

# Introducing Playback Theatre

by Veronica Needa

Playback Theatre is created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience. Someone tells a story or moment from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, and then watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape and coherence.

**Building community through personal stories** - Playback Theatre creates a ritual space where any story - however ordinary, extraordinary, hidden or difficult - might be told, and immediately made into theatre. And where each person's uniqueness is honoured and affirmed while at the same time building and strengthening our connections to each other as a community of people.

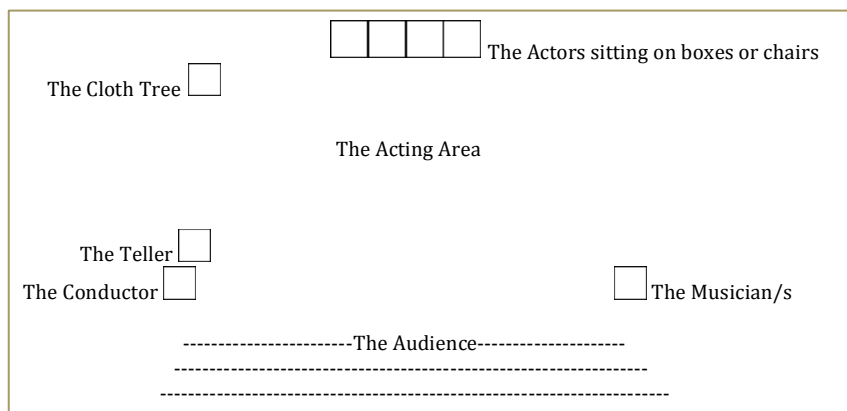
**Origins** - The original Playback Theatre Company came together in 1975, with Jonathan Fox as its director. This was in the mid-Hudson valley of upstate New York and part of the experimental theatre explorations of the 1970s - looking for ways of reaching out to its audience, bringing theatre closer to everyday reality, and breaking away from the tradition of scripted theatre. Since then, Playback Theatre has spread across the world with companies and practitioners in many, many countries. It thrives in a variety of settings, existing as community theatre gatherings as well as a professional service to both the business and social sector.

## Some Influences -

- **Community ritual & theatre:** Jonathan Fox had lived in Nepal and experienced these deeply embedded into the rhythms of everyday life.
- **Oral tradition of storytelling:** where people gather together to hear and share the old stories - the world of myths and legends and folktales.
- **Psychodrama:** while there are differences in form and practice, there are many shared values in Playback Theatre and psychodrama. For example,
  - spontaneity & creativity as natural expressions of our humanity & essential for well-being
  - inclusiveness – every individual has a place in the collective.

## The Classic Stage Layout -

Whether in a classroom, hospital, at a business conference or in a theatre, there is always the familiarity of this basic set-up for Playback Theatre. Much magic can happen within this very simple structure.



**Artistic additions** - The Cloth Tree - a selection of coloured cloth draped over a rail or ladder which can be used in the action - is often present but not essential. Some companies may have additional features, for example: upstage there may be a simple curtain on a rail to create a hidden area for the actors to use in the action. Sometimes there may be additional lighting features. These are optional extras. While there are classical performance forms such as Fluid Sculptures, Pairs, Chorus, or Story (also called Scenes or Free Form), each company may also have developed an extra vocabulary of performance forms – narrative or non-narrative short or intermediate forms - with their own ‘house rules’ for them. The artistic possibilities are endless, so long as what happens on stage best reflects, and is in service to, the audience dialogue and encounter - and serving the Tellers with integrity - within a good holding frame.

**Rhythm of a performance** - There is no script, but there is a rhythm and sequence to a classical Playback Theatre performance. The Conductor is the host and facilitator of the process. Performances will generally begin with a welcome and a period of introductions from the team and a suitable warm-up for the audience to the space and the context. Members of the audience are guided to volunteer something from their experience. These are generally shorter (a feeling or a moment) in the warm-up with the audience in their seats; to longer events and stories, which are invited to be told from a chair on stage to the side, where the audience member now sits beside the Conductor. These may be past, present or future stories. They could be about a very special time or about something that happens every day. In the course of a performance 3, 4 or 5, maybe more, people will come forward to tell a story in this way. Towards the end of a performance, the conductor may invite reflections on the process from the audience, and the team will create some sort of artistic closure appropriate for the event.

**Threads of meaning** - Sometimes a Playback performance may begin with an explicit theme, and the stories are offered following this thread. Sometimes there is no theme to begin with, and the underlying concerns and interests of the community will reveal themselves through the deeper patterning of the stories. This is not always obvious, and a skilful conductor and acting team may be able to bring this to consciousness at the end of the performance.

**Sequence of the ‘Story’** - The heart of the playback performance is in the sharing of the longer stories. The earlier process in a Playback Theatre event is designed to warm up the audience to be ready to come forward to sit in the Teller's chair on the side of the stage. Here they are more visible and audible to the audience, and the story is told from this place with the support of the Conductor.

- During the **interview**, the Teller chooses an actor to play him/herself, and perhaps other actors to play roles in the story. As the actors are chosen, they stand. When the story is told, the Conductor will say 'Lets watch'.

- The performers take this as their cue to **set up** for the beginning of the enactment. There may be music to set an atmosphere and mood. The actors may use their boxes or chairs to set the scene.
- During **the enactment**, the actors and musician will spontaneously improvise a re-enactment of the story - with a variety of theatrical possibilities & artistic formats, aiming to present the essence and heart of the story – in a way which is recognised by the Teller.
- At the end of the enactment, the actors look to the Teller as an act of **acknowledgement**.
- Then there is a **closure with the Teller**. Facilitated by the conductor this is an opportunity for the Teller to say something if they feel moved to. Often nothing more than a few words are said. Sometimes they are encouraged to say more to ground a strong emotional reaction, or the conductor may refer back to the audience to check how the story has connected with them too. Occasionally the Teller is offered a chance for a correction or a transformation of the scene. And the actors will replay it accordingly. The conductor thanks the Teller and guides them to return to their seat. And then another person is invited to tell the next story, and so on.

The simple rules of this sequence form part of the ritual that is a core feature of Playback Theatre.

**Ritual** - There are rules embedded in the practice of Playback Theatre which provide an important container for the whole experience. The ritual creates a framework, a definition for the process, within which the unpredictable and the miraculous can manifest. When the ritual is held well by the conductor and the performers, there is a subconscious sense of safety amongst the audience. And in this atmosphere, the most profound as well as the most everyday of personal stories will feel welcomed and honoured.

**Art** - Whether performed as a simple re-enactment or with more sophisticated mise en scèn,e – including abstract movement & sound, dance, with puppets or song or poetry - when the heart of the story is captured with a high level of artistry, there can be profound impact and another level of transformation and healing. When this is witnessed as a spontaneous ensemble creation, it offers a deeper experience of our humanity and collective potential.

**Social Interaction** - Alongside the fundamental principles of Ritual and Art, Playback Theatre also gives attention to the social interaction. The ritual holding and artistic response is only meaningful when it is managed with a good awareness of the social context and gives attention to the whole group experience. This theatre form is in direct service to healing relationship, communication and understanding between people. This is an underlying value, so the conductor interacts directly with the audience with respect and human warmth, and is sensitive to the larger social & political frame of the Playback event. The actors, too, can bring into the

action on stage social & political references that are contextually appropriate to the personal story. By listening to these stories we feel and weave the deeper web of our larger story as a community of people and thus tap into the collective and universal experience. Social change and transformation begins here, as we make space for the stories of the community - through individual voices - and are affected by them.

**The Playback Actor** - Authenticity in the spontaneous moment underlies Playback Theatre practice. The notion of the 'citizen actor' is very much part of the Playback world - that everyone has the natural potential to perform Playback Theatre in a satisfying enough way. Nevertheless training and regular practice are essential for good work. Playback Theatre challenges the actors to listen, allow intuition and inspiration to arise, trust and support each other, and to call upon their innate personal wisdom and experience. So in Playback Theatre training, in addition to theatre skills, there is a requirement to develop greater personal and social awareness. Playback performers come from many different backgrounds - social workers, educators, administrators. Some are professional actors, many are creative artists, trainers and therapists.

**The Playback Company** – The norm is for a group to practice together regularly, perhaps one evening a week, for a period of time, before performing openly. Many groups continue to practice like this for many years and make a commitment to regular performances - monthly or bimonthly - for their community in a public venue. When a group becomes more skilful, they may do special commissions eg. birthdays, opening and closure of conferences, and so forth. It is an interesting phenomenon that members of Playback companies tend to stay in a company for many years often for little or no remuneration for their time or service. Somehow the values and work of Playback Theatre - the orientation of theatre in direct service to the community - gives more than sufficient reward to the members of a company. And the investment of shared experience over a period of time creates an artistry that can be truly extraordinary.

**The diversity of contexts and audiences** - The flexibility of the Playback form permits a high degree of sensitivity to the needs of specific groups. Here are a few examples...

- **Social change & action:** A group in the Northern Territories of Australia performed to Aboriginal communities as part of a programme to enhance self-esteem and recovery from substance abuse. Playback has been used in hearing from both sides on the Palestinian/Israeli issue. In Argentina, Playback helped reconstruct collective memory of their social/political history. In Kabul, stories that cannot be told in a court of law, have been told in a context for transitional justice.
- **Corporate contexts:** An audience of Swiss engineers and accountants shared stories through Playback Theatre about organisational re-structuring; an audience of Post Office workers in Washington DC were facing redundancy.
- **In education:** In Alaska, schoolchildren used Playback Theatre to deal with their grief over the death of a fellow student. Hong Kong teenagers perform playback as part of

their community service programme. In a Washington DC school, Playback Theatre is part of the curriculum to teach Quaker values and the practice of inner listening.

- **In therapy:** Playback Theatre is also used as an additional tool for psychotherapists in their group work. In Chicago, a group of schizophrenics - outpatients at a psychiatric unit - met regularly to do Playback Theatre for each other, and told stories of coping with everyday life.
- **Community events:** In Sydney, Playback Theatre was part of a wedding celebration. In London, it was performed in the basement of a Chinese restaurant on the topic of gambling addiction. In Japan, a Playback group performed for mentally handicapped people and their friends and family every month. In South Africa, it was performed to encourage awareness of HIV/Aids issues.
- **Public performances:** Playback Theatre is performed to the general public at theatres and art centres all over the world. It has been said that Playback is a theatre of neighbours. You may have come into the theatre as a stranger, but almost certainly by the end of the evening, you will feel a sense of aliveness and ease in talking to the people around you.

**Grounding the Transpersonal** - One could say that Playback Theatre is a form of healing theatre, which creates an opportunity for the divine to enter in to an experience shared by a gathering of people. However one conceives this, it is nevertheless grounded in everyday life & stories, where the spontaneous enactment of personal experience builds connection between people by honouring the dignity, drama and universality of their stories.

### International Connections



#### **IPTN – the International Playback Theatre Network**

Established in 1990, this is a global association of Playback supporters, practitioners, and groups, principally for networking and connection. IPTN publishes its journal **Interplay** twice a year. Current and previous issues of

Interplay can be accessed free of charge on the IPTN website. Anyone can join as a Regular Member; playbackers with experience can join as Practitioner Members, and Groups are welcome to join at any time. [www.playbacknet.org](http://www.playbacknet.org)



#### **PlaybackCentre**

#### **CPT – the Centre for Playback Theatre**

The Centre is an outgrowth of the School of Playback Theatre, which has been offering seminal training in playback theatre since 1993. It was created by Jonathan Fox to support the ethical and artistic development of Playback Theatre

worldwide. CPT offers comprehensive international training, serves as an educational resource,

and supports practitioners through its network of company partners, accredited trainers, and affiliate Schools of Playback Theatre teaching in local languages in many countries.

**[www.playbackcentre.org](http://www.playbackcentre.org)**

International Playback Theatre Conferences have been hosted in Melbourne, Australia 1991; Sydney, Australia 1992; Rautalampi, Finland 1993; Olympia, USA 1995; Perth, Australia 1997; York, England 1999; Shizuoka, Japan 2003; Sao Paulo, Brazil 2007; Frankfurt, Germany 2011. The next will be hosted at Montreal, Canada in 2015. European Playback Theatre Gatherings have been hosted at Plougasnou, France 2005; Longiano, Italy 2006; Pieksämäki, Finland 2008; Andreevka, Ukraine 2009; Dartington, England 2012; Amsterdam, Holland 2014.

There have been regional gatherings in Australia and Asia over the years, and many countries now have annual or biennial national events which bring playbackers together to play and learn with each other. For example: the Finns gather at the height of their mid-summer holidays in June, the Israelis during May, the German-speaking community in November. As well as conferences, gatherings and festivals, there have been academic symposiums, events and training programmes around the world – many initiated or supported by IPTN and CPT and in collaboration with national Playback Theatre networks and individuals, academic institutions, and community organisations.

**Some Resources** - The Centre for Playback Theatre has a comprehensive database of articles and writing about Playback Theatre: <http://www.playbacktheatre.org/resources/>  
For past issues of INTERPLAY: <http://www.playbacknet.org/drupal/interplay/archive>

These are some key publications.

- **ACTS OF SERVICE: Spontaneity, Commitment Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre** by Jonathan Fox 1986
- **IMPROVISING REAL LIFE: Personal Story in Playback Theatre** by Jo Salas 1993
- **ZOOMY ZOOMY** by Hannah Fox 2010
- **DO MY STORY, SING MY SONG: Music therapy and Playback Theatre with troubled children** by Jo Salas 2007
- **HALF OF MY HEART/LA MITAD DE MI CORAZÓN: True stories told by immigrants in Dutchess County, New York/Historias verídicas contadas por inmigrantes del condado de Dutchess, New York**  
Ed. Jo Salas & Leslie Gauna, with photos by Elissa I. Davidson 2007
- **GATHERING VOICES: Essays on Playback Theatre** Ed. Jonathan Fox & Heinrich Dauber 1999 (also published in German, and also available free online under CPT resources page)
- **PLAYING THE OTHER: Dramatising Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre** by Nick Rowe 2007
- **DVD - Performing Playback Theatre** - the first training DVD for playback theatre, designed for new and experienced practitioners, trainers, and educators.