

## BOOK REVIEW

*Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre.* Jonathan Fox. 1994. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing. 276 pp.

In this newly published book, the founder of Playback Theatre presents his most comprehensive overview of the nature of this important method and its place in the sociocultural realm of dramatic activities in general. I have been impressed with the excitement about Playback Theatre and how it has been taken up by people in drama therapy. It is being used internationally, and it seems to respond to that hunger for community that is a natural response to the postmodern condition.

Jonathan Fox's background in both theater and psychodrama makes him uniquely capable of addressing the process of drama from its widest perspective, going beyond the conventional histories of theater and considering the nature of the oral tradition, storytelling, the improvisations of the ritual clowns in some cultures, and a variety of other activities. I was particularly pleased and informed by taxonomy of what the author calls "non-scripted theatre," described in the fifth chapter as having six major branches: experimental theater, community theater, clowning/new vaudeville, educational theater, comic-satire theater, and therapeutic theater. Fox notes Moreno's place on this sociocultural "tree"-like matrix both as a major founder of the therapeutic theater and as one who also informed experimental theater.

The author omitted a few related developments that, although not being "theater," I think should be recognized as addressing this same need. For example, other types of "play-shops" (instead of workshops) and sociodramatic activities have become more widespread. Many personal development classes, not only those in general adult education programs but also those for various professional or business training courses, have used theater games, encounter-group structured experiences, and psychodramatic warmups. Wiener (1994) has described how he uses these approaches as part of psychotherapy.

Playback Theatre appeals to many people who have no particular connection to psychodrama. This book is especially relevant to drama therapists, but psychodramatists will find it rich in its associations and basic theory. In addition to discussing many of the "nuts and bolts" considerations of developing a troupe, rehearsing, maintaining morale, working with different kinds of

audiences, and the like, Fox also discusses such issues as spontaneity, the personal development and consciousness of the director/conductor, rehearsing, and the fundamental theoretical issues involved in the oral versus the written tradition.

The inclusion in an appendix of a transcript of a performance is particularly helpful in making the process more vivid, and he cites examples from this process record at many points in the main text to illustrate various principles or dynamics.

I appreciated the way the author began by reminding the reader of the limitations of script and literary work in general, contrasting it with certain functions of the oral tradition, which allows for more of an adjustment of the performance to the circumstances of the group. Not only does this remind us of the tribal and spiritual foundations of much of drama, but it also informs us about some of the principles of the ritual process, which serves as one of the elements in the theory of how psychodrama is a healing process.

The author's roots in theater make him especially able to reflect on the original Morenean goal of a methodology for the people. Playback Theatre, for example, although frequently presented at psychodrama conferences, is not specifically psychotherapy in the sense of being a treatment for those who identify themselves as "patients." It is, however, therapeutic in the broadest sense, in that it is life enhancing to be able to tell one's story and have it mirrored dramatically, or to participate as actor or audience in validating the richness of another person's life.

Fox's scholarship is impressive, and he draws on a broad range of sources that are relevant to the nature of drama and therapy in our postmodern culture. For example, he discusses the particularly useful concept of "liminality," the overlapping frames of meaning and the therapeutic value of narrative.

In the spirit of Moreno's earlier work, the author includes in the appendix one full text of a session that provides the reader with a good sense of the process of Playback. He refers to these examples throughout the text to illustrate various points, and having the full record makes his discussion more vivid. In addition, Fox offers a great many rich and original vignettes.

My criticisms are minor. There is a little redundancy with another book written recently by Jo Salas (1993). The book also has some problems of organization, such as in the discussion of the linguistic forms—oral versus written—noted both in the first and the penultimate chapters. At times, the reading becomes a little dense, and passages require rereading and contemplation. Indeed, I could imagine this book being the subject of a book club or literature seminar, so rich is it in thought-provoking comments.

On the whole, *Acts of Service* is a valuable contribution to the literature of psychodrama, drama therapy, educational drama, and the field of theater in general. Moreno's vision was that methods for cultivating group dynamics

and spontaneity should be applied beyond the medical or “therapeutic” model, for a wider purpose of healing and developing the general social matrix. He called the endeavor *sociatry*, a term that is a play on the word *psychiatry*. Jonathan Fox’s approach offers a significant innovation and contribution to this goal.

#### REFERENCES

- Salas, J. (1993). *Improvising real life: Personal story in Playback Theatre*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt.
- Wiener, D. (1994). *Rehearsals for growth*. New York: W.W. Norton.

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