

Book Reviews

Gathering Voices: Essays on Playback Theatre, edited by Jonathan Fox and Heinrich Dauber. 1999. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala.

The need to give order and to understand meaning in life may be a uniquely human experience, coupled as it is with the wish to understand our small part in the larger reality of our world. The wish to speak and to be heard and understood is a core part of being human, as everyone, from mental health workers to advertising tycoons knows. Freud's patient, for example, spoke of the "talking cure," AT&T tells us to "reach out and touch someone," and a billboard proclaims: "Everyone has a story. Tell us yours." What all these concepts have in common is the need to connect, listen, and tell. And that is the heart of Playback Theatre, the brainchild of Jonathan Fox. The hunger for this new, yet old, art form, which can connect people and ideas and which is practiced in more than 30 countries, spread over five continents, can be gauged by the rapid growth of Fox's now-international organization.

Gathering Voices: Essays on Playback Theatre, coedited by Jonathan Fox and Heinrich Dauber, is a record of the experiences, thoughts, and research of many playback practitioners who have been trained by Fox, Jo Salas (his wife and close colleague), and others. In this slim volume, 16 authors with different frames of reference, practicing in diverse settings and different countries, attempt to grapple with the core concepts inherent in this art form. In interesting short essays, those who gathered at the 1997 Symposium at the University of Kassel in Germany write of their experiences, theories, and practices. Interwoven in the writings is an evident effort to learn, know, and grow.

The book begins with a brief introduction by Fox, who writes of the origins of Playback Theatre. He tells us that he gradually conceived of the idea of playback when he returned to the United States in 1975. He imagined a kind of spontaneous theater, with its roots in the oral tradition of storytelling but centered in the community, as was Moreno's Stegreiftheater in Vienna. Fox's idea was straightforward: Bring together trained actors, add music and

movement, and enact a story told by a self-selected teller. Fox wanted immediate theater, which could take place anywhere for anyone and where individuals could enact the thoughts, feelings, and memories of present and past. As is abundantly clear, today perhaps more than ever, there is a hunger for experiences like playback—a need to see and feel, to hear and be heard, to knit chaotic fragments into a whole to make meaning and promote healing. Living as we do in a frighteningly impersonal world, with fragile families and chaotic communities, we find that playback, at its best, can give meaning and dignity to the teller and to those who watch—and listen. Although therapeutic, it is not therapy or psychodrama or shamanism, although it incorporates aspects of each. Private stories become public, and, through playback, the tellers and the listeners share an educational/therapeutic/artistic experience.

Even as the authors of those chapters tell us of their experiences, they also, in one way or another, grapple with fundamental questions: What is playback, its mission, its “widening scope,” and its limitations? How does one address the dynamic tension between process and product, especially when there is an audience of strangers who have paid a fee and expect to be entertained? In such a situation, the leaders stress the importance of strengthening trust and safety with the group and speak of the unavoidable conflicts between aesthetics and good theater on the one hand and therapeutic benefit and broadened social awareness on the other. Directly or indirectly, many offer their definition of playback. Some emphasize theater, others education, or a variant of therapy, psychodrama, or sociometry, or a mixture of all the above. One cannot help but be impressed by the seriousness of the work and the writers’ attempts to explain what they are doing and why.

As sometimes happens in a book with many contributors, the work is somewhat uneven. The chapters vary in writing style, format, length, and complexity. Because the authors have different backgrounds, they use key words and concepts differently; some portions of the text are powerfully written, others are difficult to follow. Nevertheless, certain themes emerge in a repetitive way, giving the flavor of the core principles of playback.

What is most impressive about the book is how seriously the authors take their work. The thought, effort, and principles of respect and care for others that underlie their work are admirable. In one way or another, the authors talk about listening with respect to the teller and listening for the fullness of the story as it is without “psychologizing” the content. To do any psychologizing, we are told, risks contaminating the content. Jozsef Paradi tells us, for example, that in working with dreams, it is best to resist the temptation to be concerned with the deeper layers of meaning and to avoid “interpretive enactment” (p. 40), a belief echoed by others. But whether the setting is Germany, Northern Ireland, or New Zealand, we realize that through playback, entrenched ideologies can confront each other and that individuals and com-

munities can be empowered with the possibility of healing old wounds because each is heard and treated respectfully.

Take just one example among many. In a recorded interview between Fox and Uschi Sperling, a German woman who came to the United States for training, Sperling spoke of growing up in Nazi Germany, where suppression or repression was necessary to protect oneself. One needed to be silent about what one heard, saw, and felt because people thought, “if you didn’t talk, it would go away” (p. 136). Among many powerful ideas in that short piece is a reminder that such experiences are therapeutic because shame is diminished. “Shame,” she said, “is bigger than fear. And when shame disappears, then you are free. And you do not forget it, but you do not feel the shame about what you went through and where you came from” (p. 144).

Gradually in the interview, we learn that Sperling’s stepfather was a Nazi officer who fled after the war to escape imprisonment. Then we learn that she recently met a biological sister, and she also discovered that her biological father, an engineer, designed rockets for Werner von Braun, working next to a concentration camp. “When it’s a story about Nazis in the family, it has to be about human beings, not stereotypes. The most terrible thing for us in my generation is to realize that the fathers whom we knew and loved and who were good in some ways also took part in evil. And they are one person” (p. 150).

Sperling reminds us that we all have two sides, that this is not just a Nazi theme. It is important to show the two sides because “the basic idea of playback is an aesthetic one, that beauty can hold the most difficult truth and make it possible for us to see. That’s what art can do. Stories live in our memories and our hearts” (p. 151). One can only imagine how it felt for this German woman to tell Fox, a Jew, about her memories, long buried in shame and pain. Of their discussion, Fox wrote, “Merely to dialogue about emerging from silence was a challenge that took all our strength.” And we, too, can learn and be strengthened from reading this fine book.

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How We See God and Why It Matters: A Multicultural View Through Children’s Drawings and Stories, by Robert J. Landy. 2001. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

The title of this book immediately impressed me, because I agree with it, especially the first part. As I have discussed in the fourth and latest edition of