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Peacebuilding and the Arts

The International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University

Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts *A Virtual Collection*

# Playback Theatre: A Creative Resource For Reconciliation

By Jenny Hutt and Bev Hosking Brandeis International Fellows 2003-2004

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# Authors‟ Profiles

## *Arts Practitioner*

**Bev Hosking** is a teacher of playback theatre and psychodrama and runs a practice as a supervisor, counselor and group facilitator. She is accredited as a role-trainer with the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association and trained at the Drama Action Centre in Sydney Australia. Bev is Executive Director of the Wellington Psychodrama Training Institute.

Bev lives in Wellington New Zealand where she founded her first playback theatre companyin 1981. Over the last 20 years she has led, conducted and performed with Wellington Playback Theatre Company and with Sydney Playback Theatre in Australia. More recently Bev has worked as a trainer and mentor to playback theatre companies in many parts of the world including New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, India, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Botswana, Angola and the USA. She is on the faculty at the School of Playback Theatre in New York and co-director of New Zealand’s annual Playback Theatre Summer School.

## *Documenter*

**Jenny Hutt** is an organizational development consultant and trainer. Her focus includes diversity, teams, leadership and human relations at work. She is accredited as a sociodramatist with the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association. She is on the teaching staff of the Australian College of Psychodrama and is currently President of the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association.

Jenny is from New Zealand and is based in Melbourne, Australia. She performed and conducted playback theatre for 10 years with Wellington Playback Theatre Company and with Living Stories Theatre Company in Melbourne. She has written a number of publications and was editor of the ANZPA professional journal from 1999-2002.

# Introduction

At a gathering of playback theatre companies in New Zealand in 1996 a Maori1 woman told a story about members of her tribe being denied access to their traditional land as they protested during the official commemoration of Waitangi Day2. Each year a powerful police presence keeps all except the selected officials and guests from the grounds of their meetinghouse, where the official ceremony takes place.

In playback theatre, real stories are told by members of the audience and „played back‟ in an immediate improvised performance. At this gathering the Maori woman told her story to an all-Pakeha3 audience, and then she watched as it was re-enacted by an all-Pakeha cast. The atmosphere in the room during this process was alive and intense.

1 Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand, of Polynesian origin.

2 Waitangi Day is a national holiday to mark the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, a historical document which Maori signed in good faith convinced that the intention was to protect their rights and sovereignty over Maori land. The failure to respect and honor this Treaty until quite recently has resulted in many grievances, divisions and inequities in New Zealand society.

While those present were familiar with stories about the Treaty of Waitangi from educational and news media sources, the actors and the musician re-enacted this story in a way that captured the centuries-old experience of grief, loss and separation. The teller was very satisfied with their rendition, and everyone in the room, audience and performers, was moved.

Bev Hosking was one of the actors and had been chosen to take the role of „the land‟. She reflects: “It was a profound experience being „the land‟. I could begin to feel something of the scale of the loss and separation – the people couldn’t get back to their land. I felt such strong grief. The telling and performing of that story allowed all of us who were involved to have a deep experience of the world of the teller, and a glimpse of Maori people’s relationship to the land. A member of the audience came up to me later and said „”This story is so familiar to me, but today I understood it for the first time. I really „got‟ it.”

Currently in New Zealand typical responses to such grievances are guilt, powerlessness and despair, often accompanied by impatience, defensiveness or minimizing. This telling allowed for a new relationship to occur around these painful historical issues. In the intensity of the moment Bev noticed something significant had happened. “*There was a very receptive quality in the group as this story was told and performed. I felt we had gone somewhere new: that in this moment we had found a new meeting point.We did not move away from the pain of the situation. We all felt the sense of loss and we could all grieve this together. I was very excited.”*

On reflection, the telling and re-enactment of this story was perhaps an example of what Bjorn Krondorfer (1995: 133) describes as “small moments of redemption, in which meaning emerges out of a sharing and listening to injurious memory”. It also illustrates Charles Villa Vicencio’s (2001:1) idea that “reconciliation is the creation of time and space in which to find new ways of dealing with past grievances”. For Bev: “*It gave me an inkling of what might be possible with Playback Theatre.”*

Since the experience described above, her discoveries as a teacher of playback theatre in many parts of the world have confirmed her initial hopes: that playback theatre can bring people together and offer a creative approach in fostering meaningful community dialogue. This paper examines playback theatre as a creative resource for community- building, particularly in situations where reconciliation is needed.

## *What is Reconciliation?*

There are many communities and nations in the world where the relationships between neighbors and citizens have been severely damaged by war, ethnic violence, dispossession, oppression and discrimination. In many of these settings reconciliation is needed.

Hizkias Assefa (1993:9) defines reconciliation as “the restoration of broken relationships or the coming together of those who have been alienated and separated from one another by conflict, to create a community again.”

He observes (Assefa, 2004 Brandeis Institute) that the process of reconciliation is not always possible or appropriate. For example, when one or both parties are unwilling to reconcile or when one party is unwilling to give up a major power imbalance to become equal partners in social and political repair.

3 Pakeha are New Zealanders of European origin.

Reconciliation can be slow and complex. As Villa-Vicencio (2001: 6) comments, it “is not a sudden act of moral insight. It is a process of learning. It is the beginning of a new way of living. It involves different attitudes towards, and relationships with, those from whom one often continues to be estranged. It is a relationship that places dialogue and reciprocity at the center of the struggle to be fully human, suggesting that people are incomplete to the extent that they are alienated from one another.”

Charles Villa-Vicencio (2001:2) warns against having a tight definition of reconciliation and reducing the process of reconciliation to a neat set of rules. He comments: “There are no simple „how to‟ steps involved. It includes serendipity, imagination, risk and the exploration of what is means to „start again‟. It involves grace. It is a celebration of the human spirit. It is about making what seems impossible possible. It is about the complex business of real people engaging one another in the quest for life. It is an art rather than a science.”

Adopting a similarly explorative and open-ended definition of reconciliation, Cynthia Cohen (2004) describes the processes and tasks that reconciliation can involve. She describes “a set of deep processes designed to transform relationships of hatred and mistrust into relationships of trust and trustworthiness. These processes involve former enemies acknowledging each other’s humanity, empathizing with each other’s suffering, addressing and redressing past injustice and sometimes expressing remorse, granting forgiveness and offering reparations. Reconciliation reflects a shift in attention away from blaming the other to taking responsibility for the attitudes and actions of one’s self and one’s own community” (Cohen, 2004: 6).

She suggests that reconciliation involves engagement in at least some of the following tasks, not necessarily taken in this order:

1. Appreciating each other’s humanity and respecting each other’s culture;
2. Telling and listening to each other’s stories and developing more complex narratives and more nuanced understandings of identity;
3. Acknowledging harms, telling truths and mourning losses;
4. Empathizing with each other’s suffering;
5. Acknowledging and redressing injustices;
6. Expressing remorse, repenting, apologizing; letting go of bitterness, forgiving;
7. Imagining and substantiating a new future; including agreements about how future conflicts will be engaged constructively (Cohen, 2004: 6).

This paper illustrates how playback theatre can contribute as people from divided communities engage in a number of these reconciliation processes and tasks.

## *What is Playback Theatre?*

As illustrated in the story above, playback theatre is a spontaneous improvised theatre involving a unique collaboration between performers and audience. A playback theatre troupe usually comprises several actors and one or two musicians. In addition, the performance is led and facilitated by a conductor who interacts with the audience, encouraging them to tell stories from their everyday lives. Someone from the audience tells a story 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.

Jonathan Fox4 originated playback theatre and developed it with a group of performers that included his partner, Jo Salas5. Their first playback theatre performance took place in New York in 1975. The genesis of playback theatre, its structure and operating values are described by Salas (1993), Fox (1994) and Fox and Dauber (eds.) (1999).

In 1980 Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas ran training workshops in Australia and New Zealand, stimulating the development of playback theatre companies in both countries. Today there are playback theatre companies in more than 30 countries of the world. Training is offered in situ to these groups by a number of experienced travelling teachers. In addition longer residential training courses are conducted in a number of locations including the USA and in New Zealand. Since 1990 playback theatre practitioners have built their links at international conferences organized by the International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) and by contributing to IPTN newsletters.

## *Scope of this Inquiry*

This paper presents the results of an inquiry into playback theatre as a resource for reconciliation conducted by the authors as Brandeis University international fellows.

Our inquiry does not address the peacemaking process and the political and social conditions affecting the timing and nature of reconciliation efforts. These are outside the scope of the paper and are addressed elsewhere by a number of peace-building practitioners, including Hizkias Assefa (1993).

Our paper reflects on playback theatre training and performances in a number of communities grappling with major social change and with the effects of protracted conflict and war.

It highlights work with social action theatre practitioners in India6 by Bev Hosking and Mary Good between 1998 and 2004. It describes the use of playback theatre by the Women’s Action Forum in the Pacific nation of Fiji in the aftermath of a military coup in 2000. It profiles playback theatre training conducted in two villages on islands of the South Pacific nation of Kiribati by Bev Hosking and Christian Penny7 during 1998-99. It also describes training led by Bev Hosking followed by performances in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Angola in May 2001.

4 Jonathan Fox is director the School of Playback Theatre in New Paltz, USA. He is the former artistic director of the original playback theatre company founded in 1975. In addition to his work teaching playback theatre around the world he is a psychodramatist and storyteller. Jonathan is the author of Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre (1994), editor of The Essential Moreno (1987) and co-editor of Gathering Voices: Essays on Playback Theatre (1999).

5 Jo Salas is a co-founder of playback theatre and the author of Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre (1993). She teaches playback theatre internationally and is the director of the Hudson River Playback Theatre company.

6 Mary Good is an artist, psychotherapist and playback theatre teacher based in Melbourne, Australia. She founded the Melbourne Playback Theatre Company in 1981and the Living Stories Theatre Company in 1994.

7 Christian Penny is the Head of Directing at Toi Whakaari, the New Zealand Drama School. He has performed with playback theatre companies in Sydney Australia and Auckland, New Zealand. He was co-founder and director of Theatre at Large, for whom he directed over 40 productions. Since 1998 he has co-led the New Zealand Playback Theatre Summer School .

Our inquiry explores how playback theatre can contribute to reconciliation by generating a communal setting where people can come into meaningful relationship and give expression to their deep concerns. Illustrations from a range of settings are presented and are located in shaded text boxes throughout the paper. Reflections on this work are complemented by references to relevant literature on reconciliation, theatre and group work.

We identify some of the essential factors which make these outcomes possible, also drawing from in-depth observations and reflections on training conducted at the New Zealand Playback Theatre Summer School held in January 2004.

Also included in our inquiry is a consideration of how playback theatre might be appropriately and ethically employed in reconciliation efforts given its distinctive nature and the challenges of its application in different settings.

# What Playback Theatre Can Contribute to Reconciliation

## *Opening up a Creative Communal Space*

A performance of playback theatre opens up a creative communal space larger than the family where neighbors and citizens can explore common concerns as a group or community. This is a significant space for the work of reconciliation. Jean Paul Lederach (1997:30) describes this work as creating a place of encounter, in which parties to a conflict can meet, focus on their relationship and share their perceptions, feelings, and experiences with one another, with the goal of creating new perceptions and a new shared experience.

For while playback theatre is entertaining and dramatically pleasing it is not just an entertainment experience or a social pastime. In contrast to conventional theatre the audience members engage with the conductor and the performing troupe and with other members of the audience as they tell stories from their everyday lives. It has the effect sought by Njabulo Ndebele (cited by Gobodo-Madikizela, 2004) who noted the value of making public spaces intimate in order to bring about a change in social relationships. Some of the stories told in playback theatre are brief snapshots of moments and others are longer more complex tales. Some are light, fleeting, and funny, and others are serious, difficult and painful. Playback theatre aims for a different and deeper level of engagement than other social or entertainment settings.

The structure of the playback theatre form helps make the development of a communal space possible. At each performance members of the audience „warm up‟ to the storytelling process by telling about fragments of their recent experience (“What was it like getting here today? What is one word to describe your week?”). These are played back to them immediately in brief, often energetic, but contained theatrical pieces called fluid sculptures which last no more than a minute. Little is demanded of the people who tell these moments.

Later in the performance once a sense of connection and an ease in telling are established, the conductor invites individuals to come forward to sit with her/him to tell a story from their lives. The story is told in response to specific questions from the conductor which help contain and shape the telling and assist the performers to take up the roles they are given. As the story is told, the teller is invited to choose which performer will take the part of the teller in the story and which actors will take the other significant roles. As audiences get to know these conventions, the playback theatre form becomes familiar territory, contributing to a sense of psychological safety. Telling these stories is voluntary for the audience. Nevertheless telling requires a willingness and sometimes courage to „put oneself on the map‟ and to brave the unpredictability of how your story will come out and how it will be „played back‟ by the performers.

The quality of the communal space generated by a playback theatre event can be viewed as something produced as part of a ritual process. A number of writers have built on the work of Victor Turner (1969, 1982) to describe the importance of ritual in reconciliation processes. Bjorn Krondorfer (1997) highlights communal intimacy called „communitas‟ which emerges in rituals processes. Participants put a high value on personal honesty, openness and lack of pretension and recognize the value of relating directly to others just as they present themselves in the here and now. Lisa Schirch (2001) sees rituals “holding together ambiguities, complexities, and paradoxes in a way rational, logical thought cannot.” Jonathan Fox (1999) and Diane Adderley (2004) write of the importance of the ritual element in playback theatre in creating conditions for the telling of stories in community settings.

The development of such a communal space was the subject of comment by a number of participants at the 2004 New Zealand Summer School. The space generated was unpressured, allowed for silence and offered a change in rhythm and a different sense of time to participants‟ everyday lives. These factors had a powerful effect, enabling people to bring forward their deeper stories.

## *Building Community Relationships*

The communal space generated in a playback theatre performance creates the context for building community relationships.

Reconciliation involves restoring and renewing relationships that have been characterized by hate and mistrust. The parties involved can feel trapped in a destructive and unsustainable dynamic. The aim of reconciliation is to transcend this impasse and involve former enemies and adversaries in new ways of engaging (Villa-Vicencio:2).

Playback theatre can contribute to reconciliation by building community relationships as people tell, listen to and witness each other’s stories and see these stories performed. In good playback theatre an open group culture is developed in which audience members feel interested and motivated to tell stories, and feel their stories are listened to respectfully and in an accepting way by the conductor, the performers and by fellow audience members. Playback practitioners develop strong listening and empathic skills which are used in their performing work and modeled in their interactions with tellers and the wider audience.

A playback theatre performance is often effective in evoking stories from different subgroups of a community. To date we know of several examples of playback being used directly for reconciliation with both factions of a divided community together at a playback performance.8 These will be described more fully as this working paper is developed. Among the playback theatre work researched in detail for this paper are performances with groups on one side of a conflict and training and performances involving a mix of individual performers from the different groups of a divided community. This work illustrates significant achievements in re-building community relationships for those who have suffered violence and oppression and in processing these traumatic events.

8 This includes playback theatre training conducted by Jonathan Fox in Burundi with mixed Hutu and Tutsi audiences (see Fox 2003). Separate performances for white people and people of color culminating in a joint performance for 250 people were run by Playback for Change in the United States (see Cohen, 2004). Other examples include Jewish/Muslim dialogue groups in New York, Hudson Valley and Toronto that have engaged playback theatre companies to perform. Playback theatre is also being used in relation to Middle East conflict and to improve German/Jewish relations. These warrant further exploration as this working paper is developed.

## *Creating a Safe Space for Feeling and Reflection*

Playback theatre is often performed in community meeting places and has a less formal „stage‟ than traditional theatre. However, there is a clear separation and delineation of the performing space and the audience, and a particular recognizable spatial configuration for the conductor, musician and actors and the teller as they come to the stage to tell their story.

The open, uncluttered stage is a projective space full of possibility. This encourages a flow of imagination, thoughts and memories in both audience members and performers, expanding their imaginative capacities. The spatial boundaries described above assist in the reduction of anxiety and support the development of spontaneity, creativity and courage.

There is a recognizable structure and shape to a playback theatre performance. For example there is a familiar movement from short enactments to longer ones. There is a repeated cycle of activity incorporating an invitation to tell, the telling of a story, a transition to the enactment signaled by the phrase “let’s watch”, the enactment and then an acknowledgment of the teller.

These structures of the stage and the performance, and the theatrical enactment of the story itself, contribute to the creation of aesthetic distance, which enables both feelings and reflections to be present at the same time. As Scheff (2001: 57) comments: “At aesthetic distance, the members of the audience become emotionally involved in the drama, but not to the point where they forget that they are also observers. Aesthetic distance may be defined as the simultaneous and equal experience of being both participant and observer.”

Playback theatre as a form creates a space for tellers and audience members to feel and also reflect on their experiences. This is an important asset in working with the painful and difficult events encountered in situations where reconciliation is needed.

## *Telling Personal Stories*

Playback theatre builds relationship through the process of telling, listening to and performing personal stories. When an audience member moves to tell a story it is a gesture of intimacy. The teller is inviting others into their world in an act of generosity, which in a suitable group climate, is likely to call forth generosity in the listeners.

Telling a story in playback theatre is, to some extent, a process of co-creation. The conductor’s role is to accompany the teller, assist in shaping the story and, in a spirit of inquiry, to open out some of its aspects. At different points in the telling, the conductor will ask questions such as: „what is a word to describe your neighbor? „How did the shopkeeper respond?‟ „What were you thinking at this time?‟ so that the actors and the audience have a good enough understanding of the story. This inquiry has the effect of inviting reflection, of moving between different perspectives and building the complexity of the narrative. For playback theatre seeks to reflect the complexity of life rather than to simplify it.

In communities or groups alienated from each other the discourse about their situation can be simplified, repetitive and unproductive. Weingarten (2003: 234) notes that “stories that maintain binary oppositions of us versus them, or good versus evil, are insufficiently complex, or accurate, to assist people in revisioning their relationships.”

In contrast, the storytelling in playback theatre is layered and has many dimensions. Multiple images, threads and themes are presented and those listening are free to find their own meaning and their own relationship with what is told. The relationship of the teller to their story is evident: we are not just relating to the story, but to the teller and the teller’s relationship with their story.

Personal stories evoke feelings and stimulate the imagination. In the process of telling, both reflection and irony “increase narrative imagination, complicate interpretive frames and multiply speaker and listener roles.” (Cobb, 2003:299) The enactment also enables multiple perspectives to be portrayed, as Brook (1987:15) comments: “Theatre has the potential- unknown in other art forms- of replacing a single viewpoint by a multitude of different visions.”

This complexity was the focus of one participant’s reflection after the New Zealand Playback Theatre Summer School in 2004. She wrote: “The framework that the personal story provides is such an illuminating one. In particular, the structure of a playback story seems naturally to draw forth the complexities and contradictions within an event or an issue, even more so when we begin to listen to the story with an ear for those complexities. The „answer‟ becomes far less important than the question, or more specifically, the questioning.”

Teresa von Sommaruga Howard (2003:9) reflects on her work in conducting dialogue in large groups: “I have learnt that it is only when each person speaks from their own unique experience that something shifts”.

Reflecting on a similar dynamic in playback theatre training and events, Bev Hosking comments: “In my work I have had numerous experiences where a shift from telling a grievance or injustice to telling a personal story has resulted in a noticeable increase in receptivity and creative responsiveness.”

## *Processing Difficult Events*

People experiencing trauma can become disconnected from themselves and isolated from others. Rebuilding emotional connections with oneself and one’s immediate community can be an important part of the social healing required for reconciliation. This is illustrated in the following description of a playback theatre training workshop in Angola9 which took place shortly after killings and kidnappings associated with the civil war at Caxito.

Early in the workshop participants‟ different responses to these events were explored using fluid sculptures. A range of feelings was expressed and diverse perspectives revealed, which generated interest and a feeling of support in the group.

This was particularly significant for one of the participants whose mother had been living in Caxito. Until this time he had not realized the seriousness of what had happened. On the fourth day of the workshop he told a story of having lost contact with her after the events there. He had been deeply concerned for her safety and was very relieved when she arrived at his place in the middle of the previous night, having walked the 50 kilometers to Luanda.

9 Bev Hosking ran playback theatre training in Angola in May 2001. This involved a five day training workshop followed by two days of performances in the internally displaced persons camps.

During these few days he had kept his worry to himself. The opportunity to tell his story and have it witnessed by his community of fellow actors, allowed him to begin to let himself feel both his fear and his relief about what had been happening.

The following example from India10 further illustrates how playback theatre can assist people to come out of isolation:

A playback group in India was invited to do performances in two border villages for the victims of police torture. The invitation came from a non-government organization (NGO) worried about the deep loss of morale amongst the villagers. The police had been torturing many people in these villages over a period of time in attempts to get information about the whereabouts of a well-known smuggler.

In the performance, a man came to the teller’s chair and began to tell his story. As he began to tell, he started weeping. He wept for some time and everyone in the audience also wept. It was an intense situation which made the conductor unsure whether they could continue the performance. The man told about his experience of being tortured by the police for no apparent reason as he did not have any relevant information. This was his story, but to some extent it was the story of everyone in the village. All of them had either been tortured themselves or were close to someone who had been. The story was extremely painful, the actors were very moved, and yet they managed to portray the story very sensitively.

The man had kept his head bowed throughout the telling of his story. There was a silence at the end of the enactment and slowly the man lifted his head. He looked up and out and said *“I think that now we have wept enough. Now I feel we can go forward and now for the first time I can begin to think about the education of my grandson”.*

There was a strongly positive response to the performance. The audience felt understood, respected and affirmed in their ability to have withstood extremely cruel situations and to hold on to some hope. They realized that they were no longer alone in their struggle.

## *Witnessing*

In playback theatre participants are invited to be present to their own experience and to the experiences of others in an open, non-judgmental manner. This process of witnessing is described by Felman and Laub (1992:70) as “a social process that rests on careful attention,

„listening‟.” This quality of listening creates a space that allows for a teller to be present to their own story and move further towards understanding and integrating their experience.

Weingarten (2003: 232) comments: “It has been my experience that compassionate witnessing first invites a telling of the story that allows people to express the states of vulnerability. This story is often one that has been silenced, blocked, denied or forbidden. As difficult as it is to put this story into words- and as painful as it is to feel the states of vulnerability – it is also the beginning of an antidote to the violence that inspired it.”

Occasionally audience members respond to a story with problem solving and advice giving, neither of which is helpful. Modeling of alternative responses by the conductor and the actors helps to reduce this tendency. At times the playback conductor may have to work hard to counter a culture of problem solving which can arise in situations where people feel urgent about achieving immediate change.

10 Bev Hosking and Mary Good have conducted playback theatre training in India with social action theatre practitioners during 6 out of 7 years between 1998-2004.

Witnessing occurs in the telling and listening to a story and in another form as the story is enacted. The use of movement, sound, music, dialogue and image can provide a powerful acknowledgement to the teller of the different dimensions of their story, as does the willingness and commitment of the performers to imagine and portray the teller’s world.

At times a story can become skewed when the performers‟ strong ideology blocks their capacity to listen. These skews, both subtle and obvious, can occur in any group or culture. They arise more often when a strong ideology is present and where the desire to teach comes to the fore. For this reason, playback practitioners must get to know their own values and biases and how these affect their capacity to listen. One of the biggest challenges of this work is to suspend judgment and witnessing requires it.

The collective witnessing of a story by a community builds connections between the teller and members of the audience, as well as between the audience members themselves. It has the effect of strengthening the teller’s relationship with the others present, and serves as a pathway to integrating or at times re-integrating an individual into their community.

This happens during a playback theatre event itself, and is very often built on in the time following the event when members of the audience may approach a teller. During this interaction they might affirm the teller’s courage in telling, share their responses, recount similar stories, or describe new insights into their own experiences as a result of listening to the teller’s story.

Witnessing contributes to social repair relevant to any community’s daily life as well as to processes of reconciliation when both the personal and social worlds have suffered significant disruption and fragmentation. As Weingarten (2003: 236) comments: “In the interplay among telling, listening and reflecting, rudimentary coherence, continuity and connection can form.

Repeated they can take hold. “

## *Working in the Here and Now*

Bev Hosking recounts: *“In Angola an incident occurred where we were able to apply playback theatre in an immediate situation very effectively. Part way through the performance someone in the audience had an epileptic fit. At first it was very unclear what was happening and everyone experienced some degree of fear, panic and shock. Nearly everyone, performers and audience members alike, fled screaming from the jango (compound). The young man recovered well and was taken outside to rest.*

*The question then was if and how to proceed. Everyone was still in shock and it seemed important at least to bring people together, even briefly, before we finished, and the actors and the conductor agreed to this. The conductor invited the audience to talk about their experience of what had just happened. The first person told of feeling confused and not knowing what was happening, the second told of having felt really shocked and frightened and the third person told of feeling worried and concerned for the man. The actors were quite courageous and did some wonderful work playing these back as fluid sculptures. The second fluid sculpture very accurately mirrored the experience of the shock and there was awkward laughter and murmurs of recognition in response. My own experience with this sculpture was feeling the „shock‟ leave my body.*

*Following this, everyone seemed to be able to relax and wanted the performance to continue. There was one last story and we finished with some singing and dancing. Although rather shocking in itself, this incident provided a very immediate experience of using playback theatre to workwith a tense and difficult moment in the life of this community.”*

Playback performers develop strong abilities to work in the here and now rather than delivering anything pre-planned. The capacity of the therapeutic group leader to work in the here and now is described in detail by Yalom (1998). In the example above, the playback teacher’s and conductor’s capacity and willingness to work in the here and now illustrates the immediacy with which this work can be done.

## *Fostering Social Inclusion*

During a playback theatre performance it is the job of the conductor to encourage a wide range of people from the audience to feel comfortable telling their stories. There is an underlying belief that each person’s experience is of value and that it is important to create a place for everyone to be heard and seen. The conductor seeks out many different voices in a community on the assumption that while their stories remain untold, the value or respect that a community grants each member is limited. The capacity to foster social inclusion is a sign of skillful group leadership. Appendix 1 describes in more detail how this is achieved.

In Kiribati11 a playback theatre training project complemented other training aimed at increasing the participation of women in decision making. It also aimed to test whether playback theatre could influence and empower women within their families and local communities. The level of social inclusion generated in the playback training and performances had a positive impact on more than the relationships between men and women. One participant in the group was marginalized in his community because of his sexual orientation. He was isolated in the group, and often on the receiving end of harsh jokes. The trainers worked hard to include him at different points in the workshop and to value what he had to contribute. They also worked to build a strong enough relationship with him and with the group as a whole in order to create the conditions conducive for him to tell a story. This was not such an easy task.

Bev reflects, *“When we finally invited him to tell a story he accepted and came to the teller’s chair with a vulnerability that was very poignant to witness. He told a story about building, then losing, a close friendship. His love for this friend was evident and there was a sense that perhaps for the first time he was able to say his friend’s name in public. As they listened, the group was able to go beyond their stereotyped view of this man and to see his humanity. They enacted his story with a great deal of tenderness, compassion and respect. This proved to be a turning point in the relationship between this man and the group. That evening we observed a warmer, more expressive connection between a number of the participants and this man. For the rest of our time together we noticed a marked decrease in people singling him out for ridicule.”*

11 In 1998-99 Bev Hosking and Christian Penny worked together in two villages of the South Pacific nation of Kiribati. They taught playback theatre as part of an overseas development project funded by the New Zealand government.

## *Expression of Strong Feelings*

Creating a community context for the telling of stories is a challenging and delicate process. Telling stories involves a move away from a rational, logical approach and opens out the imaginative and feeling dimensions of experience.

By its very nature reconciliation involves dealing with deep-seated and intense feelings relating to painful events, injustices and losses. To enable a movement away from adversarial and defensive positions, there needs to be a willingness to work with these rather than to close down the possibilities for expression. In his work with third generation Jews and Germans, Krondorfer (1995: 1) notes the need to be able to work with intense feelings and the importance of mourning in the reconciliation process. “To transform their strained relationships they must learn to trust each other and allow their long stored anger, guilt and pain to emerge.”

In playback theatre as the audience develops trust in the process and in the performers‟ capacity to listen and respond, strong feelings such as despair, shame, grief, sadness, anguish, fear and anger as well as delight, deep appreciation and joy can be expressed. As a participant in the 2004 New Zealand Summer School observed: “The allowing of the expression of feelings of hurt enabled me to tell my story.”

Both the playback structure itself and the efforts of the conductor combine to create an open and safe environment where these feelings can be held and contained. As feelings are expressed, participants may experience a catharsis and the release of new energy.

This is illustrated in the telling and witnessing of stories of caste oppression in India, which are also stories of courage, endurance, ingenuity and compassion. The process of storytelling and enactment builds courage, inner and outer strength, and increasing pride in a group within Indian society for whom daily survival has been, and still is, precarious.

During a training workshop for thirty field workers and activists working with issues of bonded labor12 a man came forward to tell a story:

*“I was seven years old and my brother was five years old. There was not enough food to eat. My father was a bonded laborer and worked for the master and he was provided with food. At night my mother would send me and my brother to meet my father as he went to get his evening meal, We had no other way of getting food. My father would get two bowls of food, rice and dahl, just enough food for one person, and he would share his food with us. This worked well for a while although my father would never get any extra food.*

*After a time the master saw what was happening, got angry and locked the gates to keep us out. However my brother and I would climb over the gates to meet up with our father. The master then began to set the dogs free at this time of the evening to keep us away. But we were so hungry that we still went to meet our father. Sometimes we were chased by the dogs and it was terrifying. One day when the dogs were loose, my brother fell over as he was running away and he was bitten. I could not help him. Every time I remember this, I lose all my strength.”*

12 Bonded labor is a system under which a person is bonded to provide labor to repay a loan. The person is often trapped into working for little or no pay for seven days a week , sometimes for the duration of their life. The value of their work is invariably greater than the original sum of money borrowed.

Two images from this story were enacted. The inhumanity expressed in the story was almost unbearable for the group to witness. The participants were highly distressed. It became apparent that many of them had stories of a similar nature that they had never told anyone. Following his story, there was an obvious need for others to tell their stories and to have them witnessed by their community. Bev reflects: “We decided that, for the rest of this session, telling was most important and we would not have enactments. So we sat together in a circle and listened to a number of very painful stories - stories of extreme poverty, hunger, shame, rejection and exclusion. The stories were terrible and the walls in the room seemed to bend just to hold them. There were many, many tears.

After the session finished there was a short time of quiet reflection. Then the participants began drumming, dancing vigorously, singing and playing. This went on for about twenty minutes. “

The Director of the non-government agency working on issues of bonded labor later reported that, although he had known some of these young people for 15 years, he had not heard these stories before. He also said that even though this was his work, he had never been quite so aware of the far-reaching effects of the poverty and degradation resulting from bonded labor. Listening to these stories had had a profound impact on him.

Following this session, many of the participants reported that they felt less burdened by their past and that the sharing of these stories freed up a lot of energy and created connections among them. They also said that they could feel their commitment to the work with bonded labor in a new way.

## *Generating New Perspectives*

Playback theatre can also have a mirroring effect for the teller and the audience. They often enjoy seeing themselves, their stories, and their culture brought to life on stage. This „mirroring‟ effect can affirm and strengthen both individual and community identity in contrast to the impact of selective images of a culture and sub-groups presented by the mainstream media. This can be a significant step in the process of community building for those affected by oppression and violence.

Playback theatre portrayals also help audiences see their experience from the outside, including what happened to them and things they did to others. This can be a significant development in the process of reconciliation. Telling and seeing enactments of each other’s stories can provide community members a new view or perspective on themselves, and can lead to questioning of accepted values and behavior. This is illustrated in the following description of a story told at a playback theatre training workshop held away from the participants‟ home locations:

*“Two months ago, the teller who was a community worker, was in a village. A woman had returned from the fields before her husband but rather than preparing lunch had visited her friends. The husband got annoyed about this and the wife became very defensive and took her temper out on her daughter. The small girl became frightened, went inside in a hurry to light the fire, but had an accident with the kerosene. The parents and other members of the community were right outside but could not easily get into the burning house to help as the girl had locked the door. By the time the parents and the community worker got into the house it was too late to save the girl.”*

Following the telling and enactment of this story the conductor inquired about what had happened to the mother. They were told that the people in the village had taken a very punitive attitude to her, that she had been ostracized in the village and that this was unlikely to change over the course of her lifetime.

As she spoke about this, one of the participants became very thoughtful and said that she suddenly became aware that this woman had already suffered enormously and had already been punished enough. She said that she now thought it would be good if she visited this woman and offered some support to her. Seeing the story performed and having the freedom and space to think about the event in a local context away from the village enabled a new perspective to emerge.

## *A Group-Centered Approach*

The group-centered approach adopted by Playback theatre is an approach to working with groups well established in the field of group psychotherapy: the group defines its own agenda rather than having this imposed by the group leader. Interactions between group members and the overt content of what they say are clues to interpreting the group’s central concerns and the conflicts they are experiencing.13

In this spirit, playback theatre brings a wide range of stories to life on the stage. It is a lively approach which can generate delight and enjoyment. It mirrors all aspects of life including funny, lighthearted, ludicrous moments, moments of beauty, moments of distress, moments of humanity and moments of inhumanity.

This contrasts significantly with more didactic or agenda-driven approaches to exploring social concerns where a more morally prescribed approach can limit the work and the range of expression. The use of personal story rather than a teaching approach opens up the possibilities of a new discourse.

When using a group-centered approach, the group itself sets the agenda.

Even a hint of judgment or political correctness will inhibit the range of stories told and narrow the frame of any exploration or dialogue. If that happens, participants only bring forward „socially acceptable‟ stories and avoid real engagement. While all stories are influenced by the cultural and social perspective, prejudices, partial views, and limited knowledge of the teller, there is a need, highlighted by Burkett (2003: 13) to keep the teller’s chair as an ideologically free and open space. This is essential to avoid playback theatre becoming “another conservative method of whitewashing difference which will only contribute to driving fears, hatreds, jealousies and paranoia further underground where it fuels possibilities of communal violence, destruction of processes and segregation mentalities.”

Acceptance of the stories that *are* told is a highly valued aspect of this approach. At times on training workshops this central value is revisited when practitioners express impatience or frustration that stories are not „deep‟ enough, not „political‟ or not „political enough‟.

Bev Hosking reflects, “*In my experience a community tells stories that they are interested in and that they are ready to tell and listen to. We are building and, at times, re-building trust through a process of telling. As playback theatre practitioners we need to be very sensitive to this.*

13 Writers on a group-centered approach include W.R. Bion, Dale Richard Buchanan, D.S. Whitacker and M.A. Lieberman (see bibliography).

*Some subjects or areas of concern may be approached rather indirectly at first, or alluded to in a story and this needs to be respected. This is of particular relevance when the practitioner comes from outside the culture. They must be aware of politically and/or socially sensitive areas where revealing too much could put the teller at some risk.*

*Avoidance of some areas is likely to occur and this also needs to be respected. In some situations avoidance might be „mirrored back‟ to the audience by the conductor and this may lead to an opening out into new areas of community concern. This mirroring needs to be done thoughtfully and with care. The practitioner needs to avoid thinking that they know what is good for the teller or the group. An important working principle for me is that the group chooses what to tell and when they tell.”*

A participant from the 2004 New Zealand Summer School describes her process of „warming up‟ to telling a story: *“What people said felt extremely honest - this influenced me to want to find a more honest place with what was coming forward in myself. Then as more people told, I was impressed with the diversity of views and experiences; and the clarity with which they were expressed. This was very satisfying and on a couple of occasions I wanted to tell so that I could be more a part of that.”*

While some performances may be oriented around an appointed theme, what gets told is determined by the individual teller and the group. One of the roles of the conductor or group leader is to reflect back what is emerging in the group and build on it. There is always a sense of movement through the stories, a shifting between “states of vulnerability and states of resilience” (Griffith and Griffith, 2002: 232) although this is very rarely a linear process. Bev Hosking comments: *“We have noticed that there has been a definite movement in the stories, at all our Summer Schools, from stories that are a little bit removed to stories that are more personal, from „victim‟ stories to stories of „agency‟ where shame, guilt and responsibility have begun to be acknowledged.”*

## *Capacity to Work Directly and Indirectly*

*In Kiribati playback theatre was used to work with the whole community and all its stories, rather than making the topic of enhancing women’s role in the community an explicit agenda item. Time after time during the playback theatre training both tellers of stories and the wider community were delighted, moved and challenged by seeing their world reflected through the enactment of their stories. As stories from women and men were told and performed, enough trust developed between the women and men in the group for some of the core stories and conflicts around gender to emerge. This happened privately in the workshop sessions and then more publicly in the performances.*

*While introducing the idea that playback theatre is a means to work directly with social themes, a brief but potent exploration of the theme of equality between women and men took place. It ended with a story illustrating changing values about the relationship between women and men in this community. A woman told of her relationship with her father, which involved criticism, an overuse of power and physical beating. Her father had told her that she was bound to marry a good-for-nothing man. In fact she married a fine man who involved her in decisions, shared his successes and difficulties with her and was respectful of her. The teller and the audience were deeply affected by the enactment of this story, finding it both enjoyable and thought-provoking.*

*Women aged from 14-56 years participated actively and equally as participants in the training workshops in group decision-making during the workshops and in leadership groups established in each community. They willingly told stories about their experiences, which made visible and acknowledged their contribution to community life. Impacts of the project were immediately observable in the day to day functioning of the participants. The women’s shyness and self-consciousness dropped away and their confidence in presenting themselves in front of the group increased noticeably.*

*The workshops provided an environment for modeling and enacting equality in the relationships between men and women. The trainers demonstrated an equal and respectful working partnership. Care was taken to ensure that women and men participated equally in group discussions and decision-making processes in an atmosphere of mutual respect.*

*The process of learning the basic skills of playback theatre in the training workshops created many opportunities for a growing understanding and strengthening of the relationships between women and men. They worked closely together and built on each other’s work in creating dramatic enactments. They regularly chose actors to play roles in their stories without reference to gender and there was little difficulty in playing roles of the opposite gender. This was a powerful approach to facilitating greater understanding of the world of the other. Stories of ordinary daily activities from the lives of both women and men were listened to without judgment and the dramatic enactments were received with appreciation and delight. New pictures and possibilities of relationships between women and men were beginning to be voiced and witnessed in the community.*

Story is itself to some degree an indirect communication. Stories are multi-faceted, allowing a listener many entry points to understanding or learning. Jonathan Fox notes that “in stories, the value, the meaning, often reveals itself only indirectly” (1999:119).

The work undertaken by Bev Hosking and Christian Penny in Kiribati described above illustrates how playback theatre can be used subtly and indirectly and well as directly on an area of social repair and development.

## *Capacity to Work with Ethnic Conflict*

Fiji has seen two coups in recent years, one in 1987 and one in 2000.

The population of Fiji comprises about 48% indigenous Fijians and 48% Indians who were brought to Fiji by the British between 1879-1916 as a workforce to harvest sugar. Both coups have involved expulsion of the democratically elected government, by the indigenous Fijian military.

During the May 2000 coup the Prime Minister and other Members of Parliament and government officials were held hostage for 56 days. Stimulated by these events, widespread racial tension and violence occurred between the indigenous Fijians and Indian communities in Fiji. Overnight divisions occurred between neighbors of different ethnicity who the day before had called each other „tavale‟ (brother).

In September of that year the Save the Children Fund asked the Women’s Action Forum to work with children in primary schools on a Post-Coup Trauma Counselling Project. This work was to specifically target children of 12-13 years of age. It had been identified that some participants in the 2000 coup had been 12-13yrs old at the time of the earlier 1987 coup. It was thought that during the first coup children of this age group had had experiences and developed attitudes that had led them to become involved in the recent coup**.** It was thought that if the effects of the recent coup on 12-13 year old children could be identified and worked with, some change could be possible. There was also an interest in developing a project to work creatively with the current conflicts at a grass-roots level so that on-going prejudice and discrimination could be minimized or avoided.

Initial investigation in schools explored the immediate impact of the recent coup and its aftermath on the children. An increase in violence, a lack of concentration, a lack of respect towards both students and teachers of different race, and an increase in racial tension were all widely reported.

WAC developed a theatre-based program in which they performed two scripted theatre pieces based on traditional stories with themes reflecting current areas of conflict - racism, jealousy, cheating and greed followed by playback theatre which invited the audience’s responses and stories. The schools themselves were to provide any on-going support for the children following the performances.

The WAC performing group comprised five indigenous Fijians and one European. This ethnic composition has strong implications for the work, particularly in the Indian schools and communities where it had been difficult to build enough trust for people to be willing to come forward to tell their stories. However the fact that this group of primarily ethnic Fijians was willing to listen to and enact their stories of injustice and discrimination proved to be a very positive beginning to a reparative process. This had a strong impact on some people. At times the actors were visibly affected by the stories. One woman wept while playing the role of an Indian woman being humiliated as she was forced to do something which was culturally very unacceptable. This had a strong affect on the audience.

The program was offered to schools in both Fijian and Indian communities separately and in some schools that had a mix of students from both these communities. In many instances adult members of the communities were present and participated by telling their stories.

In one town, during the initial stages of the project six months after the coup, the stories tended to be about panic, fear and violence. There was already a good degree of trust as many of the children already knew the theatre group from previous performances so they told their experiences readily. Many of the stories they told were quite shocking to everyone including the school staff and the performers. The teachers were often unaware of the extent of the violence that the children had been exposed to. The immediate effect was that the children experienced a great deal of relief and felt less isolated in being able to tell their stories and have them witnessed by their community.

Nine months after the coup, the project continued in schools located where the conflict had been extremely high. The performers noticed a shift in the themes of the stories. While stories about violence and the ensuing fear were still being told, the older children were now telling more reflective stories about their inner experience. They shared their feelings about what had happened and about what it had made them become. The stories were about tension, mistrust, separation from their old friends and their resulting grief about this.

Strong themes of injustice, the unfairness of some situations, and shame began to emerge in the stories. The other prominent thread through the stories was fighting: how fighting does not make us feel better and how, in fact, it often makes us feels worse. In one of the more recent performances, a young man from a local village told of being involved in a fight and feeling very bad afterwards. That a man told this story in front of a school and in front of other men from his village was considered very unusual and came as a big surprise to the WAC group. They saw it as a sign of hope that attitudes to violence might be beginning to change.

Even though very difficult and painful stories have been told in these performances, rather than escalate feelings of racial conflict, they have led to empathy and greater understanding. The performers report completing their performances with the feeling that they were leaving people as friends. People in the community were more friendly with each other and they also saw WAC as their friends. As they have met with people and listened to their stories, WAC have been surprised by the big-heartedness of the participants on both sides of the conflict and the interest in finding a way forward.