Playback Theatre's Debt to Moreno

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It can be a transformative experience to tell your story while others listen deeply. It is what we have been inviting audiences and workshop groups to do for over 40 years in many settings and cultures. It is what has inspired groups of us to stay together for decades, practicing and bringing our work to local communities. The core of our approach, called playback theatre, consists of audience members briefly sharing personal stories which are then enacted on the spot by trained actors and musicians. The purpose of this article is to outline the ways in which the practice of playback theatre owes a debt to Moreno and his methods. It will focus mainly on the concept of spontaneity.

I first attended the Moreno Institute in Beacon in 1973, 2 years before the founding of playback theatre. The main trainers at that time were Zerka Moreno, Ann Hale, and later John Nolte. Exposure to psychodrama, with its roots in Moreno's theatre experiments, helped trigger the idea for playback theatre. We turned to the psychodrama networks in finding actors for the original company. These included Judy Swallow—a psychodrama student at the time and now a TEP and psychodrama elder—who has been an active practitioner of playback theatre since this time. Other members, including cofounder Jo Salas, had backgrounds in the arts rather than in psychodrama. Playback theatre troupes around the world vary greatly in their makeup, but many reflect this mix of those trained in psychodrama and those not. Even though what we did on stage was quite different from Moreno's early experiment, Zerka Moreno was an active supporter in our early years, in part because she saw playback theatre as an incarnation of the Theatre of Spontaneity.[1]

A word about terminology. In playback theatre we use the term *teller* instead of *protagonist*, and *conductor* instead of *director*. Perhaps most significantly, instead

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[1] See an article on Moreno's theatre activities in New York by Fox (1993). The Teatro Espontaneo movement in Latin America is a direct outcrop of Moreno's Stegreiftheater work. See Garavelli (2003). For more information on our early experiences at the Moreno Institute, see Fox (2015).

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of *problem* or *issue* we use the word *story* to refer to articulated personal experience.

FOCUS ON STORY

A story is a narrative account shaped by an intended meaning or meanings by the teller. The conductor's invitation to a member of the audience to tell a story—a personal story—constitutes a major spontaneity test. Unlike in psychodrama, where a potential protagonist will have roughly 70 minutes to explore her story, in playback theatre the teller has roughly seven. Thus, in that moment of invitation, the potential teller must focus sharply, choosing what experience to tell and making the decision whether to put up a hand or not. The conductor tries to make clear that what we are looking for is a story chosen in the moment (although of course some, familiar with playback theatre, have thought about a story to tell beforehand). This act of finding one's story and deciding to tell it is a profoundly creative act that in itself can be transformative.[2]

Psychodrama, though slower in rhythm, follows a similar process—a protagonist choosing to work and zeroing in on a problem to work on. Finding your core issue of the moment is a major challenge to spontaneity, and it is in the work on the stage in psychodrama, or in the telling and watching from the teller's chair in playback theatre, that "one gains towards his own life, towards all one has done and does, the point of view of the creator" (Moreno, 1947, p. 91). This reliance on the unplanned narratives of audience members we learned from psychodrama.

The *theatre* in playback theatre comes from a team of actors and musicians embodying the teller's story theatrically, helping to bring out intended meanings and providing resonance (all storytellers aim to achieve a certain resonance with their audience). The performers face two kinds of spontaneity challenge. First, they need to use a knowledge of story, life experience, creative imagination, and artistic skill physically expressed to render, without consultation or planning, an intelligible version of what the teller has described. Moreover, they do this as a team. ("Spontaneity begets counter-spontaneity," said Moreno, 1953, p. 706.) Access to such spontaneity is impossible if the performer does not have a good sense of herself (knowing where her story ends and the teller's begins) and an openness to her own and others' creative impulses. Second, the actor needs to be appropriate in Moreno's classic definition of spontaneity, possessing general role flexibility (being hard edged when it is appropriate to be hard edged, soft when it is appropriate to be soft) as well as the capacity to modulate the role to fit the specific demands of the teller's narrative.

Membership in a playback theatre troupe that meets regularly constitutes a kind of spontaneity training that generally feels beneficial for everyday life, since it expands one's role repertoire and provides a place for its members to tell and see enacted their own stories. It is one reason why they remain for many years.

[2] For an account of the walk to the teller's chair as a rite of passage, see Dennis (2004).

SPONTANEOUS DECISION MAKING

The conductor in playback theatre acts as the intermediary with the audience, inviting the teller to come to a special chair at the edge of the stage and holding a short interview. The conductor's primary challenge is like the psychodrama director's, in that she is faced with a continuous need to make decisions. In playback theatre the entire team, but mostly the conductor, faces the challenge of keeping a balance between attention to story, spontaneity, atmosphere, and guidance that requires intense mental effort, that cybernetic flow of sensory input (I see the face of that person in the audience full of emotion), evaluation (I think he wants to tell his story), and action (I will invite him) that can be termed another form of spontaneity.[3]

When that balance is kept, then the playback theatre event will exhibit narrative reticulation, a rich flow of stories that are interconnected. This is mainly an unconscious process, since each teller is telling her own story. Yet there is a cocreated result. An audience will engage in a group dialogue through the stories. We have learned after many years of experience that audience members contribute to this dramatic conversation in a very sophisticated way, creating a richly-layered text from spontaneous individual stories. The totality of the stories shared invariably conveys themes and images of importance to the group.

Playback theatre was influenced in its group focus by two streams: oral traditional practice, which used traditional tales to articulate communal identity; and Paolo Freire, who emphasized social activism through a critical awareness of the self in relation to society.[4] Contemporary uses of sociodrama attempt to connect groups with wider social issues. However, although a significant part of Moreno's theory, sociodrama was not a meaningful part of psychodrama training at the Moreno Institute in the 1970s.

PORTRAIT OF GROUP IDENTITY

I would say that the emergence of group identity is the main purpose of playback theatre, although to be sure the method is utilized in specific instances to promote dialogue (such as performances in a postconflict society, such as Burundi), honor transitions (at the beginning or end of a conference), advance therapeutic objectives (in a shelter for abused women), or serve an educational objective (as part of an antibullying program in a school).

To recap, spontaneity is a cornerstone of the playback theatre idea. It is a theatre with no play rehearsed beforehand, relying instead on emergent audience stories, which are then reenacted by performers relying only on their own spontaneity. This undertaking depends on marshalling the spontaneity of the audience, performers, and conductor in multiple ways.

In order for the process to work at all, there must be a positive atmosphere, or no one will dare to tell. This challenge of creating the right mood has nothing to

[3] See Fox (1994).

[4] See Lord (1960) and Freire (1973). A protégé of Freire, Augusto Boal, founded a widely practiced form of interactive theatre and initially described it in his book (Boal, 1979).

do with the stories themselves, or theatre for that matter. The study of group process learned in psychodrama training, with its emphasis on positive social choice and the integration of the marginalized, has been invaluable for our work in this area, including an understanding of sociometry.

Sociometric awareness has been important on a mundane level—"Let's have the next teller a man," when the previous three have been women, for example—and also on a profound level, knowing that it is the unheard teller, often positioned at the conjunction of personal isolation and societal oppression, whom we want to find a successful way to invite to the stage.

Most important, in terms of building atmosphere and stimulating narrative reticulation, we want *any teller* to command the attention of the witnesses. This of course is a daunting task, for our social problems are deep and rejection commonplace. It takes us directly into the domain of social change, focusing, for example, on who is present in the room (demanding organizing work with community partners beforehand) as well as who tells once there. Knowing how to build a positive atmosphere among audience members is also a critical aspect in creating a sense of connection and safety for the revelation of personal narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

Playback theatre draws on ordinary people—the tellers—to provide creative contributions to community dialogue through the medium of personal storytelling. The performers, themselves mostly volunteer citizen actors, add stimulus by virtue of their own heightened spontaneity and creativity. Thus we rely on nonexperts to practice the method. However, as tellers started to use the medium of playback theatre to tell about traumatic events, and as playback theatre emerged as a vehicle for community healing rituals following natural and civil upheaval, we have placed greater and greater emphasis on training.[5] (The possibility of retraumatization, in a public setting of disaster-affected individuals, is palpably real.)

From the start, playback theatre has stood outside the domain of psychotherapy and has not allied with the psychodrama movement in its self-characterization as a cure for mental illness (although articulating your story and seeing it reenacted can bring insight and catharsis, as well as a sense of discovery, and experiencing the attention of the listeners often builds social connections). Yet Moreno and his ideas have profoundly influenced playback's development and practice. Looking back, Zerka Moreno's hunch about us proved prescient, for it can be said that we have tried to fulfill Moreno's call in *Theatre of Spontaneity* for a new form of community-based theatre, where "it is the community from which the dramas spring and the actors producing them, and again it is not any

[5] Since 1993 the Centre of Playback Theatre in New York has been offering formal training in playback theatre, and there are now affiliated playback theatre training programs in 10 other countries. The Centre's list of accredited trainers throughout the world can be found at http://www.playbackcentre.org/about-playback-theatre/accreditation/accredited-trainers/.

community, a community in abstracto, but *our* village and neighborhood" (Moreno, 1947, p. 28). This has been true in upstate New York, home of the original experiment; in Santiago, Chile; in Hokkaido, Japan; in Manpur, Nepal; and in hundreds of other cities and towns where playback theatre provides a regular occasion for people to engage in the creative act of finding their stories. They then watch as citizen actors give those stories resonance through reenactment, and audiences follow with deep attention the narrative conversations they create together in the moment.

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