## *Engaging in a Social Dialogue*

In playback theatre the stories told offer a window to the concerns and interests of the group or community. As stories are told they seem to relate to each other by addressing a common theme, echoing a motif or element, and seeming to answer or offer an alternative perspective to the stories told earlier.14. The playback theatre performance or workshop becomes a form of social dialogue.

Martin Buber (1958) used „dialogue‟ to describe a mode of exchange among human beings in which there is a true turning to one another in full appreciation of the other, not as an object in a social function, but as a genuine being. A spirit of deep and respectful listening is generated in dialogue (Barbara Fritts, 1998).

In contrast to debate, dialogue is not about having or winning an argument, but involves suspending judgment and listening with an open mind. “It is based on the assumption that by sharing all points of view and exploring new possibilities we can learn from difference and create a common wisdom” (Fritts, 1998).

David Bohm (1996) says “In dialogue people learn to think together by surfacing their fundamental assumptions and developing insight into how they arose.” Dialogue involves the deep exploration of different world views by surfacing the experiences that have contributed to them. The outcome of dialogue is that we feel heard and we can hear each other. This is achieved by paying attention to our own assumptions and reactions and those of others with a relaxed, non-judgmental curiosity. In this sense dialogue is a journey of discovery. “The primary activity of dialogue is to see things as freshly and clearly as possible” (Bohm, 1996).

The group-centered approach of playback theatre allows for the deep exploration of group concerns. These emerge as a deep dialogue embedded in the stories which are told and enacted. The relevance for this in reconciliation work is well illustrated in the following series of stories about race relations which were told during a ten day residential playback theatre Summer School in New Zealand15 in 2002. The stories told start with an unexpected discovery by one group member that another participant speaks her language. They move on to a story of racial prejudice, a story of denied cultural origins and various stories about participating in, or being caught up in racial violence including helping neighbors or people at risk of violence. In some of these stories remorse and regret about these events are expressed.

A Chinese woman from Asia shrieks with surprise as a Melanesian woman from the Pacific speaks to her in Mandarin as they are performing together. It transpires that the Melanesian woman learned Mandarin in China where she spent two years as a student. There is wide-spread delight as the group witnesses this new and unexpected meeting.

14 Jonathon Fox has taught about this phenomenon and it is documented by Folma Hoesch as “The Red Thread: Storytelling as a Healing Process” in Fox and Dauber (1999).

15 The Playback Theatre Summer School is a residential training school held in New Zealand each year since 1998. It was initiated and is led by Bev Hosking and Christian Penny. The school is attended by playback theatre practitioners from many countries of the world.

The Chinese woman tells the first story of the workshop in which she mentions her fear about coming to New Zealand and spending ten days in a workshop with „amor‟ (Europeans). There is considerable tension in the room as the story is told. The issue is very confronting so early in the workshop and the group is not ready to face it directly. The conductor does not deal with it directly and the performers do not portray the fear and the prejudice in their enactment.

The woman later tells a story about her relationship with her Peranakan16 grandmother and her growing connection and interest in Peranakan culture. As her father had rejected this aspect of his cultural identity it was denied by her family as she grew up. The leaders invite the group to explore the values and world view of each character in the story, to understand some of the fears and beliefs contributing to the prejudice. The participants display courage, thoughtfulness and compassion. Their lack of judgement or blame is noticeable as they work to go beyond stereotypes. Their courage and the accompanying vulnerability is apparent to everyone.

As the workshop continues there is reflection on the stories that are being told. A number of stories have been about other people’s prejudice and about being on the receiving end of prejudice. The group is invited to consider how they might ask the audience to tell stories of their own prejudice. In a practice session group members grapple with the difficulty of doing this in an open-ended way, without teaching or preaching. A spirit of exploration appears essential, especially when there are strong feelings involved.

At the end of this session, building on this learning, a conductor invites the group to tell a story of a time when they themselves felt prejudiced towards someone else.

The person who comes to the teller’s chair is an indigenous Fijian woman married to an Indian Fijian man. She tells a story from the time of the coup in May 2000. *“It was quite exciting at first as there was something new and different happening. Then suddenly I realised that perhaps my husband was not safe and I begin to be very worried. My husband who is a taxi driver picked me up at work and took me home so I would be safe. I wanted him to come home and stay safe, but he was keen to continue to work as there were so many people trying to get out of the middle of the city. In the end I agreed that he would do one more job before going home, but I insisted on going with him. It was terrifyingly chaotic in the town with people looting and running in all directions. Shop windows being broken and Indian people getting beaten up. I realised that my husband was in real danger. I finally persuaded him to go home with me. We picked up our child and hid in our house feeling very frightened and unsure whether we were really safe.”*

There are three participants from Fiji in the workshop, and after a short break, the conductor makes an invitation for the other two to tell a story from this time of the 2000 coup. We continue an exploration of this event from different perspectives.

The next teller is an indigenous Fijian man. *“For weeks before the coup, the radio had been talking up a case against Indian Fijians. They were presenting a view of Indians taking over the businesses, employment and now the government. I came to accept this view. I was feeling angry and resentful about this situation and then I got caught up in the excitement generated by the coup and the temporary breakdown of the law and order.*

16 A Chinese person born in the Straits of Malaya

*Along with a couple of friends I wanted to do something to „get back‟ at the Indians. We decided to go a village some distance away from our own community where we would not be recognized. Here we spent time throwing stones and rocks at the houses of Indian villagers. This went on for some time until a group of Indians came towards us brandishing long cane knives and began chasing us. I was frightened for my life but in the end we got away okay.*

*However as we arrived back to the outskirts of our village, my friends and I saw an Indian man in the middle of the road up ahead. He was striking a cane knife on the surface of the road. We were again very frightened and we decided to attack him. I suddenly recognized this man as someone I knew quite well, but I was not able to tell my friends. They picked up a big rock and threw it at this man injuring him quite badly.*

*At this moment I suddenly woke up, I sort of came to my senses. This man was not some impersonal stereotype „Indian‟, he was a neighbor. I realized that I had been caught up in doing something, I felt terrible. I still feel badly about this, and I have not told this story to anyone.”*

The man is filled with grief as he watches the enactment and when he is able to speak afterwards he expresses regret and is very apologetic. *“I am so sorry about what happened. If only I could turn the clock back, if only I could undo what happened. He was a friend.”* His two colleagues from Fiji move from the audience to stand beside him.

After listening to and watching this story the group is quite shaken and is feeling how painful it is. We take some time to sit together and have some people bring forward their responses to the man and to his story. There is much appreciation of the teller and his courage to tell such a story. A number of people share about moments when they have done things they are not proud of. This includes a man from another Pacific nation. He is very distressed and tells about his experience during the earlier 1987 coup in Fiji when he was a young man studying in Suva. At that time he was involved in similar violent activities which he has continued to feel badly about since then. He has not told anyone about this and has not been able to come to terms with his actions. His regret and remorse is very evident. As with the earlier teller, the group is able to listen to this story with acceptance and compassion and do not move away from him.

Towards the end of this session someone begins to sing a song - a Bob Marley song that the Fijian man had taught earlier in the workshop: *„‟Peace, perfect peace. I long for peace in our neighbourhood*”.

The next teller is a European woman who has grown up in Fiji and has been a social activist for many years. She is full of feeling as she comes to the teller’s chair. She is distressed at what is happening in Fiji as it is so far away from her vision of how life could be in Fijian society. She is disturbed at the degree to which greed has become such a motivating force in Fiji society and she is despairing about this.

*“Dr Bavadra, an indigenous Fijian, was the Prime Minister ousted by the first coup in 1987. He was a brilliant man and a wonderful leader who was beginning to make some significant changes that were affecting life for many ordinary people in Fiji, particularly in the areas of health and education. He was a man with a big vision and there was a strong feeling of hope in the general community about what could be achieved with his leadership. I was and am still very upset by his undemocratic removal from office.*

*In the middle of the night of the 2001 coup, an Indian man whom I knew came to my place asking for shelter. He was an ex-prisoner and was running away from the riots and smashing of shops because he was afraid that he would be blamed and beaten by the police. He needed a place where he could feel safe. I was more than happy to give refuge to this man as some small contribution I could make. As I sheltered him, I realized that I just did not know how to respond to this latest coup and I felt an overwhelming grief and despair about the situation in Fiji.”*

After seeing her story the woman realized just how much she had lost hope and was struggling to hold on to a vision that is inclusive of the different groups that comprise Fijian society. She was also aware of the lack of any real leadership and anyone expressing a vision for the future for the country. She became more aware of the importance of good leadership and became thoughtful about ways her organization could respond to this.

The European woman chooses the same man from the Pacific nation to play the role of Dr Bavadra, the Prime Minister, in her story. He plays this role with great dignity and humanity. Following the enactment he is very moved and appreciates the experience of playing this role.

He goes on to tell a story of being caught in some riots in his home country and being able to take to safety a couple of foreigners who were at risk. He speaks of the fear of the chaos and his shy pride in having been able to help is visible. To some degree this is a counter to his earlier story of shame.

The next teller is a woman from another Pacific nation:

*“I was a student in Beijing at the time when the US planes dropped a bomb on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. My friend and I were going to the High Commission for Papua New Guinea, which also serves other Pacific nations. This building was close to the American embassy in Beijing. As we approached the High Commission we found ourselves in the middle of a very big, very angry demonstration against the actions of the US military.*

*Some protesters mistakenly thought we were African–Americans. They began to yell at us, push us around, treat us roughly and then threatened us with guns for quite a long time. We were terrified and we thought they were going to kill us. We were unable to make ourselves and our situation understood. Fortunately a Chinese man from the High Commission saw what was happening and managed to persuade the protestors that we were from the Pacific and not American and we were able to escape to the safety of the High Commission. I have never been so frightened in my life.”*

After witnessing this story, the Chinese woman from Asia is very upset and says to the woman from the Pacific nation: *“I am sorry this happened to you. Nobody should ever have to experience this. Even though I am not from China, I am very sorry that you were treated in this way by Chinese people.”*

This is the last story in the workshop and there is a profound feeling of satisfaction as the group sits together and reflects on the path they have travelled through these stories and the connections and interconnections that have emerged.

There is a greater awareness of the nature of prejudice and the fact that no one group is immune to the depersonalizing process involved. There is an awareness of the painful impact of prejudice on others and of the restricting experience of shame when we act in ways that are contrary to our deeper values. The telling and listening to such stories and allowing themselves to feel about them had the effect of assisting participants to be able to learn from our experience as well as freeing them to move on. It also seemed to generate a greater commitment to becoming conscious of their own attitudes and the effects of these on their behavior.

## *Developing the Abilities Needed for Reconciliation*

The capabilities and values intrinsic to playback theatre are relevant capacities for individuals and groups involved in reconciliation. This paper shows how conducting playback theatre performances can contribute to reconciliation efforts. Participation in playback theatre training is a significant capacity-building activity in its own right.

Such participation develops a range of abilities including attentive listening, the capacity to enter into the world of the other, receptivity and empathy. The work requires the capacity to „hold‟ complexity, enter into the unknown, allow vulnerability and accept strong feelings. Courage, spontaneity and flexibility are needed. Group leadership skills are also required. The latter are described in more detail by Clayton (1989, 1994) and by Clayton & Carter (2004) and some are highlighted in Appendix 1.

In training settings and in performance the core values of respect, relationship, acceptance, inclusion, enquiry, compassion, and creativity are at the heart of the work and have a positive modeling effect on the participants and the audience.

As playback theatre is essentially a theatre of listening, development of the capacity to listen is central. This involves listening to what is told and what is not told, to the spoken word and to the silences. There is a listening for the personal dimension in a story and also to the social, cultural and political resonances in what is told.

A participant at the New Zealand Summer School in 2004 reflects: *“Everyone, irrespective of language, was required to be more attentive to gesture, facial expression and mood; to try and tune in to the unspoken frequencies that were passing between us. I really valued being in an environment where the huge number of assumptions we make about what other people understand was always being called into question and tested.”*

This work of deep listening builds receptivity and empathy, which are further enhanced by the training in play and improvisation. In play we can imaginatively enter the world of the other or of many others. This involves a process of discovery and understanding. We begin to move from our own stereotypes and frames of reference to see the world from different perspectives. *“Play makes us to recognize that any particular referential perspective is relative”* (Ruud, 1995:94). “Play allows a shift of rules, a shift between different positions” (Etchells, 1995 cited in Murray, 2003).

However the movement towards viewing the world from the position of the other is not always easy or straightforward to develop, especially when working with significant differences. Clayton (1993:60) notes the challenges of bringing depth to the enactment of the roles of people who have a very different value system, but asserts that even a superficial enactment brings about an embryonic development that can be built on at a later stage.

In play there is a continual shifting between initiating and following, and this requires both flexibility and co-operation. A basic level of trust is required and the work also builds trust. Saying „yes‟ to someone else’s initiative allows them to take us into the unknown and into the new. This builds courage and daring in the face of not-knowing,

The capacities described here help playback theatre practitioners relate to the life experiences of a wide range of people. However using playback theatre in some reconciliation contexts requires specific understanding of the effects of trauma on individuals and communities. Additional training and collaboration with agencies which have this understanding is recommended.

Discussion of Applications and Challenges

## *Current Applications Relevant to Reconciliation*

This paper describes playback theatre training events and performances at which a range of group and community concerns have been explored. As illustrated, these concerns have included the effects of ethnic violence, war, social conflict, oppression and discrimination.

Mostly the work described in detail in this paper was not initiated with the specific focus or intention to work towards reconciliation, although sometimes it did have related social development aims. Exceptions to this include the playback theatre performances for children conducted in Fiji after the military coup in 2000 and work in Burundi and the USA referred to in footnote 8.

The paper portrays playback theatre events in a range of settings, each offering particular advantages and challenges. Some are conducted in situ in the village, locality or country of the performing troupe, while others take place at international training events and conferences. As we consider how playback theatre might be further used in reconciliation efforts, it is worth exploring what each of these settings makes possible.

Working in Situ

Work in situ with local performers (such as the work in Kiribati, India, Angola and Fiji) offers several advantages for the local participants.

People enjoy seeing themselves, their stories, and their culture brought to life on stage by members of their own community. It has a mirroring affect that can be very affirming and which strengthens community identity.

Working in situ, people can use their own language, their own cultural idiom and forms of expression. This can be freeing, validating and strengthening. In Kiribati participants were encouraged to work with their strength as singers. A small group of 5-6 singers accompanied the actors, in contrast to the one or two musicians more usual in playback theatre.

Occasionally working in situ can increase the difficulty for participants of „standing in the shoes‟ of some people who are highly marginalized in their own community. This can arise from ignorance, prejudice and at times because of previous hurts, or anger at the person or group concerned. However, over time this can change, as enough trust is built for tellers from the marginalized sub-groups to come forward. As someone tells a story this can also shift a commonly held view of a member of the community.

Coming from outside to work in a different cultural context, with people in their own locality, poses challenges for the playback theatre practitioner. As an outsider they must invest more energy in absorbing and relating to local cultural norms and circumstances. Because there are many things they will not understand an attitude of genuine interest and enquiry is needed. It is important to realise that there are some things an outsider will not be invited to understand.

The work of playback theatre requires practitioners, particularly the conductor, to adopt an attitude of genuine interest and enquiry. Coming from outside presents numerous opportunities for practitioners to accept not-knowing and to learn in a rich way through the immediate relationships built and the stories told. Peter Brook (2000: 112) observes that theatre becomes “life in a more concentrated form” if there is no sense of an act of charity, only the feeling that one group of human beings wants to make contact with the other.

Their role as an outsider can also make some things possible. The outsider has more distance, is not one of the players in the bigger on-going story and therefore does not so easily get caught up in the content and emotions of the stories told. An outside facilitator can „hold‟ a community and enable some stories to be told that might not otherwise be told. Examples of this include the stories told in India of the hungry children chased by the landlord’s dogs and of torture by the local police.

Being an outsider also means the visiting teacher may be less constrained by cultural norms and is able to stimulate the group’s creativity in unexpected ways. This is illustrated in Bev Hosking’s early work with playback theatre in Singapore. She encouraged participants from Chinese, Indian and Malay cultural backgrounds to tell and to listen to each other’s stories in English, but perform speaking their first languages on stage. This request went against the norm in Singapore where English is the common language and is required in mixed groups. As they took up Bev’s suggestion, the group found that using words was no longer their primary method of communication. Suddenly they woke up to a new potential and their delight and interest was evident.

*“It seems to me that they began to experience each other in fresh ways and I observed a new quality in their relationships with each other, one where they acknowledged their differences”,says Bev. “In this situation my naivety as an outsider had a positive outcome. I stumbled into an area that was politically sensitive. But in the spirit of play I was able to work with it and in fact opened out a new area of discovery. As an outsider I was not so caught in the ongoing cultural tensions and had a certain freedom and room to move. However, generally speaking caution and sensitivity are needed in this sort of situation.”*

While playback theatre seems simple, the component skills take a long time to develop and integrate. For this reason in situ playback theatre training requires follow-up training and support, especially in new contexts where it is unclear where and how playback theatre will „land‟ culturally. For example, the work in the Pacific nation of Kiribati in 1998-99 involved two visits, eight months apart.

*“Quite a lot of the playback theatre forms and framework were lost in the time between our visits so we had to revisit the basics. A variation on the playback theatre form had emerged which looked more like the social action theatre that delivers a message or teaches something, a form with which they were more familiar. These groupsneeded more regular mentoring in the early phase than they received. “*

Working in International Settings

There is also considerable value in playback theatre practitioners participating in international training events and conferences. In these settings mixed groups can help to build understanding across cultures and stimulate significant learning. This is illustrated in the following story about an Indian participant’s experiences at an international playback theatre conference:

He attended a workshop session at which a German man told a story about the family secrets surrounding his uncle’s involvement with the SS Nazis in the Second World War. This story was played back very powerfully by a group of Swiss, French, Hungarian, Australian and NZ actors, two of whom were Jewish. The Indian man accompanied them as the musician. This performance was a strong experience for everyone in the room and the group’s courage in listening and enacting this story was impressive.

The next day the man told Bev that he was extremely surprised by what had happened. He was amazed that a German man would tell such a story and that the Jewish participants were willing to listen to and play in this story. He said that he had never imagined that this could be possible.

He also said that as a result of this experience, for the first time in his life he was able to imagine the possibility of a so-called high-caste person and a so-called low-caste person being in the same room together and listening to each other’s stories. Before then he had never pictured this: it was beyond anything he had ever imagined. Since that time he has taken forward this vision, by creating and now working with a mixed caste group in India.

In contrast to being an outsider providing training in other countries, at international training events at home such as the New Zealand Playback Theatre Summer School, the group leaders can adopt the role of host. This includes attending to the needs of the participants at many different levels including leading meaningful rituals of welcome, thanksgiving and farewell, providing food and accommodation and giving personal attention, support and even guidance on matters such as access to the local mosque.

A significant element of the New Zealand Summer School is the use of Maori powhiri (greeting) and poroporoaki (farewell) ceremonies conducted in Maori language led by Christian Penny and other participants of Maori descent with participation by others using the English or other languages. These rituals which are engaging and moving events for the participants involved.

The New Zealand Summer School has now run for 6 consecutive years, with a number of participants returning more than once. This has enabled the work to evolve and deepen over time as relationships have developed and grown stronger.

Further Considerations

## *Limited Reach*

Playback theatre is often performed for 20-100 audience members and sometimes up to 400 or more**.** Playback theatre aims to develop connections within the audience and between the audience and the performers. Its community-building nature means it is not well suited for a mass audience, such as those seen at a music concert or a football game. Because of its intimate nature it simply does not have the „reach‟ of many other art forms and this may limit its efficacy in reconciliation efforts.

## *Time Commitment*

Much of the playback theatre training described in this paper has developed as the result of a commitment to building relationships over time, on-going learning by the performers and ongoing refinement of teaching practice. This is illustrated by the work conducted in India:

Bev comments: *“The fact that we visited more than once was very meaningful to the groups we worked with. It substantially strengthened the relationships and the level of trust. We were very surprised and honored that they would share such personal and painful stories with us.”*

*“Going back a second time, we could address difficulties that had arisen using playback theatre in their particular context. For example, different groups had been doing one-off performances that they felt had a limited value for social change. We worked with them to develop thinking about a project approach that involved a series of performances where they could build a relationship with some groups, organizations or villages over time. As a good level of trust developed, more challenging, painful and difficult-to-tell stories could be told.”*

The work in other settings has built over several years and has always involved workshops of several days duration. Generally the climate that can be built in a group living and training together over several days contrasts dramatically with the climate which can be developed in a one-off playback theatre performance of 1-2 hours duration. An exception to this is the performance for the victims of torture in India where very deep and intense stories were shared in the context of limited relationships with the performing group.

Similarly, the New Zealand Summer School has developed over six years with intensive planning, input and review by the leaders. The annual event involves an investment of 10 workshop days for the participants. It is over such a sizeable time frame that the work, such as that described in the section on social dialogue, is able to unfold as it does.

## *Working across Cultural Differences*

There can be significant challenges in conducting playback theatre across cultural differences when the performers are from a different culture than the audience.

If the performers have insufficient cultural awareness of those in their audience, the performance can „miss‟ portraying their experiences in a recognizable way. Important aspects of a culture or situation may not be understood, and there is a risk that the teller’s experience may be trivialized.

Ignorance of certain cultural norms can cause offence or make a story difficult to watch. However, one of the conventions of playback theatre is that after the story is enacted, the conductor will check in with the teller to see that there has been an accurate enough portrayal of their story. If the conductor can see discomfort in the teller they may invite the teller to offer a correction. This can be done during a performance to help address this issue. In a longer workshop setting, these gaps in understanding can be corrected, worked with, and wonderful learning can occur. In this way the training together also builds greater understanding across differences and across cultures.

It is striking that playback theatre is now being used in many countries with little need for alteration to its basic structure and form which is simple and clear. It appears to be able to incorporate elements from different cultures without losing any of its power. An example of this is in New Zealand where, on a number of occasions, traditional Maori protocol has been an integral part of playback theatre events and has added considerable depth and meaning to the experience.

Within the form itself, performers can use their own language and there is plenty of room for variation in aesthetics, and modes of expression. For example, in India fabric is used primarily to assist with characterization while the Japanese use fabric for creating metaphor or essence. In Kiribati the performers were encouraged to incorporate singing, which was a highly developed ability in that culture. Increasing the number of musicians brought the role of musician to life in that cultural context.

In certain cross-cultural contexts, it may be necessary to create particular conditions that will encourage some tellers to bring forward their stories. In a training workshop in New Zealand, a small group of Maori women asked if playback theatre could be adapted so they could feel more confident to tell their stories:

*“They asked if they could choose the actors for their stories from the audience rather than having to choose from a group of actors already on stage. They wanted to have the freedom to choose the actors who they most trusted to capture their world. The leaders and the group willingly accepted this to make it easier for these women to tell their stories. A very deep and powerful story of cruelty, dispossession and loss was told by one of the Maori women and enacted beautifully and respectfully by the two other Maori women and those Pakeha actors who were chosen”. Bev comments, “In my experience it is very uncommon for such a story to be told in a mixed group in New Zealand. The Summer School is the other place I have seen that happen.”*

Reaching across cultural differences can be very demanding when the performers are from a dominant culture and the audience or teller is from a group which has suffered oppression from that group. People from marginalized or oppressed sub-groups may prefer to tell their stories in their own language and to be able to identify themselves with the actors on stage rather than have their experience mediated by the mainstream culture/oppressing group. This is especially important when trust between cultural groups is minimal. For example, in one playback theatre performance in New Zealand a Maori participant did not want to choose Pakeha actors to play the part of him or his ancestors, as his experience of historical and current injustices was too strong and immediate to be set aside.

In contrast, at times the challenges of a deep cultural divide between the performers and the audience has been overcome. For example, members of the Fijian Indian community were very moved to see their stories of being discriminated against and attackedunderstood and enacted so fully by the WAC performing group which comprised five indigenous Fijians (the perpetrating group) and one European.

Conducting playback theatre events with mixed language groups within a particular society also poses challenges. For example, at a playback theatre event in southern India in 2004, the participants from three language groups had no common language they all felt at ease with17. The group’s strong commitment to inclusion meant that for four days all instructions, stories and presentations were translated into Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and English. This was done using interpreters from the group and without the assistance of modern technology. The level of goodwill and patience with this process was remarkable. At times artistic elements of performance were compromised by the slower pace and loss of flow. However, the value of ensuring that everyone could tell stories and be listened to, and the strong sense of community that resulted, more than made up for this.

17 In India people in different states speak different languages. While it is compulsory to learn Hindi at school this is not a language of choice.

## *Risks of Secondary Dramatization*

At playback theatre performances held in communities where people have suffered from racism, ethnic violence and civil war, traumatic stories are likely to be told. These stories can be deeply distressing to the performers and working with them is challenging for even the most experienced practitioners. Taking on some roles and entering the experience of the other can affect the performers profoundly. Playback theatre companies often find they need to take time with each other immediately after, and in the period following performances, to share their responses to having heard and performed these stories. It is also important that members of performing groups take opportunities to tell their own stories during their regular rehearsals.

When performers have themselves experienced traumatic life events, their enactment of disturbing stories in playback theatre can pose a risk to their emotional wellbeing. For example, it became apparent for the WAC group in Fiji, that their playback theatre work sometimes surfaced memories of trauma from their own lives that had only partially been resolved. Regular group sessions with an outside facilitator were recommended to help the group de-brief after listening to and working with difficult stories. Individual counseling sessions as a safe, confidential and productive means of working with these issues were also recommended. The unavailability of this kind of support for group members produced an ongoing high level of stress in the life of the group and at times contributed to some members deciding to leave. More recently the group has received considerable assistance with the issue of secondary dramatization and has invested time and care into their own healing processes.

Similarly in Angola, the non-government organization which initiated the playback theatre training was aware of the dangers of secondary dramatization. They decided not to continue the playback theatre work because of the intensity of the stories and the lack of psychological and emotional support for the group.

## *Levels of Competency*

The practitioners portrayed in this chapter are very experienced and highly competent in their field. Bev Hosking, Christian Penny and Mary Good all trained in drama, psychodrama and playback theatre. Bev and Mary work respectively, as a counselor and psychotherapist. All three have performed in Playback Theatre companies. Mary and Bev have both founded and directed playback theatre companies. All have been involved in training people in other playback theatre companies. The maturity of the leadership they provide is considerable. The number of invitations to run playback theatre training in different countries of the world is an indication of how their experience and set of abilities is valued.

There are many component skills in playback theatre, including performance and conducting skills. Other abilities underpinning the work profiled here include group work skills, a high level of spontaneity, the capacity to help others learn, a deep appreciation for cultural differences, a strong vision for what playback theatre can bring forth and the personal qualities and interpersonal strengths to realize that vision. These abilities have been developed over a number of decades and do not come easily, as many an aspiring conductor or playback theatre company director can attest.

It is important to note that not all playback theatre practitioners are motivated by the same interests. Some are more oriented to providing entertainment, with a primary focus on the artistic elements in theatre and music, while others are oriented to storytelling as a form of individual therapy. Even where there is an interest in addressing social issues, practitioners express realistic apprehensions about how to handle the complexity and responsibility of this work and their own emotional response to it. These are important ethical considerations relevant to all playback theatre practitioners.

Conclusions

Playback theatre originated in the USA nearly 30 years ago. Since then it has been readily adopted in a wide range of cultural settings. Most of this development has happened through the efforts of local performers stimulated by input from visiting teachers and also by cultural exchange at international training and conferences.

This form of theatre aims to hear and play back the stories of ordinary people. It enables many things to happen at once, including storytelling, artistic performance and engagement as a community. This engagement includes at times simply meeting each other; telling and learning of each other’s experiences; having these mirrored back; and experiencing and expressing the range of feelings related to these experiences.

The extent to which playback theatre is used for simple entertainment, dramatic satisfaction, individual therapy or community building varies, depending on the interests and abilities of those in the performing groups. The illustrations presented in this paper particularly amplify how playback theatre has been applied to foster social development and social repair, which is relevant to its application in reconciliation.

Playback theatre offers a creative option for reconciliation efforts. It opens up a safe, reflective and creative communal space for engagement between neighbors and fellow citizens. It adopts an open-minded approach that engages a group or community with their own current concerns.

While it is not agenda-driven and it does not aim to deliver a certain message, it does demonstrate particular attitudes to life which are relevant to reconciliation. These include open inquiry, respect for humanity and engagement with a wide range of people and perspectives.

In this paper we have illustrated what playback theatre can bring to reconciliation efforts. It helps communities build relationships, process difficult events and engage in a deep dialogue about areas of concern. It has group therapeutic effects in breaking down isolation, allowing for the expression and recognition of deep feelings and generating new understanding between people and fresh perspectives on difficult situations. It can be used to explore community concerns directly and indirectly, with a focus on the past, the present, the future and the „here and now‟ experience of the audience.

Participation in playback theatre training develops a range of values and abilities relevant to reconciliation, including attentive listening, entering into the world of the other, empathy, spontaneity, flexibility and group leadership. Exposure to these capacities over time is likely to have a positive modeling affect on audiences.

Playback theatre can increase cross-cultural understanding and bring about social repair as audience members see their experiences recognized and portrayed accurately and sensitively by those from ethnic or social groups from whom they have been alienated.

However, playback theatre has some inherent limitations. It cannot reach a mass audience as can community radio or large music concerts, for example. When used to explore the experiences of people in divided communities the cultural origins of the performers can create obstacles and blind spots. It is still relatively untested in most settings as a way of working directly with combined audiences of ethnic or social groups deeply alienated from each other or in significant conflict.

But when it comes to reconciliation, some of playback theatre’s limitations are also its strengths. Development of the abilities to lead and perform playback theatre to explore deep group concerns requires considerable investment of time, care and skill. The outcomes described in this paper are not easily replicated in short-term work or by less experienced practitioners. Similarly, the working relationships between members of performing troupes and their audiences require significant commitment.

Playback theatre is a creative resource for community-building which produces outcomes highly relevant to reconciliation. Because of the complexity of reconciliation work, we recommend it is conducted by experienced practitioners, with the group leadership skills described in this paper. We also recommend that the timing and appropriateness of its use is assessed in collaboration with colleagues from peace-building and community-building agencies, so that playback theatre can take its place in a range of coordinated reconciliation initiatives.

Establishing the strong relationships and the range of capabilities to do this work well are essential conditions for using playback theatre in reconciliation and fulfilling the promise it holds.

Appendix 1: Highlights of Playback Theatre Training

The field research for this paper involved documentation of the New Zealand Playback Theatre Summer School held in January 2004. Elements of the School are highlighted here to give the reader an insight into how this playback theatre training is conducted and some of the essential factors involved in its success.

## *Play: An Essential Ingredient*

The Summer School involves a lot of play and laughter, things not readily associated with the serious business of social dialogue and reconciliation. While the play helps the performers warm up physically, it aims for much more: to develop the abilities essential for good improvisational theatre.

Games of musical chairs, catch, the winking game (moving around the room winking at everyone you pass) and hug tag (you hug another person to be „saved‟ from being tagged) are building the performers‟ capacities for immediacy and alertness to each other in the „here and now‟. Shyness and inhibitions about meeting and touching new people are overcome. As group members are thrown together in new combinations, their reliance on the comfort of their familiar subgroup is eroded in favor of easy participation with an ever-changing set of fellow performers.

Playful activities are interspersed with vocal warm-ups, vocal improvisations in pairs, Maori songs (waiata), Maori stick games (which involve singing and throwing in unison), physical stretches, loosening each other up through massage, and slowly moving around in pairs giving and taking each other’s weight. As they play there is growing physical and emotional ease and greater expressiveness.

Some games clearly hone the performers‟ abilities to improvise. For example, performers are invited to pair up to play the „yes…and‟ game, demonstrated first by Bev and Christian:

Christian is making the physical motions of digging a hole.

Bev: “That’s a great hole!”

Christian: “Yes, I’m building a washing line for my family!” Bev: “I imagine it will be a long one.”

Christian: “Yes and it will catch the North sun.”

Bev: “I bet Katherine is really pleased about that!”

Christian: Yes, she’s so pleased she is taking me out to dinner.” Bev: No doubt you will be on your best behavior.”

Christian: Yes, and I will have a present for her.”

While they play this game the performers have varying flow and ease in responding immediately to keep generating a „story‟ together, which has life, movement and coherence.

As they play, saying yes to someone else’s initiative involves accepting being taken into new unknown territory. This process builds courage and daring in the face of not-knowing.

Of the two workshop leaders, it is Christian who leads these activities at the Summer School and he does so with a distinctive personal authority both nurturing and provocative. At the nurturing end of the spectrum, he introduces a game by asking: “R., did you play musical chairs when you were a child?” After the first round of the game he encourages participants to voice what he has seen them portray: “As you farewell your first dance partner, you say: „I was a little bit shy, but I felt supported by you‟”. And after the second dance partner “You know, magically with you I feel even more confident”.

At his more provocative, Christian flouts political correctness and sentimentality. He is playing too.

He asks the group: “When you think of dancing, who looks like a good partner?” Someone replies “You!” He responds: “You can’t have me; otherwise other people will be jealous. it’s not good to make the Japanese jealous!”

Participants in competitive dancing games are teased: “You used to be so good last Summer School, S., but G. wasn’t there then!” and “This is a warning A., you can be eliminated for being too boring!” “G. you have been eliminated for doing a turkey!” When the last two contenders in a game of musical chairs avoid sitting in the chair to make one the winner and the other the loser, he teases them warmly about their politeness.

This provocative teasing is tempered with an eye for workable norms about physical safety. “Be careful, E. (a North American), if you are with someone from Australasia. We are mad for rugby and we run for the chair!” And to the group: “If you push or elbow I will send you off!”

Each game is a simulation of sorts, developing key abilities needed on the stage in improvisational theatre including expressiveness, un-self-consciousness, accepting and building on „offers‟ by other performers, being attuned to the whole group, responsiveness and daring.

Games of increasing difficulty are played as the School progresses including a trust game with all participants running around until, during a time designated by Christian, one of them decides to fall and the others have to immediately move to catch him/her. This requires the faller to make a clear „offer‟ and to create a space before they fall and it requires the catchers to move towards a fall as soon as they sense it happening. This requires the high caliber attentiveness of the Playback ensemble performing on stage.

Towards the end of the Summer School an extraordinary game of skipping takes place. Individuals are invited to skip through a large rope turned by Bev and Christian. Then pairs are invited to skip through together. By the end of the game the group is skipping as a large group of 16, which takes considerable spontaneous co-ordination!

The link between play and improvisation skills is apparent as the Summer School progresses. As you might expect, the quality of performing increases significantly over the ten days. But it seems to have more to do with a significant shift in the individuals than mere skills training, playful as it is. The people who came to this workshop look transformed at the end. They look much more alive, engaged with each other and they have a „glow‟ on.

It is here that the spontaneity effect familiar to those who have participated in psychodrama or spontaneity training is evident. Both leaders are trained in psychodrama a group psychotherapy method originated by Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974).18 It is clear that the emphasis on play at the Summer School is not just an instrumental skill-building process. Rather, it reflects a commitment to the development of spontaneity – in the individuals and in the functioning of the whole group.

Defined from a psychodramatic perspective, spontaneity goes well beyond its street meaning as somewhat free-wheeling, impulsive behavior. Elements of spontaneity valued in psychodrama include adequacy, warming up, vitality, originality, the ability to move between reality and fantasy and back again, and creativity.

To illustrate two of these: *adequacy* is the form of spontaneity which enables individuals to adapt, move and respond flexibly to new situations. And the ability to *warm up* to the roles required in particular situations – to the appropriate thinking, feeling and actions – is also a form of spontaneity. If we enter into a situation „cold‟ we do not function adequately. When we „warm up‟ fully to a particular moment in a particular situation, then we are said to be in a spontaneity state. In this state the creative genius awakens, allowing new perceptions and new solutions to emerge into our consciousness (Clayton 1989: 67-68).

## *Building an Open Group Culture*

The Summer School is quite a journey for the participants. In the workshop there are periods of arriving, catching up with themselves and presenting themselves to others. They bring forward their own experiences and stories and listen and respond to those of others. All the while they are doing the groundwork as performers, putting themselves forward to perform and being coached on their work. By journey’s end there is a strong sense of both personal accomplishment and social relationship. Participants comment that they could not have achieved what they have without being „held‟ by the others. These comments, made with feeling, are not sentimental. They reflect something of the distinctive group culture built here.

One of the foundations of this group culture is *social inclusion.* In pursuit of this outcome, the leaders make a range of interventions.

The group comprises participants from many language groups. In the first introductions, warm-up activities and Playback performing, participants are invited to use their own language whether or not it is understood by others. Rather than causing confusion in the listener it seems to engender a different kind of attentiveness to the person, their body language and their being. In the speaker there is ease, flow, self-acceptance. Different worlds co-exist on stage together as performers play with both understanding and not understanding, knowing and not-knowing.

18 Jonathan Fox has edited a book of Moreno’s selected writings: *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method and Spontaneity* (1987)

In this context, early anxieties about being in a cross-cultural group surface naturally. A Japanese woman is tearful as she says: “I am nervous I can’t speak English very well. I will do my best. Please talk to me slowly.” A Chinese woman says: “I feel very small, tiny. I don’t know how to place my position in this community. I am nervous how to behave myself. I don’t want to disturb the community - I want to watch.”

Early attention is also paid to linking participants up with a wide range of people in the group. This prevents the formation of comfortable cliques or language sub-groups.

Participants are encouraged to keep working with others they don’t know or know least well. As teams form for performance, Bev notices some participants are less confident to put themselves forward. “Let’s have five actors and a musician for a story, including at least one person from Japan.” Later she reflects privately: “Some of the Japanese are only here for a few days. Also because of the language, it is harder and harder for them to get up if they leave it (until later).”

Later the needs of non-English speakers to understand the stories as they are told in English to the conductor are addressed. Bev, to the performers: “Let’s make sure if you do not understand the story that you indicate during the telling. In a training setting like this, that is fine.” Christian: “Practice putting up your hand”. Later a Chinese participant says “I have many things I want to talk about. I’m naturally talkative but in English I have many hesitations. I am afraid of being clumsy.” Bev responds thanking her and saying, “We will work to create an atmosphere where you can find the space to express yourself. I don’t think anyone will be impatient with you. We will lose out if we do not hear from you. I know what it is like trying to speak another language. Sometimes I have felt like a four year old.”

As a conductor, Bev is keenly attentive to who comes forward to tell. After the performance of a fluid sculpture she may ask, “Who is having a different experience?” or “What is not being said? What is hard to bring forward now?” “Let’s hear from one of you who doesn’t have English as a first language.” She achieves a delicate balance, actively including people by creating an invitation or opening for them to come forward, without generating pressure.

In this culture a high level of *self acceptance* and *mutual acceptance* becomes apparent. Individuals are consistently encouraged to notice their own experiences moment to moment: experiences of arriving, leaving their lives behind, sharing accommodation, and at each phase of the work together. The highs and lows and nuances of life at the Summer School are regularly shared, listened to and reflected back to participants in short enactments such as fluid sculptures and „pairs‟ which portray both sides of a conflict simultaneously. The group displays ease with this level of self-awareness and self-expression – it is clearly the stuff of company rehearsal time. As is the attentive listening to each others‟ „moments‟, „conflicts‟ and „stories‟. A wide range of feelings and experiences are encouraged, expressed and attended to.

For example on the morning of the third day everyone responds in turn to Bev’s question:

“What is alive in you?” E. comments: “I am surprised by the power of old stories, old losses.

I’m a little exposed. During the last six months I have been travelling, I’ve had freedom and adventure and I’ve been alone. Now it’s nice to be held within a group and be taken care of.” Later M. comments” I feel peace and I think is this real? Scary things might be coming.”

Later T. comments: “I’m floating through lots of different things. I’m tearful a lot and need to rest a lot. I want to go and sleep somewhere if there was a really protected, safe space. I’m not avoiding connection – I just need to look after myself. I’m enjoying the movement and sound. I’m getting feed (by it).”

This accepting atmosphere is fostered by what the leaders do as well as what they don’t do. As the group performs the first story they are out of tune with each other and their performance is a bit chaotic and unrefined. There is a decision not to rework this. Bev comments to Christian later: “I think we won’t go back to the first story –it’s always hard at the beginning when the relationships are still largely undeveloped and it’s such a big thing to put yourself forward”.

The performers‟ self-acceptance gets stronger as their efforts meet with an appreciative response: “Lovely shape, eh. Let’s give them a lovely shape applause,” “Good work you guys.” A moment later this is matter-of-factly balanced by asking the teller, “(There was) something they didn’t get?” In these few moments the appreciation visibly warms and buoys the performers and the lightly delivered feedback helps them keep their feet on the ground.

Later Bev coaches the group to let the applause in: “It (performing) is a service. Let it in when people clap. We are all learning. If you let us appreciate you, it’s a two-way relationship.”

There is no harsh, berating coaching in sight. After a rowdy „over-the-top‟ fluid sculpture, the first coaching is quiet and gentle: “One little thing, a little coaching. Look now at R. (the teller) sitting in his chair. Notice his eyelids. Do the same (fluid sculpture) but take that into account.” The re-play is much quieter, more focused. “Look at his eyelids – now, even more like his eyelids. And A. keep breathing, look out at us A.” Later Christian comments to me: “ Everything we are doing is leading to expression through stories. I leave out huge chunks of what I could work with – it would skew them. I’m trying to get them to have the courage to walk out there.”

The pressure performers inevitably feel from time to time to „get it right‟, is addressed with an accepting wisdom. Christian: “We know the stage is a lonely place but we are on the stage with our friends. We love our companies! They love us, and mostly they love that we try. They have been to workshops, they know how hard it is.” In response to F. who is doubting her work having conducted E’s story, Bev says with steady reassurance: Look at E.

It was plenty good enough.” Christian adds: “If you do a tiny bit for the teller it is enough. And the group is touched.”

As a conductor Bev plays a key role in assisting tellers to express, accept and recognize their experiences.

The effect of building this group culture is acknowledged during the farewell ceremony:

“I’ve had a lot of great teachers and supporters in my journey, my softening, for this time. I want to acknowledge in particular Bev and Christian for your teaching. I have felt your complete and utter devotion to us. You have shown a deep consideration of where we are all at in our Playback and other journey’s.”

“Kia ora whanau. (Greetings, my family.) Bev and Christian, thank you for building this nest to be in and encouraging us to jump out of it. Safety is a bugbear of mine. Thank you everybody for all the leaps you have taken, all the flapping, flopping and flying!”