questions relating to aesthetics and to artistic standards have raised themselves constantly. Can this really be theatre if it is also service? Are we doing it well enough? Can we expect to be acknowledged by others as theatre artists? How can we recognize and measure success in playback? How can we refine it? What do we mean by "good" playback?

What we do is art, but not only art, and maybe not always art. Playback's effectiveness involves artistic excellence—but artistic excellence alone does not ensure success, and further, playback theatre can, in certain circumstances, be fulfilled by people lacking artistic sensibility, skill, or experience.

Evaluating Art

All art is the manifestation of the artist's impulse to create, which itself is an urge to synthesize and to reveal. Art is the revelation of meaning—not the simple depiction of beauty or obedience to laws of form, but the artist's inspired attempt to convey her or his perception of a meaning that emerges from or underlies the randomness of common experience. For the perceiver of art, there is a sense of recognition, delight, a confirmation of truth. The philosopher Newton speaks of the artist's task as being not to create beauty where none existed, but in fact "to lift a corner of the veil and *reveal* beauty:" and by beauty, he means rightness of form and design, not necessarily harmony. Gregory Bateson discusses art in terms of pattern, meaning the presence of elements that repeat in a connected design, so that if you see one part of a pattern you also learn about the other, unseen part. The internal metaphors of a work of art contain information about wider realms—the unconscious, or the nature of reality itself—that are not directly perceivable. The artist's deliberate placement of one element in relation to another matches or illuminates the perceiver's intuition of truth: it is the fact of this relatedness, says Bateson, that is the true subject of art.

Art has the capacity to imply the presence of design, of pattern, as a feature of reality. It can affirm an ontological meaning, which is the knowledge that *being* itself is purposeful. When we raise the question of assessment of a work of art—"how good is it?"—it is this function of affirming meaning that we are asking about. As human beings, we need the affirmation that art gives us, and we want it in strong measure.[1] We need art in order to integrate and comprehend our experience. We are disappointed, even dismayed, by inferior art. We may travel long distances and pay large amounts of money to experience "good" art. If we are artists ourselves we invest enormous effort, usually unpaid, in making our art as fine as we can possibly make it. And as artists, we are not content with anything less than an evaluative aesthetic judgment. We are pleased to know someone has enjoyed our creation; but there is a world of difference between hearing "I enjoyed it" and "This is very good." The pronouncement of value indicates the perceiver's "yes!"—that inward recognition of meaning and truth. It indicates that the artist has succeeded, at least to some degree, in his profoundest task of lifting a corner of the veil and revealing a part of the connecting pattern that lies underneath. The

creator of the world itself, according to Genesis, pronounced his work to be good when it was completed, an expression of satisfaction recognizable by any artist.

How do ordinary people, not professional critics, evaluate the art that we encounter? What is it that leads us to perceive something as good art? Do the music, literature, art and performance that most strongly move and inspire us have anything in common?

There are elements, I believe, shared by all art that is widely recognized as being great. Whether the work is visual, written or performed, these elements include order (in the sense of purposeful design), an integrity of form with some kind of internal cohesiveness, the presence of originality, a high degree of skill in execution, evidence of conviction and inspiration on the part of the artist, and the ineffable sense that the work of art speaks of a reality beyond its own scale.

If an artistic creation possesses all these qualities in abundance, it is likely to be considered by most people as great art. It will create in its audience the strongest experience of revelation of meaning. In the absence of these qualities, or of some of them, a work of art is less likely to generate a consensus of value: its impact will vary from one perceiver to another. But art that is less than great may still fulfill art's deepest purpose for some people. It is perfectly possible for an audience member to be riveted and transported by an amateur concert even if the performers lack the skill of professionals. It depends on the presence of other elements, not exclusively aesthetic: more about this later.

Evaluating Interactive Social Events

As I said earlier, playback theatre is an art, and therefore subject to assessment according to the presence or absence of the elements mentioned above. However, it is more than art: a playback event is also integrally an interactive social event, and subject to success or failure as such. (It is significant that there is no obvious term to refer to the realm of our work that lies beyond pure art. The absence of a familiar or fully adequate term reflects the common difficulty in comprehending and discussing what I am referring to as the "interactive social" domain.)

We live our lives in proximity to others. The groups in which we find ourselves as children—family, neighborhood, and school—may be nurturing, or inadequate, or destructive. With maturity comes the desire to choose, to the degree possible, the nature and quality of the groups that form our social world, the people we live and work with, the groups we learn and play with.

Although most people seek out groups that are rewarding and try to avoid those that are disappointing or harmful, they are not necessarily aware of the components of successful interactive events, and therefore may not be able to consistently choose, build or maintain groups that are truly satisfying and effective. You may notice that your evening language classes run smoothly and feel enjoyable while meetings with colleagues at work leave you dissatisfied or diminished, without realizing that the difference between them is no accident. As in the domain of art, there are distinct elements that are likely to lead to fulfillment, whether in an ongoing group or in a one-time event.

Consider a family gathering, a class, or a town meeting. Although each has its own particular demands, they also share common criteria of success. These include planning and organization according to the purpose of the gathering; a congenial and appropriate physical environment; an opportunity early in the proceedings for each person to be seen and heard; an atmosphere of respect; some form of participation or engagement from all present; the acknowledgment and inclusion of diverse concerns, points of view, and feelings; time management; a sense of achievement in relation to the meeting's intent; and an adequate closure at the end. The more these elements are present, the more the event will be experienced as successful. In their absence, an event is felt to be a failure. Participants are likely to feel disappointed, excluded, frustrated, bored, or left wanting, depending on which aspects were inadequate. A family gathering in which some members sit silent while others laugh and chat will not be successful in bringing the family together; a town meeting that is unplanned will not make progress toward its purpose; a classroom that is too cold or crowded will not be conducive to good learning.

Moreno's method of sociometry addresses particularly the questions relating to inclusiveness and participation. He considered that in any group there is an intricately evolving pattern of relationships between members, resulting in a greater or lesser degree of inclusion and contributing therefore to the group's vitality and effectiveness. Sociometry explores this system of interconnections, with the goal of maximizing and enlivening the participation of all those present.

Groups of many different kinds—vocational, recreational, geographical— are often referred to as "communities," a word rather wistfully overused in our post-industrial era where it is common for people not to know the names of their neighbors. What does "community" mean? It is, I think, the idea of a group of people who acknowledge, value, and maintain their connectedness and their commonality. Jean Vanier, who founded a series of group homes for disabled people in France, described community as "a group of people who are yearning to bring each other forth."

The qualities that might actually lead to the creation of this kind of community are similar to those I have suggested as necessary to a successful interactive social event: the attention to inclusiveness, the care taken with environment and structure, the matching of design to purpose. Whether in an ongoing situation or within one particular event, fulfillment of these criteria can create community in Vanier's sense—a gathering of people who seek to know each other, to listen to each other, to remember and care for each other.

A Meeting Place

A playback theatre event is integrally both an artistic event and an interactive social event involving both complex group dynamics and sensitive one-to-one communication. If the task of art is the creation of form to express the artist’s perception of meaning, then the playback artist’s task, specifically, is to create cohesive and shapely pieces of theatre based on an acute sense of the meaning of the teller’s story. It is their artist's sensibility that enables playback performers to transform moments from real lives, however simply or roughly told, into well-crafted dramas that have resonance for the

audience as well as for the teller. Drawing on their aesthetic sense of story, as well as language, metaphor, and stagecraft, they create art, embodying a pattern of elements in relation to each other in such a way as to suggest the wisdom contained in a larger reality. For the audience, watching and listening is an aesthetic experience—in other words, an experience of affirmation, expansion, revelation, and delight.

This art is different from an art that only seeks to convey the artist's vision: it is an art that is committed to affirming ordinary people's experience and to fostering connections between them so that the communities we live in can grow in compassion and humanity. We strive to hone our art in order to offer it as service. Playback is a fusion, perhaps a unique one, of artistic and social phenomena. The more it can fulfill the demands of both, the more it can succeed.

Every playback practitioner is familiar with the experience of frustration and chagrin when the process seems to fail, and with the elation that can come when it works. The assessment depends somewhat on whether you are considering a whole show or a single scene, whether it is a performance or an applied context such as a therapy or training group, whether you are a performer, a teller, or an audience member, and so on. However, I believe that the criteria I've proposed for success in art and interactive social events will consistently apply, along with some further qualities specific to playback.

Here are two more moments from my own experience when the question of success or failure has been notable for one reason or another:

Four of us from my company, Hudson River Playback Theatre, went to perform as part of a college symposium on reproductive rights. It was several hours' drive from our home. We got there to find that the preparation for our show had been minimal. The location was the corner of a large open space with people wandering through on their way somewhere else. Very few people came for the show. We began by making personal statements relating to the theme, feeling more exposed doing this than if there had been a large audience. One of the organizers told a moving and very disturbing

story about an abortion she had had many years ago. The actors enacted with passion and ingenuity. After it was over, the audience was silent. No-one else wanted to tell anything. We continued as best we could, hoping to somewhat redeem the situation with the strong ending that we had planned. But shortly before the scheduled close our host jumped up and said she was sorry, she'd made a mistake about the time frame and we had to end immediately. It felt very abrupt. In spite of expressions of gratitude from some of the people who were there, we felt that our show had been a failure.

Looking back at our choices that day, I think that we failed, and I especially as the conductor, to create a safe enough space for this tiny audience who had come to explore an extremely delicate topic. Daunted by the inhospitable room and the small turn-out after our long drive, we didn't sufficiently adapt our plan to the situation we found. Our own discomfort as we made our personal statements at the beginning should have warned us that the audience would probably feel similarly exposed. If we had built a better connection with them at the outset, perhaps they would have been willing to journey with us from one story to the next. But the actors' stagework, although skillful and sophisticated, could not by itself draw the audience into more participation. It was in the social domain, not the artistic, that this performance was lacking.

Another moment:

At the Playback Theatre conference in Finland in 1993 there were performances by a number of different groups. A few were companies who had come with all or most of their members, but most were ad hoc groups composed of representatives usually from companies with a common language, if not a common country. All the performances showed a knowledge of playback forms, and some were more accomplished than others, but none fully embodied the playback spirit, in my view, until the last day, when a pick-up group of New Zealanders, Australians, and Hungarians took the stage. They had recognized in each other a kind of anarchic energy and wanted to play together, although they shared neither language nor playback style. Their performance was a great reassurance to me: I had been wondering unhappily what was missing from all the others (all the more troubling to me since four of the groups had asked me to perform with them as a musician). Looking back on it from the perspective of a few years, I recall

a joyful interactive creativity among the actors, which made up for the complete absence of actorly polish; and a no-holds-barred attitude to the audience from the conductor. She faced us as though we were a many-headed organism, which we were, and teased, provoked, and cajoled us to tell our stories, not necessarily the ones we thought we wanted to tell. The large audience came alive and felt like a group for the first time in the entire conference.

Acting and Other Playback Criteria

The degree of success of the three performances I've mentioned (London, New York, and Finland) can be accounted for in a general way by the presence or absence of the qualities that I listed earlier as criteria for value in art—artistic form, skill and inspiration, etc; and in social events—skillful attention to inclusiveness, environment and structure, etc. There are also elements that are specific to playback theatre, some that are clearly in the realm of art, others that are simultaneously questions of art and non-art.

In a public performance, the audience wants, expects, and deserves an aesthetic experience. How do we, the playback artists, ensure that they get it?

Like any other artists, playback performers strive to find form in which to embody meaning. The primary artistic task in playback is the transformation of personal stories into theatre pieces, works of art with integrity of form and design. In our work, the meaning we seek to convey is the meaning embedded in the teller's experience.

The tools with which playback performers (including musician and conductor) make such transformations are those of the stage, beginning with aesthetic concerns like the visual set-up. Most importantly, there is the quality of the actors' performance. Good actors use movement freely and creatively. They know how to move and position themselves on stage in order to embody the story and to create an aesthetic, evocative stage picture at every moment. They use language with accuracy, economy and gracefulness. During scenes, they make imaginative and judicious use of the boxes and cloth props. There is a co-creative give-and-take between actors and musician. They have mastered the different demands of specific forms—fluid sculptures, pairs, etc. The

ritual framing of the show and each segment within it is fulfilled with presence and dignity.

The quality of acting itself goes beyond the specific use of movement, voice, etc. Playback theatre requires a particular kind of acting which we can call *authentic* acting, as opposed to the more stylized acting familiar from television, film and most other kinds of theatre, however naturalistic. In playback acting, the actor does not use a code to depict emotion but draws her portrayal directly from her sense of the teller and his story.

At its best, this kind of acting can be as powerful and inspired as that of great traditional actors, whose genius is precisely their quality of authenticity built on prodigious skill and training. However, formal theatre training may not be a good preparation for playback acting. Traditional actors are used to basing their performance on a script, not an empathic sense of an actual, present human being, and their technique may distance them from teller, audience, and fellow performers. They may also find it challenging to summon the generosity that playback actors need: part of Chloë's difficulty in the London performance was her concern to make an impression as an “actress” rather than a sense of service to the audience.

Experienced playback actors use a high degree of artistic awareness and skill in their acting: authentic acting does not mean that it is unmediated by an aesthetic consciousness. But because authenticity is the key, it is sometimes possible for completely inexperienced actors to produce very good acting drawing on nothing but empathy and spontaneity. On the other hand, people with a little experience—enough to have lost their beginner's innocence, but not enough to have acquired artistic skill—sometimes fall into serious mistakes in their acting. The problems are often in their attempts to depict story or emotion nonliterally—brandishing a piece of red cloth to show anger, for example, or following the teller's actor around the stage in a clumsy attempt to "be" his inner self. Brand-new actors in their innocence do not think of being anything but literal, while sophisticated actors know how to move fluently and clearly between literal and symbolic action on stage.

The music in playback is another area where artistry is key. Again, spontaneity and empathy on the musician's part can go a long way toward making up for a lack of

musical talent or training. But the aesthetic quality of a performance will be greatly enhanced by music that is expertly and sensitively played.

In addition to these artistic considerations, there are elements indivisibly in the realms both of art and of social interaction, and equally essential to playback's success. There is the faithfulness of the enactment to the teller's story, which depends on attentive and empathetic listening on the part of conductor, actors and musician. There is the co-creativity between actors, between actor and musician, between the conductor and the rest of the team. This includes the elusive quality of improvisation itself, which operates on a constant reciprocity of offers, in turn deriving from the performers' sense of the story and where it needs to go in order to be fulfilled. There is the shape of the event itself; the structure of the performance, how to begin, how to end, with decisions based both on an artistic sense of design and on the particular needs of the context and the audience. And encompassing all, the ritual and ceremony that underlie the entire performance, expressed in the quality of the performers' presence, the music, and the palpable sense of occasion—the “heightened dramatic event,” as Jonathan Fox describes it.

The Role of the Conductor

The conductor embodies the fusion of art and social action: every aspect of the role carries both an aesthetic and an interactive consideration. It is the conductor who must greet and warm up the audience at the outset of the show; nothing is more crucial to the event's success. If the conductor in this initial moment is able to acknowledge and include all the disparate elements of the audience, to show a sensitivity to subgroups of age, culture, ethnicity or background, to create a sense of ease in those who are new to playback and eagerness in people who have come before, to establish an easy pattern of question and response, to direct the focus to the show's theme if there is one, then the performance is likely to unfold in a way that is satisfying to all. As the show proceeds, the conductor must remain attuned to the developing dynamics of the audience, the themes that emerge, the stories that may be untold but present. In his or her interactions with each individual teller, the conductor must create an immediate and

genuine rapport, then elicit the story with grace and economy, maintaining contact with the rest of the audience while listening for the essence of the teller's experience, crystallizing it into the form of a story, and ensuring that the actors have enough but not an excess of information. As the performance draws to an end, the conductor will probably be the one to guide a closure, to draw attention to the collective story that has emerged, perhaps to thank the hosts, or to announce upcoming further events.

Are these tasks social or artistic? They are tasks that we are more familiar with in social events; but in playback they must also be fulfilled with an aesthetic attention to form, design, and style. A playback actor's adequacy is measured by his basic performance skills in combination with his attunement to the teller, the story, and his fellow-performers; a playback conductor by her assurance and skill in handling group and interpersonal connections, and by the elegance and integrity of her own demeanor.

Some conductors have, in addition to these qualities, a charm or force of personality that might be called charisma. When combined with the essential skills of the conductor, charisma can be a positive factor that draws audiences into warmth and connection. However, charisma without skill and integrity can exert power in a way that is dangerous and incompatible with "good" playback, drawing trust to a conductor who does not deserve it.

In my examples of success and failure above, fulfillment of both *artistic* and *social* considerations accounted, in my opinion, for the success of the London and Finland performances. In London, Chloë's criticism only emphasized the fallacy of assessing a show by looking solely at what is happening on stage—in effect, by ignoring all but purely artistic criteria. In the reproductive rights performance, our artistic proficiency was not enough to make up for our shortcomings in the interactive realm.

Context and Standards

In a playback performance there is an implicit contract regarding standards between the playback team and the audience. The audience has come to see professional theatre, they have paid at the door, and they legitimately expect to see competent work. They

will be disappointed and critical if the performance falls below a basic level of artistic skill. Although no audience assessment will be unanimous, there will be a general consensus about the line between adequacy and inadequacy in the use of stage, voice, movement, and the artistic shaping of scenes.

The contract is different in non-performance contexts, where stories are enacted not by a company but by members of a training or therapeutic group where there is no separately-defined audience. In a therapy group, the emphasis is entirely on the process, and there may be little if any attention paid to artistic skills. The same is true using playback with groups of managers, teachers, or social workers to help them focus on current issues in their workplace. In such settings, the participants are not expected to be skillful performers, and artistic skill on their part is not necessary to the success of the work.

However, this inherent flexibility of standards in playback does not extend to the conductor. In any context, with any group, with any purpose, the social and interactive aspects of playback must be expertly handled if the work is to fulfill itself. Whether in performances, workshops, or other applications, a sociometric awareness of the group is essential—acknowledging individuals and subgroups, inviting tellers, being alert to structures of influence and allegiance. Playback's purpose is always to bring people together, to affirm the individual and the group. Without mastery of the conductor's role, this fundamental goal cannot be achieved.

Problematic Playback Theatre

Inevitably, as playback has been adopted by enthusiasts around the world, a few have developed practices based on a fundamental misunderstanding of playback theatre's purpose. Such work can never meet the criteria for "good" playback, because it is built on distortion.

One such misapplication is the performance of playback in a comedic, entertainment manner, with little skill in sociometry or subtle communication on the part of the conductor, and insufficient respect for the story on the part of the actors. These

companies may enjoy success in the sense that their audiences are enthusiastic and they may be in demand for contracted performances. However, their work is not good playback: the deeper meaning of the stories is ignored or lost, the dynamics and themes of the event remain undeveloped, and the audience is entertained without being affirmed in their humanity.

Another pitfall for playback performers, particularly conductors, is the mishandling of playback's therapeutic dimension. All playback theatre is broadly therapeutic in the sense that the process is potentially and ideally healing for all present, including the performers. Telling one's story publicly, seeing it reflected back, realizing that it is accepted and valued by others is a healing experience for the teller. For the audience, as well, there is an integration and affirmation that strengthens the connections between them. If the basic criteria for successful playback are met, this healing potential will be fulfilled. But some performers do not trust the story to carry its meaning on its own terms. Instead, with the goal of being more therapeutic, they force a "psychological" interpretation, usually with the effect of limiting instead of deepening the meaning. Actors may do this through an interpretive enactment of the scene, conductors through interpretive questions and comments during the interview. (Interpretation in the psychological sense means imposing one's therapeutic insight on the story; it is distinct from artistic interpretation, the filtering of the story through one's artistic sensibility, a process which is integral in playback.)

I once watched a conductor with a teller who told a brief but resonant story about how she survived her childhood by singing to herself whenever her family seemed too crazy. The conductor probed and delved until she elicited further information about the teller's birth and her present relationship to her family. In the enactment the teller's original story, rich with image and metaphor like a small, enigmatic painting, was buried in a rambling framework of psychological detail.

A third danger area is the failure to understand playback's vigor as theatre and its roots in oral tradition, offering it instead as a quasi-religious New Age experience replete with candles and prayers, weak in cultural reference and artistic integrity.[2]

"Good Enough" Playback Theatre

In an essay called "The Face of the Story," Mimi Katzenbach describes playback's remarkable capacity to embody meaning simply in the enactment itself. If the story is heard and enacted with empathy and an intuitive grasp of its essences, then all its multiplicity of allusion to myth, history, and psychological truth will be present and it is unnecessary, even a detraction, to make it more explicit. Playback scenes are not superficial versions of stories told to therapists. The story's meaning is in the face that it shows us; what we see there is enough.

Fortunately, the majority of playback performers are committed to its fundamental purposes. They understand the dual requirement for artistic and interpersonal sophistication; they are artists enough to respect the aesthetic qualities of story itself without distortion in the direction of psychological interpretation. And they achieve what we might call "good enough" playback, on the analogy of Bettelheim's idea of "good enough" parenting: playback that generally fulfills both the artistic and interactive criteria to an adequate degree despite inevitable shortcomings.

In striving to fulfill the work as best it can, every company faces choices about how collectively-oriented they want to be. What is more important to the group, the highest possible standards of performance or a democratic access to conducting, acting, and music? Do you leave the conducting in the hands of the most skilled, or do you commit to training everyone to conduct? Do you rotate roles during a performance as an expression of equality, in spite of a possible drop in standards? The guideline of "good enough" playback is the final determinant of how a group balances the sometimes conflicting demands of democracy and excellence.

The idea that "good enough" playback theatre depends on fulfilling the criteria for success both in art and in interactive social events has implications for training. Whether in companies or in workshops, new performers can be encouraged to develop an artist's sensibility—an aesthetic awareness of form and design, and a commitment to art's purpose of revealing meaning through inspired metaphor and image. They can also, from the beginning, learn about the need for sensitivity and skill in communication and in guiding the functioning of a group.

Many people come to playback with a background in one but not both of these areas—artists who are unsophisticated in human relationships, or helpers and healers who are undeveloped as artists. Training that emphasizes the importance of both sides can help people acquire the balance that is essential.

Trance, Subjectivity, and Judgment

The response to art and the perception of value is necessarily subjective. In playback, subjectivity of response has a special meaning, because of the marked difference in perspective between audience member, teller and performers.

For playback or any theatre to work, there must be an engagement on the part of the audience so that they allow themselves to believe in the illusion of another place and time, whether it is the Forest of Arden or the teller's childhood home. This is a kind of trance, willingly entered into by audience members. Part of the conductor's job is to entrance, to induct audience and teller into an altered state for the duration of the enactment (while remaining firmly out of trance herself). Even the actors are mildly in trance. While they remain fully aware of themselves and each other, thinking about the story and what needs to happen, they are also caught up in the reality conjured by their acting. The music is a powerful trance inducer, altering the state of the teller, audience, and actors from the first notes of the setting-up music.

The stronger the trance, the stronger the perception of success and of artistic value. The trance is almost always strongest for the teller, and weakest for the performer. All playback performers have had the experience of a teller praising them warmly after a scene that they felt they had done poorly. Audience members may also let themselves believe in a story in spite of occasional mistakes or awkwardness in the enactment. (But if the performance is not "good enough" playback, the trance will not work and audience and teller will remain unmoved.)

The peculiar strength of the teller's trance means that in non-performance situations, such as workshops, training groups, or therapy contexts, stories may be enacted with great success by people who lack skill or artistic sensibility—success in the sense that

the teller and other group members feel that the story has been fulfilled satisfactorily in spite of the inexpert acting. Leading children's therapy groups, I have seen tellers completely transfixed by enactments that were clumsy and superficial, just barely adhering to the story, even though the young actors were doing as well as they could. The teller would readily project his story onto the action and feel satisfied that it had been reflected fully.

Subjectivity of response also means that the perception of artistic merit will vary according to context and expectation, as we discussed earlier. I remember a two-hour workshop for recreation workers in which a man told a story about being taken as a child to see Hooverville, the shantytown of homeless people who lived in New York's Central Park during the Depression. The man's father hoped to teach his son to appreciate the privilege and security that he had. But what Victor, the teller, remembered was the moment when a boy his own age stared back at him, a burning challenge in his eyes. In a flash Victor understood this boy's human dignity, and that it was wrong to stare as though he were an animal in a zoo. In the enactment the man who played the homeless boy fulfilled the climactic moment with unforgettable intensity and truth. He was fully invested in the role and its meaning. An experienced actor could not have done better.

He was probably to some degree in trance, believing so deeply in the reality of the boy in Hooverville that his belief informed his portrayal. Another element in the impact of his acting was the context itself, a workshop in which no-one had previous experience with playback or any other kind of performing. I and my co-leader therefore had no expectation of skillful acting and were possibly more impressed than we might have been by someone in our own company doing the same thing.

This subjectivity and flexibility of standards is not unique to playback, but in fact a component in any realm of art. Context and expectation play a part in any audience's experience of any performance. There is always an interplay between what is actually offered by the artists, on the one hand, and what the audience brings to it, on the other. The same is true of non-performance art forms such as literature or painting. Value is

ultimately a co-creation of artist and perceiver, which accounts for the genuine artistic meaning found at every point along the spectrum of actual accomplishment.

Playback's Fulfillment

In my small town there lives a world-famous pianist who performs here once or twice a year. His most recent concert fell on the same night as one of our playback shows. I was very sorry to miss it: this man's music is a treasure, a consummation of the art of the keyboard. As my imagination went from his concert, an all-Bach solo recital, to our playback theatre show, the difference between these two kinds of performances was very clear. Much as I love the magic of playback's mercurial creativity, I also sometimes want the grandeur and perfection of art that is painstakingly developed and rehearsed.

Playback is not great art. It cannot meet art's most rigorous criteria, because it is of the moment. Although performers may develop their skills for years, becoming elegant and compelling both in their acting and in the aesthetic transformation of life into theatre, their on-the-spot enactments cannot, by their nature, be built of the highly crafted language and choreography of formal theatre. However, like other art which may not attain greatness, it nevertheless has the power, depending on context and audience perception, to fulfill art's deepest purpose: the revelation of pattern and ontological meaning.

Those moments when playback reaches a peak of brilliance, those moments that we all recognize and remember, are invariably times when there has been a perfect fusion between the artistic and the interactive aspects of playback. They may happen in any setting, with inexperienced actors as well as with trained performers. In a non-performance setting, it can seem like a kind of miracle when the group members reach into themselves and discover an artist's sensibility for the first time. In my experience, this quantum leap is always called forth by a strength of emotion toward the teller and his story. It has nothing to do with a conscious striving; it is a response to humanity combined with the potency of the artist's reaching for form. The remarkable thing is that the newly-achieved level of artistry invariably creates a similar leap in the group's

understanding of each other. It is a process of synergy in which the art and the group interaction mutually enhance each other.

In performance, the conductor's attunement to the audience and to the teller combines with the actors' empathy, accuracy, inspiration, and teamwork to create theatre that can be matchless in its beauty and truth. An entire performance is unlikely to remain on such a soaring level; playback is also "Rough Theatre," in Peter Brook's phrase, with the inherent unevenness of any art whose creative process is unmasked and visible to all.

Playback theatre belongs rightfully in the realm of art; it seeks to fulfill art's fundamental purpose of revealing meaning through the aesthetic distillation of experience and perception. It is also integrally an interactive and altruistic social event. To be judged as "good," playback must fulfill the criteria for success in both these realms, as well as in those unique to playback itself.

The degree of skill required from the actors varies according to context. In performance situations, the performers must have sufficient artistry and experience to achieve "good enough" playback if they are to satisfy audience and teller. In non-performance contexts, playback can fulfill its purpose without a high degree of skill from the actors: stories may be told and enacted with satisfaction for the teller and the group as a whole in spite of a lack of experience and acting ability.

In any context, however, the conductor's artistry and interpersonal skill is necessary to playback's fulfillment. The conductor's role is an embodiment of playback's fusion of art and social action, both within and outside of performance.

And in any context, performance or otherwise, there is the possibility of those moments that show us the ideal fulfillment of playback's promise; the ephemeral, magical fusion of artistry and humanity.

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Notes

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[1] See also Salas, “Aesthetic Experience in Music Therapy,” *Music Therapy*, 9 1 (1990): 1-15.

[2] See Fox, *Acts of Service*, Part I: A Context for Nonscripted Theatre.