# CHAPTER TWO: Presenting Playback Theatre

The story depends on every one of us to come into being. It needs all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have [experienced] to keep on coming into being.

Trinh (in Somerville 1999, p.111).

The god of dirt

Came up to me many times and said

So many wise and delectable things, I lay

On the grass listening

To his dog voice,

Crow voice,

Frog voice; \*now\*,

He said, and \*now\*,

And never once mentioned \*forever\*

Mary Oliver (1986, p.50).

Trinh offers the idea that stories depend on \*all\* of us to bring them alive. In the poem excerpt from \*One of Two Things,\* Oliver sings of listening – \*now\* and that somehow this will be enough.

In this chapter I introduce Playback Theatre, a ritual performance method where together audiences and performers bring personal stories to life, and where people are required to listen, \*now\*. In the first section of the chapter I recount the genesis and the development of Playback Theatre and the Playback Theatre movement. In the second section, I draw together a number of voices in the Playback Theatre literature to present an account of the form and its values and purpose/s. This includes an explanation of the central position of personal story in the method. In the third section, I elaborate on the practice of Playback Theatre, with emphasis on its application in the community. Ultimately, I critique Playback Theatre scholarship and research, identifying the gaps in the literature and relate this to the focus of this study.

## 2.1 The Development of Playback Theatre

Playback Theatre is an international movement with performing companies in over 20 countries (IPTN, 2001). Emerging in the USA in the mid-1970s, Dauber (1999a) suggests that this distinctive theatre form was responding to a specific cultural need. Salas (1993) states that it was a "response to human need, both individual and social, for the communication and validation of personal experience" (p.1). The idea for the Playback Theatre methodology came from Jonathan Fox (Salas, 1993, Fox, 1994, Fox & Dauber, 1999). Influenced by his own exploration of twentieth century experiential theatre and a fascination with preliterary storytelling and other oral cultural forms, Fox set out to develop a theatre form that espoused values of social justice and valued theatricality – a form that he would want to practice. A chance meeting with the psychodrama method served to crystallise his vision, and the early workings of the Playback Theatre method emerged (Fox, 1999a).

In the first decade, other people[3] joined Fox and co-founder Jo Salas, in an experiential, experimental development process, where practice and reflection were the basis for developing this hybrid performance form. In Australia and New Zealand, early proponents of the form (including some from the psychodrama movement) pursued equally foundational and experimental practice in dialogue with the US founders. Throughout the second decade, the practice and embryonic theorising of Playback Theatre focused on coming to terms with the application and evaluation of the form within the multiple practice arenas Playback Theatre had infiltrated. Significant to this period was the thinking about what is required to effect \*good enough\*[4] Playback Theatre (Salas, 1993). This decade heralded the establishment of Playback Theatre Companies in the USA, Australia and New Zealand, with expansion into Europe, the UK and Asia.

[3] This group became known as the Original Company (Fox, 1994).

[4] The notion of \*good enough\* is informed by Bettelheim's idea of good enough parenting (Salas, 1993, p. 30).

The spread of Playback Theatre has been consistent yet contained, with the basic philosophy and methodology transferred through a predominantly oral process, including international gatherings. This approach has served as a form of quality control and risk management. On the eve of the third decade, access to the Playback Theatre method and the international community was advanced through the establishment of a centralised school of instruction and the formation of an international body – the International Playback Theatre Network[5]. These bodies have served to oversee the expansion of the form and to provide regulation (Fox, 1999a). Simultaneously, the first books about Playback Theatre were published[6]. The next section weaves together accounts of the Playback Theatre form, its values and purpose/s.

[5] The International Playback Theatre Network comprises delegates from Playback Theatre Companies from around the world and encourages reflection, discussion and writing about Playback Theatre.

[6] A Playback Theatre methodological guidebook, \*Improvising Real Life,\* was published in 1993 (Salas, 1993). Fox's documentation of the theory informing the development of the Playback Theatre methodology, \*Acts of Service\*, was published in 1994 (Fox, 1994).

## 2.2 The Playback Theatre Method

Jo Salas, music therapist and co-founder of Playback Theatre states that from its earliest inception, the scope and purpose of Playback Theatre has been to Reveal the shapeliness and meaning in any experience, even the ones that are unclear and formless in the telling. [Playback Theatre can] dignify stories with ritual and aesthetic awareness, and link them together so that they form a collective story about a community of people whether the temporary community of a public audience, or a group of people whose lives are connected in an ongoing way. … [Playback Theatre] offers a public arena in which the meaning of individual experience expands to become part of a shared sense of purposeful existence (Salas, 1993, p.22).

In Australian and New Zealand contexts \*good enough\* has additional meaning drawn from the notion of adequacy fundamental to Moreno's theory of spontaneity (see Karp, 1994).

Salas' explanation alludes to three defining elements of Playback Theatre: personal story (the content), a ritual aesthetic (the form), and the context. Fox (1994) reports that early Playback Theatre audiences included children in their schools, disabled residents at their group home and friends and family in their neighbourhood. It was the early application in places other than theatres, for people other than conventional theatre audiences that differentiated it from other forms of theatre. That these audiences were situated in specific contexts, e.g., education/school, rehabilitation/group home, community/neighbourhood, has emerged as a defining aspect of the Playback Theatre method. The contemporary terminology for applications of theatre in such contexts is applied theatre (Taylor 2003).

Three defining frames of applied theatre forms like Playback Theatre are the content, the form and the context. As suggested above, the context frames the process and provides a gateway through which audience members enter the participatory ritualised frame (the form).

The context can act as an initial link among audience members and between audience members and performers. It gives focus, purpose and direction to the performers. Strong identification with the context can contribute to strong engagement in the process, or as Brook (1989) explains, soften up the audience and assist the performers to get the audience "to a state of readiness" (p.127). The second defining aspect is the Playback Theatre form.

This is the ritualised process that both drives and is driven by the audience-performer interaction. In Playback Theatre the form consists of conventions of space, performance and content through participation. An illustration of the Playback Theatre spacial conventions appears in Appendix 1. Performance conventions include the performing roles[7]: actor, conductor and musician, and performance forms, for example fluid sculptures and story scenes[8], and styles, which could be unique to the specific ensemble. (For a description of a Playback Theatre performance see Appendix 2). Hosking & Penny (1998) propose an explanation of Playback Theatre as an interactive performance form:

[7] Playback Theatre performing roles are discussed in Chapter 5. For a full description of the performing roles see Chapters 4-6 in \*Improvising Real Life\* by Jo Salas (1993) & Chapters 9-11 in \*Acts of Service\* by Jonathan Fox (1994). See also Good (1986) and Hoesch (1999).

[8] For a full explanation of the technical aspects of the Playback Theatre forms see Chapter 3, \*Improvising Real Life\* by Jo Salas (1993).

Playback Theatre is spontaneous improvised theatre created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience. Someone tells a story from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, then watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape and coherence (Hosking & Penny, 1998, p.10).

While stories are mentioned in this description, Salas highlights the centrality of personal story in the theatre that is created during the performance. She writes:

Audience members … are invited to [tell a story] … guided by the director or "Conductor," [the teller] casts his or her story from the row of actors. The chosen performers, supported by music and lighting, transform the story into a theatrical scene, using boxes and pieces of cloths as props (Salas in Feldhendler, 1994, p.101)[9].

[9] The Playback Theatre stage is a simple arrangement of instruments and props, with two chairs placed stage left for the teller and conductor; opposite which is a semi-circle of audience chairs. For an example of the simplicity of the Playback Theatre stage see Appendix 1.

Efforts at describing and defining Playback Theatre have been limited due to the difficulty in capturing the ephemeral vitality of live performance in words. Despite his seminal role in developing Playback Theatre, Fox himself claims that the Playback Theatre process is not simple to describe or understand (Fox, 1999a). One reason for this could be its flexibility.

Dauber states that "it can be adapted to many different specific needs … [and] spans the conventional categories of theatre, psychology and education"(Dauber, 1999a, p.116). Salas reports that "it can work in virtually any setting, because by its nature it adapts to the needs and concerns of whoever is present" (Salas, 1993, p.1). Practitioners in New Zealand and Australia (Good, 2003, Hosking & Penny, 2002) write about Playback Theatre as a method of inquiry and dialogue.

Emerging in more recent writing about Playback Theatre are statements about what the form does \*not\* do. Most notably the fact that it is not message-driven like other applied theatre forms, for example, Boal's (1979) forum theatre, and popular theatre and theatre for development processes. Rather it is a process that is premised on inquiry. In their report on an application of Playback Theatre in the pacific island country of Kiribas, Hosking & Penny propose that Playback Theatre is:

A methodology for the exploration of an issue or concern rather than message driven theatre. [Where a group can work toward] a comprehensive understanding and expression of what is occurring and the underlying social values. [It works at] a level under political motivation [and] may be used to stimulate change, to celebrate achievements, to explore questions, to address conflict and at the same time it will always build connections and strengthen ties within the group and in this way enhance the sense of community (Hosking & Penny, 1998, p.10-11).

Claims such as these provide insight into what some practitioners believe Playback Theatre can achieve. Mock (2002) asserts that researching live performance is difficult. Many of the claims made about Playback Theatre have been based on practitioner reflection and reveal the evolution of practitioners' understandings. In documenting these understandings practitioners have articulated their embodied knowledge or praxis. This is a legacy of the experimental development model and the way in which practice reflection has informed Playback Theatre knowledge to date. Embedded in the descriptions of Playback Theatre is practitioners' sense making with regard to the application of Playback Theatre in a particular context and informed by their personal values, biases and assumptions, and further informed by the values intrinsic to the Playback Theatre form. These values include: honouring diversity, listening, respect, communication through stories, artistry, social interaction and community building (IPTN, 2002). While there is a critical imperative in reflective practice many of the descriptions and explanations of the Playback Theatre form appear somewhat like advocacy.

In recent research, Wright (2003) asserts that the claims made about Playback Theatre in learning and healing applications were probable. That empirical research is only just emerging from the field is discussed later in the chapter.

Fox (1994, 1999a & b) undertook numerous attempts to describe and define Playback Theatre. In the more recent re-presentation of his sense making about Playback Theatre, Fox

![Rea%20Dennis%20-%20Public%20Performance,%20Personal%20Story%20A%20%20aa69f3095310455e95ef906fd8770c9c/image3.png](Rea%20Dennis%20-%20Public%20Performance,%20Personal%20Story%20A%20%20aa69f3095310455e95ef906fd8770c9c/image3.png)

looks at the interaction between ritual, art and social interaction. This results in a simplified framework from which to teach Playback Theatre. The tri-dimensional model incorporating a ritual, an artistic and a social facet is documented as Figure 1. Fox argues that there is an interactive relationship between the three dimensions where at any time one could be dominant. In a 'good' Playback Theatre performance all three must continually balance over the course of the performance. Much of the tension of working in the dialectical flux of these three dimensions is the domain of the conductor. The actor's preoccupation tends toward the balance between the artistic demands of theatre and the social demands of listening or being present (Salas, 1993) as the storyteller performs. Salas (1999) deems that good Playback Theatre requires empathy and intuition in the interpretative enactment of the story and cautions against Playback Theatre that produces "superficial versions of stories told to therapists" (p30).

\*\*Figure 1: Essential Elements of Playback Theatre\*\*

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| | | | | |

| | | SOCIAL

INTERACTION Event management Safe atmosphere

Psychological knowledge ART SOCIAL Inclusivity

INTERACTION Awareness of social issues Explanatory language

ART

Sense of aesthetic

Expressiveness

Originality

Versatility RITUAL

Teamwork

Story language

RITUAL

Keeping to rules Ecstatic emotion Transpersonal dimension Goal of transformation Spellbinding language

ZONE OF GOOD PLAYBACK | | |

| | | | | |

| | | | | |

Fox, (1999a, p.127).

In defining the essential elements of Playback Theatre, Fox gives each – art, ritual and social interaction – a set of qualifiers. Some of the qualifiers in the artistic realm: a sense of aesthetic, teamwork and expressiveness, in the social realm: inclusivity and awareness of social issues, and in the ritual realm: keeping the rules and goal of transformation, are co-operatively enacted by players and audience alike. Fox's model says little about the essential aspect of participation by the audience. This essential interactive basis of the form is perhaps the primary value underpinning the application of Playback Theatre and the thing that most gives relevance to the model Fox proposes (see Figure 1).

Coalesced with the value of participation, is the central place of personal story in the Playback Theatre form. As mentioned earlier, the intersection of personal story and interactive theatre demands strong containment. This is facilitated through the ritualised process where performances are built around the systematic application of basic theatrical devices, simple staging, and consistent shaping by a conductor who primarily uses repetition (of the invitation to tell a story) to build momentum in the process. The method provides a venue to tell stories.

This may be construed as a warm and romantic idea. However, when the word \*story\* is preceded by the adjective \*personal\* to yield \*personal story\* some tension is present in the idea. Add to this the public nature of the telling and you have a form of theatre that is counter-cultural, occupies the margins, and elicits multiple responses. Asha Richard (1999), Germany-based Playback Theatre performer, suggests that such tensions and others arising from the unknown in Playback Theatre are what make it \*theatre,\* rather than specific artistic criteria. She questions "whether it is artistic theatre, which is not the same as good theatre" (p.115).

By virtue of its methodological structure and its various practical applications, Playback Theatre is a political form of theatre. The political nature of Playback Theatre is derived from the essential postmodern and anti-oppressive nature of the form. Hoesch (1999) reports that "Stories will not be judged or evaluated. Each carries equal weight. Everyone has the right to the teller's chair. A good conductor will invite silent people" (p.63). Thus, postmodern ideas like: personal stories in public places, a public event with an agenda driven by participants, a theatre experience where the audience provides the text, a public meeting where people have a say without being judged, a community dialogue where marginal voices are actively sought, and entertainment that challenges the dominant social narrative are possible within the Playback Theatre performance. While these ideas are inherent in many of the claims made about Playback Theatre, there is also a belief that Playback Theatre is an \*act of service\* (Fox, 1994) with "citizen actors[10] hearing and enacting stories of their fellow community members" (Bessko, 2000, p.2). This implies that Playback Theatre is a theatre of listening more than a theatre of telling. Hosking (2001) suggests that people who are interested in new experiences come to Playback Theatre and that it is the "being listened too" that counts (p.7). This expands Salas's (1993, 1999) idea that it is the presence of the performers (with their commitment to listening and being there) that constitutes the worth of the Playback Theatre experience. She states:

[10] The citizen actor is intrinsic to the values of Playback Theatre. Fox envisaged an actor who studies and performs Playback Theatre as an avocation, not a career; and who is embedded in an ordinary life in the community in which they live (Salas, 1993). This is made more complex by the artistic stance of the Playback Theatre actor, where they are "present as themselves often relating to the audience between stories in a human way" (Fox, 1999b, p.123).

What helps most of all is simply the example of performers themselves, ordinary people standing up there willing to try anything, willing to be seen. It is a kind of courage and some audience members are inspired to discover it (the courage) in themselves (Salas, 1999, p.154).

And in some small way this describes Playback Theatre: from the simplicity of an ordinary actor "willing to try" to the profoundness of strangers gathered together with a preparedness to listen (Good, 2003), to the complexity of a process contained by a ritual frame where people come out of isolation and see their lives treated as significant (Hosking 2001) and where art evokes beauty so that we may see the truths in the stories of ourselves and others (Fox in Sperling & Fox, 1999).

The artistic endeavours of Playback Theatre may see players minimise the more difficult aspects that have been expressed in a story. In fact, the teller too, may have minimised these in the telling. Zánkay (1999) asserts that for Playback Theatre to succeed it must "show the dynamics of the contravening forces in the story" (p.192). In failing to do so the unexpressed aspects of the story are brought to stage in the next story; and again until there has been adequate listening and an accurate animation of the \*intensity\* of the experience expressed in the story. In his improvisational practice, theatre experimenter, Peter Brook (1989) found that performance such as this was "exceptionally difficult" and required the actor to accomplish "precise technique". He writes:

[Improvised performance] required specific training and also a great generosity and a capacity for humour. Genuine improvisation, leading up to a real encounter with the audience, only occurs when the spectators feel that they are loved and respected by the actors (Brook, 1989, p.112).

In the mutuality of the Playback Theatre process, where audiences and performers co-create theatre through the dynamic and collaborative vulnerability of performance such real encounters are possible. Through his growing understanding of the particular intimacy that improvised performance demands, Brook recommends that "improvised theatre must go to where people live", to their local neighbourhoods and communities (Brook, 1989, p.112). The next section explores the work of Playback Theatre as community performance.

## 2.3 Playback Theatre as Community Performance

Playback Theatre has been described as a public avenue for celebrating difference and making connections (Salas, 1993). A sense of connections, in addition to belonging and security, has emerged as fundamental to experiences of community in recent scholarship (see Ahmed, 2000, Popple, 1995). Amit (2002) asserts that embracing and celebrating difference is a contemporary purpose of community-based practices. While a popular application of the Playback Theatre method is in a workshop format, in this study, it is the Playback Theatre performance that features. Specifically, it is the one-off community-based event. The placement of Playback Theatre as a performance enables it to maximise the elements of public ritual intrinsic to oral traditions. Fox (1994) states that:

[T]he idea of performance is so important in the oral tradition. For each moment presents a new challenge, to be met with the heightened creativity we associate with a moment on stage (p.92).

In performance the 'unexpected' can arise from the formalised, predictable structure. This can capture audiences and carry them along to the surprise they experience as they listen to the stories or witness the immediacy of the enactment. The open – yet contained – space of the stage beckons the individual and ritualises time (Hosking, 2001). The liberty to invent stimulates imagination and play and elevates the imperfect-ness in the theatre of the playback performance to the level of art. Such improvised performance can be somewhat taboo in a culture that discourages experiences of the unknown and the \*public\* presentation of something that is likely to oscillate between success and failure as an art product (Fox, 1994). This flirting with the margins of art and culture bring a certain tension to the Playback Theatre form. Yet, over the years, Playback Theatre has found application in multiple contexts. These are discussed next.

The expansion of Playback Theatre across the world occurred simultaneously with the expansion of Playback Theatre into multiple practice sites. Much of this had to do with the diversity, experience and values of people practicing Playback Theatre. Fox (1999a) summarises these contexts into six categories. These were community-based theatre, education, social services, ritual, organisational development and therapy. These six practice sites are explained below.

The Playback Theatre community-based theatre event has often been referred to as a theatre of neighbours. Fox (1999a) suggests that many Playback Theatre Companies conduct open or public performances at regular intervals, in a 'home' theatre, throughout the year. The application of Playback Theatre in education is as both a process instrument providing opportunities for children to express their feelings and see them validated, and has also found application in improving literacy, developing emotional intelligence and building confidence and self-esteem. In the social services sector Playback Theatre has been successfully integrated into practice frameworks as a process that builds cohesion through listening to each others' stories, highlights differences and similarities, and teaches listening and communication skills.

The process and structure of Playback Theatre render it a ritual event in all applications.

Playback Theatre has also found specific ritual application, for example, to open or close conferences or to mark special anniversaries like births and deaths. The reflective function of Playback Theatre has led to it finding relevance in organisational development. It has assisted organisational groups to honour and integrate emotional and spiritual processes like restructures and can ritualise aspects of working life to raise consciousness, grieve, celebrate or effect closure. A popular and consistent application of Playback Theatre has been in the therapeutic domain. Drama and music therapists see value in the way it validates personal stories, while psychodrama practitioners have used it for role training (Fox, 1999a, pp.13-14). The specific Playback Theatre application that features in this study is the one-off community-based performance.

There is a tendency in the Playback Theatre literature to refer to audiences at a specific event as "the community" (see for example, Fox, 1999b, p.116). Salas (1993) writes that Playback Theatre is "community building" (p.1). She suggests that the Playback Theatre performance links stories into "a collective story about a community of people" (p.22). The theory underpinning the thinking about the audience in this way is drawn from sociodrama theory. Sociodrama has been defined as "a deep action method dealing with intergroup relations and collective ideologies" (Fox, 1987, p.18). It is based on:

[The] tacit assumption that the group formed by an audience is already organized by the social and cultural roles which in some degree all the carriers of the culture share … It is therefore incidental who the individuals are, or of whom the group is composed, or how large their number is (Fox, 1987, p.18).

In this way, the audience at the Playback Theatre performance is seen to represent the community from which it is drawn. Used in conjunction with sociometry – an observational and operational method that explores the "inside social structure of a group of people at a particular time" (Fox, 1987, p.24) – a sociodramatic approach assists the conductor to relate to the group as part of a broader context. In this study it is the idea that those who gather at the performance experience a "sense of community" (Salas, 1993, p.33) or share an experience of community that is of interest. This idea of community as an experience equates to Lash's (1994) conception of community as one that seeks shared meanings.

In his examination of non-scripted, pre-literary and oral theatre traditions Fox (1994) identifies a key element of the Playback Theatre experience as its capacity to be both communal and intimate. It is communal in that it has the capacity to connect people through common themes in stories about the neighbourhood and community in which they live, through familiar issues in individual stories, and through the humanity demonstrated both in the stories and in people's attempts at participating. Yet it is intimate as it enables the audience to share personal stories, to experience being listened to and heard, and in some cases experience transformation in witnessing the enactment of their story. Salas (1999) claims that the Playback Theatre performance meets the needs of the individual and the group. Drawing on the sociodramatic idea of the audience outlined above, Good (2003) proposes that Playback Theatre can act as a mirror for the community. I am more inclined to think of it as a window with the one-off Playback Theatre performance revealing a snapshot of the current interests and concerns of the particular community, through the personal stories of the audience.

The 'text' of the Playback Theatre performance, i.e., what gets revealed, shared and discussed, is comprised of what people are prepared to tell. The idea is that the audience members who share stories give an account of a real experience. These stories told from the perspective of the teller constitute the truth from their worldview. Hosking (2001) and others (see for example, Hoesch, 1999) demand that the teller's chair be immune from judgement by performers and audience alike. This makes Playback Theatre unlike Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed where audience members are encouraged to assess actions made by different characters in the story and offer solutions toward overcoming oppression. The improvised nature of the Playback Theatre event means that at any given time anyone can tell a story.

As proposed above, the text of the Playback Theatre performance comes from the audience.

As such, Playback Theatre can be conceived as a series of storytelling performances interspersed with a series of dramatic enactments, within a ritual framework. Each time a teller comes to the stage they are presenting themselves, performing in the way that Goffman (1959) suggests that we do everyday, enacting a familiar and recognisable social practice (Bauman, 1986). With little adjustment, this performance can be elevated to a more theatrical style, but is always enacted in the company of the conductor. This makes the storytelling performance a duet, with the conductor facilitating the teller's performance while simultaneously working to produce and shape the storytelling in the context of the complete performance. The conductor is also in relationship with the ensemble and the audience throughout the storytelling performance. The performance is multi-layered with the teller in "major" during the telling. Major[11] then shifts to the stage where the actors and musician animate the story in an improvised theatrical interpretation. The Playback Theatre performers are required to:

[11] Major is an improvisational concept that denotes where the audience attention is at any given moment. I have seen it used in performance analysis of dance; and I am familiar with its use in the dance composition/improvisation technique, Viewpoints, devised by Anne Bogart (for more on Bogart's work see Bogart (2001) and Dixon & Smith (1995)).

```[F]ulfil the very essence of theatre's intention: to convey human experience by enacting it in distilled form; to embody narrative and meaning in the realm of space and time (Salas, 1999, p.18).```

At the completion of the enactment the actors on stage freeze, holding the final scene, and transfer their gaze to the teller. The gaze of the spectator is again directed to the teller. And so it shifts: back and forward between the audience and the stage, between the individual and the group, and between the tellers and the players. As the teller returns to the group the audience is in major as they recompose themselves and orient to the idea of the next teller. The conductor subtly caresses these shifts throughout the performance.

There is a good deal of interest in the effect of Playback Theatre on the audience participant who tells a personal story. This individual speaks aloud from the group either seated amongst them or on stage alongside the conductor. As suggested above, both sites of telling require the audience participant to assume a more direct performative role in the event. They step out, into the private/public threshold, bringing with them the content that forms the basis of the next dramatic display. While this transition and subsequent participation in the performance is somewhat central to the Playback Theatre method, it is in no way unique in storytelling theatre traditions.

In other narrative contexts (see for example, Bruner, 1986, Sayre, 1989) the storytelling participants are positioned as empowered or liberated, and as witnesses for the group. In Playback Theatre there can be a tendency to position the storytelling participant as vulnerable (see for example, Nash & Rowe 2002). Thinking about the teller in this way can have the effect of skewing the teller's performance toward a therapeutic frame. I am inclined toward a conception of the telling participants as risk-takers. That is not to say the act of telling will not render the teller vulnerable. In fact, like many performative roles vulnerability is central, for it is in the individual's capacity to take risks that we see their truth and their humanity. When they move to tell, they embark on a journey into the unknown possibilities of the performance. In this performance the conductor accompanies them. Penny (2002) asserts that if, in the enactment, the actors match the risks taken by the teller a primary condition for advancing the ritual will be met. He states, "For the actor to advance and deepen the ritual they need a performance courage that matches specifically the courage the teller summoned to tell" (p.7). Experimental theatre technician, Peter Brook (1989) writes about the primacy of risking as an improviser. He asserts that taking "total" risks as a performer enables the ensemble to be influenced by the presence of the people, the context, the pace, and even the time of day (p.118).

In this section I have discussed the notion of Playback Theatre as a community performance ritual. This was achieved through a consideration of the way in which Playback Theatre interacts with the audience as community and in communal ways in a performance context. The notion of performance and the place of story generally, are explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Next, I present a description of the emergence of Playback Theatre scholarship and research.

## 2.4 Playback Theatre Scholarship and Research

Published works on Playback Theatre include the early works of Fox (1994) and Salas (1983, 1992, 1993, 1994) on the application of Playback Theatre, the artistic elements of Playback Theatre, and good enough Playback Theatre. While these works are necessarily advocating the fit of Playback Theatre to the contemporary world, they make sound attempts to present a thoughtful and critical gaze. In his book \*Acts of Service\*, Fox presents a comprehensive explanation of the conception of Playback Theatre. Based on his own reflective practice, \*Acts of Service\* reveals Fox's sense making processes drawing on literary theory, ritual and cultural theory, psychodramatic theory and the history and theory of preliterary theatre. He attempts to document what is required of the specific roles inherent in the form: actor, director, conductor and ensemble. Fox documents the place of language and form in non-scripted theatre and includes his conclusions about how the improvisational process has a contribution to make in educational and social spheres in society. As discussed earlier in the chapter, these have not been isolated reflections but have arisen from an experimental ensemble, where he has been influenced by others, and by the processes that unfolded as they prepared, enacted and cooled down from their performances. Salas' contribution, \*Improvising Real Life: Personal story & Playback Theatre\*, published a year earlier but developed simultaneously (Dauber, 1999a) is structured like a Playback Theatre handbook. It provides a practical guide to doing Playback Theatre from how a performance could unfold, to the conventional Playback Theatre forms and many applications.

These two texts articulate the ways that Playback Theatre diverges from other oral theatre traditions, from theatre as art or theatre as entertainment, and from psychodrama and various other action methods that have informed Fox and Salas in their formative years (Dauber, 1999a). The two volumes also act like entry texts to the method yet do not stand alone.

Practice-driven writings proliferate and contribute equally to the early sense making, theory building and documentation of the Playback Theatre process, its values and vision, its diverse application, and potential outcomes. There is also writing about artistic style, artistic excellence and the aesthetics of Playback Theatre.

The International Playback Theatre Network publishes a quarterly newsletter, \*Interplay\*, and convenes biennial international conferences – both providing much needed forums for dialogue and critique. Since its inception, the \*Interplay\* newsletter has featured practice reflections, theory and concept development based on anecdotal evidence, and performance analysis writings[12]. The publication of the eclectic volume, \*Gathering Voices\* (Fox & Dauber, 1999), a collection of essays presented at the inaugural Playback Theatre symposium in Kassel, Germany is the most recent contribution to the Playback Theatre writing. A milestone in the movement, Fox (1999a) states that the Kassel Symposium has acknowledged that the early period of experimentation is complete, and has signaled a move toward inviting more rigorous and critical research. Significant, in terms of providing a critical gaze to the mix, is the chapter by Dauber himself. \*Tracing the Songlines\* (Dauber, 1999a) documents a history of the evolution of Playback Theatre by way of considering biographical information about the founders, Fox & Salas, and examining the inferences therein.

[12] \*Interplay\* publishes a variety of articles reflecting on Playback Theatre in specific contexts. Some examples of these contexts include: organisations (Hofman, 1997); prisons (Bett, 2000, Southard 2000); housing estates (Murphy, 2001); disability (Day, 1998); mental health (Muckley, 1998); youth (Wynter, 1998); refugee groups (Robb, 2002); and in indigenous communities (Cox, 1996). There is also discussion of the form from various practice frameworks, for example, from a therapeutic perspective (Nash & Rowe 2001, Tselikas 2001, Salas 2000); and in development and social change: (Mills, 1999, Hosking & Fox, 2002).

More recently, there have been papers presented at academic conferences (generally not refereed) and student essays emerging from The School of Playback Theatre's Leadership Module. Conference paper topics have included the application of Playback Theatre in education & training by US academic, Linda Park-Fuller, and Australians, Deborah Pearson and Tarquam McKenna (see Park-Fuller, 1997a, Pearson, 1997, McKenna, 1993). McKenna and Park-Fuller have also published on Playback Theatre as a research method (McKenna, 1999, Park-Fuller, 1997b). An archive of available Playback Theatre writings is currently underway to enable access to these and others papers written about Playback Theatre (see for example Bett, 1999). Specially authored reports on work done with the support of government funding or non-government aid funding have included Hosking & Penny (1998, 1999).

These works represent the documentation of the body of knowledge about the form and practice of Playback Theatre. There is considerable scope for more formal research to be undertaken, a task already underway through the completion of this study, and the imminent completion of further dissertations[13]. Further, the completion of this thesis coincides with the recent launch of a Playback Theatre journal.

[13] Over the course of the research I have learned that there are dissertations underway or near completion. These are by Fe Day in New Zealand (The Application of Playback Theatre in Public Health Education), Nick Rowe in England (\*Personal Stories in Public Places\*) and Markus Hühn in Germany (title/topic unknown).

Given its rapid development and worldwide expansion, there has been little empirical research undertaken on Playback Theatre. Heinrich Dauber, university professor and Playback Theatre practitioner, contemplates what Playback Theatre research might look like composing what he calls a "(tentative) definition." He writes that Playback Theatre is both an \*\*individual\*\* as well as a \*\*collective\*\* experience, which on the one hand can only be understood from a \*\*subjective perspective\*\* – i.e., through (individual and collective) self-reflection, and on the other hand can be described from an \*\*objective perspective\*\* as an objective experience of a theatre performance in a particular social context (bold in original, p.159).

This provides another way of thinking about the dimensions of Playback Theatre elucidating the content dimension in addition to those of art, social, and ritual nominated earlier in Fox's model (see Figure 1). Dauber offers a qualification of each dimension (see Figure 2) by means of defining the perspective informing each and proposing congruent questions for research. In his critique, Dauber proposes four possible research foci: the storyteller's experiences, the artistic endeavours of the form, the aesthetic of the ritual performance, and/or the socio-political context. Drawing from the earlier discussion about Playback Theatre as an unconventional and applied theatre approach, the research could focus on the content, the form and/or the context. This study recognises the interaction of these three dimensions as integral to an experience of Playback Theatre.

\*\*Figure 2: Four Dimensions for Research\*\*

| DIMENSION | RESEARCH QUESTION |

| --- | --- |

| Content dimension – individually subjective perspective | What does Playback Theatre achieve, or how does it work from the perspective of the storyteller? |

| Artistic dimension – individually objective dimension | What makes a performance artistically effective? |

| Ritualistic dimension – collectively subjective dimension | What does Playback Theatre achieve or how does it work in regard to the ritual interaction between the storyteller, conductor, players and audience? |

| Social dimension – collectively objective dimension | What effect does Playback Theatre have on the audience, the performing Company and on the social context in which it is embedded? |

(Dauber, 1999b, pp.159-162).

The four spheres Dauber names are also mutually interactive. The Playback Theatre performance is layered and complex for audience members. Bharucha (1993) asserts that researching any performance demands a consideration of the contexts in which it occurs. The complexities of researching a Playback Theatre performance occur on multiple levels. As Dauber states, the pluralistic nature of Playback Theatre makes the task of researching effectiveness difficult (Dauber, 1999b, p.161). This study does not set out to measure effectiveness, rather it investigates the Playback Theatre performance through the experiences of the audience.

## 2.5 Summary

This chapter has charted the development of Playback Theatre from the early experimentation by The Original Company in upstate New York, USA, through the international expansion and the establishment of various elements of regulation, to the emergence of a more critical phase in which research such as this thesis now features. I have presented the philosophical underpinnings and integral values of the form and sketched the practice applications that have emerged. The dimensions of the Playback Theatre method have been acknowledged in relation to general applied theatre methods and the specific aspects identified in Playback Theatre theory - art, ritual and social interaction. An exploration of the many applications of Playback Theatre has assisted me to articulate the complex nature of the interactive purposes of this hybrid form in the community arena.

The final section discusses Playback Theatre scholarship and research with particular emphasis on the multiple levels at which Playback Theatre operates and the complexities of researching performance. The chapter argues that theory and knowledge about Playback Theatre has ostensibly been developed through practitioner reflection in the tradition of an oral culture. In undertaking this study, I aim to extend the knowledge and scope of understanding about Playback Theatre within the academic domain.

# CHAPTER THREE: Review of Literature

One of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves through multiple forms: by telling themselves stories; by dramatizing claims in rituals and other collective enactments; by rendering visible actual and desired truths about themselves and the significance of their existence in imaginative and performative productions.

Myerhoff (1986, p.261).

Each story spun into other stories, binding us together so that process became community, however brief the time.

Anne Daveson (2001, p.38).

Myerhoff evokes the possibilities of ritual performances. Daveson's idea of an ephemeral experience of community is organic to a story-based form like Playback Theatre. As I depict in Chapter Two, Playback Theatre is a hybridised performance ritual that blends personal story and improvised theatre. In this chapter I draw from the literature on performance theory. I look particularly at the way in which liminal activities support experiences of flow for individuals in those performance arenas in which they are expected to participate. I explore the way in which flow is contingent on participants feeling confident with their capacity to join in and equate this to the way in which anxiety can inhibit spontaneity in participants. I consider how the ritual elements of performance can induce communitas. Communitas is presented as an experience of community that is evoked when individuals encounter simultaneous experiences of flow during liminal activities.

I discuss the contemporary place of stories with emphasis on the storytelling act and the process of stories being enacted. I present three levels of engagement for audience members who are spectating – as a witness to the storytelling, as a witness to the enactment, and in reflection. Audience response and audience engagement literature has been arranged to shed light on audience experiences in both traditional and nontraditional theatre contexts. The review then considers the place of personal story as a relevant and potent public discourse.

Ritual performance as an experience of community is discussed through the concepts of communitas; belonging and estrangement; collective experience; and diversity. In this review I argue that the centrality of personal story and the animation of stories through theatrical enactments in the Playback Theatre performance render it an arena for experiences of community. Thus, this literature provides a frame for positioning the Playback Theatre performances that I investigate in this study.

\*\*3.1\*\* \*\*Performance Theory\*\*

"It is hard to define 'performance' because the boundaries separating it on the one side from the theatre and on the other side from everyday life are arbitrary" (Schechner, 1988, p.85, Huxley & Witts, 2002). Carlson (1996) proposes that performance has become indefinable due to its "extremely popular" use in a "wide range of activities in the arts, in literature and in the social sciences" (p.1). The, now considerable, body of literature articulating theories of performance is informed by a wide range of disciplines (Carlson, 1996). In this section I begin by presenting some of these positions.

Anthropologists have tended to view culture and ritual as performance. Particular emphasis has been given to documenting the performative aspects of cultures and societies, e.g.

initiations, tribal celebrations, seasonal festivals (Turner, 1974, 1986, Schechner, 1985, 1988). Sociologists claim that there is theatre in everyday life (see for example, Read, 1993). Goffman (1959) positions social behaviour as performance, theorising that we all perform as part of everyday life. He posits that performance refers to "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (p.22). In socio-linguistics, language itself has been considered in terms of 'performance' with the performative act being defined as communicative (in a given cultural context). This elaboration similarly situates the potency of the performance in the relationship between the speakers (performers) and listeners (audience) (Hymes, 1975, Kunst, 1986). In the discipline of theatre studies, performance is predominantly conceptualised as art. In a bid to address the differences between traditional theatre and the emerging field of performance, the agency of the performer is named as central. Carlson (1996) suggests that "performance art places the (usually solo) performer's personal contribution in the foreground" (p.54). Therefore, performance potency hinges on the spectacular feats of the performer.

It is useful to contemplate that performance can be conceptualised in terms of its intention and its origins. Performance can be socio-political (Huxley & Witts, 2002, Holderness, 1992), emancipatory (Boal, 1979) or liberatory (Brook, 1989), poor (Grotowski, 1975), devised (Oddey, 1994) and liminal (Broadhurst, 1999). Political or socio-political performance ranges from works that position the performing body as resistant (Martin, 1990) to works that challenge the dominant paradigm, like the feminist performance works of Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch (Carlson, 1996, Huxley & Witts, 2002); to performances in which the internal structure of the genre challenges our accepted socio-cultural and political beliefs and systems (Broadhurst, 1999). Emancipatory and liberatory performance can also be socio-political, yet have as a primary purpose a specific intention regarding 'empowering' and 'liberating'

audiences, respectively. The "poor" in the performance genre of Grotowski refers to the resources required to create and perform the work, while devised performances may incorporate all the intentions and constraints that have been described so far. Broadhurst (1999) claims that "liminal performance" is a genre in which hybridization is the "quintessential feature" (p.69). The eclectic potential of the Playback Theatre method means that it can draw on any and all of these descriptive labels. The centrality of personal story immediately politicizes the form, as does the participatory process, introducing the possibility of social, cultural and political resistance. Little or no props are used (poor) and coupled with the simple, accessible internal structure it offers a potentially empowering and liberating theatre experience where liminal activity is fostered.

Over the years Schechner (1993, 1988, 1985) has proposed a number of models from which to speak about performance from his seminal position in the contemporary field of performance theory. Regardless of the way in which performance is defined, Mock (2000) argues that it is important that the definition states whether the performance is "live" or not.

She claims that intrinsic to a conception of performance is its essential "ephemeral 'presentness' … its 'liveness'" (Mock, 2000, p.2). She writes that a \*live\* performance is "one which is still happening and still has to happen [and that] includes the potential for change in its every moment of delivery through the dialectical processes which \*need\* to be experienced" (Mock, 2000, p.3). She is critical of Schechner's multiple attempts at defining performance claiming that "theories of performance that embed ideology into their construction leave themselves open to criticism of being irrational" (p.4). She argues that claims about live performance as "ideologically resistant" are irrelevant and that "it is more useful to suggest that the ontology of live performance somehow provides the \*potential for\* ideological resistance" (Mock, 2000, p.4, Huxley & Witts, 2002).

In his critical review of performance theory, Carlson (1996) reports that the performance process "can work within a society … to undermine tradition, to provide a site for exploration of fresh and alternative structures and patterns of behaviour" (p.15). This echoes the claims made about ritual that are discussed in the next section. Turner (1986) positions performance as transformative for performers and spectators. In his work on ritual performance, he asserts that ritualised or symbolic dramatisation of important events in a culture are transformative for the audience (Turner, 1986). Performance is reflective – enabling us to show ourselves to ourselves, and reflexive – "arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves" (in Guss, 2001, p.158). Schechner (1988) is critical of Turner's conception of performance. He claims that it tends to locate 'the essential drama in conflict and conflict resolution' (p.170).

Schechner differentiates this idea from his own conception of performance as transformative.

He writes:

I locate it (performance) in \*transformation\* − in how people use theatre as a way to experiment with, act out, and ratify change. Transformation in theatre occurs in three different places; and at three different levels:

1) in the drama − that is, in the story;

2) in the performers − whose special task it is to undergo a temporary rearrangement of their body/mind;

3) in the audience − where changes may either be temporary (entertainment) or permanent (ritual) (italics in original, p.170).

Brook (1989) similarly claims the drama as a site of transformation. He suggests it is the unique capacity of theatre to replace a single point of view with many different views. Schechner points to the possibilities of active audience engagement during performance beyond what Carlson claims is "a passive hermeneutic process of decoding" body, gesture, sound. Thus, audiences are

> [M]uch more active, entering into a praxis, a context in which meanings are not so much communicated as created, questioned, or negotiated. The "audience" is invited and expected to operate as a co-creator of whatever meanings and experiences the event generates (Carlson, 1996, p.197).

>

He suggests that this shift from a passive to active audience position coincides with a shift in focus from \*pretence\* to \*presence\* in performance. Such performances are resistant to sending "a message about something" (Kirby in Carlson, 1996, p.126) instead they aim to make audiences more conscious. Marranca (in Carlson, 1996) argues that the performative imperative involves heightening audience members awareness so that they were aware of "\*being there\* in the theatre … and [of] the immediacy of the relationship of the audience to the theatrical event" (p.127).

McKenna (1999) writes of Playback Theatre as transformative; a "place of expanded consciousness … [where] shifts in awareness, artistic involvement, and social reconstruction are attended to" (p.177).

Brook (1989) claims that the efficacy of theatre is in its "linking of the private and public, the intimate and the crowded, the secret and the open, the vulgar and the magical" (p.40). He suggests that performance can present a site of blurred boundaries where collective experiences of intimate truth are possible, a site of thresholds and convergence. Mason (1992) states that the performance is a site where the

> [B]orders between entertainment and art, between audience and performer and between the performance itself and the larger social event; have become less defined in recent decades (Mason, 1992, p.3).

>

Its situated-ness on the margins renders performance a site for dialogue where different voices, different worldviews, different value systems, and different beliefs are brought together.

Conquergood (in Carlson, 1996) claims that performance can be open-ended and resist conclusions while encouraging interrogation. The historical challenges to the moral and social control agendas of theatre and performance by artists has resulted in the development of specific forms that express and enact empowerment and solidarity (Boal, 1979, Holderness, 1992, Martin & Sauter, 1995), or that privilege experimentation and authenticity (Brook, 1968, 1989, Grotowski, 1975). These alternative forms of performance emerge as practitioners seek to return theatre to the people, and resurrect the primacy of it as an instrument of cultural celebration and social transformation. As suggested in the previous chapter, the genesis of Playback Theatre is a similar story. Experimentation in theatre, driven by the aspirations of the inventors, has increased the attention given to the junction between theatre and the social sciences (Carlson, 1996).

Fundamental to this study, is a conception of the performance act that emphasises process over structure, participation over competence, and the dialectics of socio-cultural processes over the logics of cultural and social systems (Turner, 1986, p.21). In effect, most useful to this study, is the conception of performance as a process that contains as a defining characteristic the interaction between the performer and the audience and where insight into human beings and human activity is attained (Carlson, 1996, Goffman, 1959, Hymes, 1975, Schechner, 1985, 1988). The inter-relatedness of performance, theatre and ritual is evident in much of the current writings on public events. The next section presents a critique of public events and suggests that the public performance is a form of ritual event.

\*\*3.1.1 Public Events\*\*

Public events can provide an avenue for communities to act on their own behalf. They are often one-off episodes where culture is celebrated. Manning (1983) suggests that events that celebrate culture both reverse and violate ordinary reality \*and\* replicate and uphold it.

Handelman (1977) conceives public events as an interaction between play and ritual. The public event embodies the paradox of the play message: let us make believe, and the ritual message: let us believe (Handelman, 1977). Schechner (in Ben Chaim, 1984) compares the belief inherent in the participants of ritual with the suspended belief that is required of the audience at the aesthetic drama event. Aesthetic drama "works to affect a transformation in [the] nonparticipating spectator's consciousness" (Ben Chaim, 1984, p.42). Turner (1990)

suggests that the public event could act to ritualise time for participants, support liminal activity and evoke heightened experiences.

During public events, be they ritual, aesthetic drama or play focused, participants engage in dialogue about things they may not usually speak about. In this way there is a reclamation of personal and community power, a claiming of responsibility and the opportunity to present the self. The public event ruptures the borders that Mason (1992) writes about where aspects of old forms converge to make new forms. Ben Chaim (1984) reminds us that "ritual does not exist in a vacuum but requires a social fabric and a deeply held belief system to have effect" (p.42).

Handelman (1990) differentiates between three types of public events: events that model the lived-in world, events that present the lived-in world, and events that re-present the lived-in world. Handelman elaborates on this three-tier typology suggesting that events that model the lived-in world facilitate change in participants and have direct impact on their social world. Events that present the lived-in world are designed to use and show the obvious symbols and icons of the social world. They depict familiar versions of relevant social realities. Events that re-present the lived-in world promote critical consciousness through the presentations. Handelman claims that these events animate the social world in such a way that participants can compare and contrast the event in "relation to [the] social realities" (p.49).

In his effort to develop theory about public events such as ritual performances, Handelman (1990) suggests that the public performance represents a conscious attempt at making meaningful connections by participants. Informed by his review of the definitions of public events by ethnographers, Handelman states that public events have social value. From such things as providing a reflection of collective understandings and principles of social structure to the possibility of recourse to address or redress social problems, public events meet social needs. This is similar to the way in which O'Toole (2000) speaks of theatre as a social art form in a social context and therefore giving social permission for various (often taboo or unsanctioned) behaviours. The ritual containment of the public event facilitates this 'loosening" of social protocols. Handelman (1990) is critical of many of the definitional accounts of public events because they do not acknowledge that every cultural event can only communicate "a version" of the social order (p.9). He contests claims that "all occasions are constitutive of social order" saying that some "are primarily 'expressive'" (p.10). Significantly, he asserts that "public events are phenomenally valid forms that mediate persons into collective abstractions, by inducing action, knowledge and experience through these selfsame forms" (Handelman, 1990, p.15). In the context of this study, Playback Theatre can be constructed as a public event that facilitates conscious attempts at meaningful connections for participants. The deliberate social purpose of the public Playback Theatre event is evident in Fox's (1999b) description of Playback Theatre as social interaction in a dialectic relationship with art and ritual. The theory of ritual is discussed in the next section.

\*\*3.2\*\* \*\*Ritual Performance\*\*

The study of ritual has progressed adjacent to the study of theatre and performance in the past four decades. It is no surprise that the theories of ritual anthropologists (e.g., Victor Turner) appear in the writings about performance and experimental theatre. Nor is it surprising that the practice experiences of experimental theatre makers (e.g., Brook) are used to illustrate the theory of ritual. This interest in the overlap of ritual and performance has also been nourished by the post-colonial reclamation of indigenous cultural forms by local populations in developing countries (Chinyowa, 2002). I explore the intersection and overlap in ritual and performance in this section to provide concepts to write about the way in which Playback Theatre might straddle the performance/ritual threshold. At times, Playback Theatre appears to be all one, and at other times all the other, and at times in between or neither.

Cabral (2001) argues that rituals take many forms but are premised on a collective experience that is mediated through a patterned, sequenced, theatrical process. Myerhoff (1990) states that ritual performance provides continuity and predictability and "must be reasonably convincing, rhetorically sound, and well-crafted" (p.246). She assets that while ritual events might desire to alter individual belief at the deepest level, this level of alteration is not required. Turner (1969, 1986, 1990) has been a key contributor in the exploration of ritual performance. Early on, he drew on van Gennep's conception of ritual as a process-based structure. Van Gennep's (in Turner, 1969) three-phase schema comprises a separation phase, a transition phase, and a re-entry phase. Carlson argues that fundamental to Turner's preference of van Gennep's three-phases over other frameworks to explain ritual is their derivation. Van Gennep developed the schema with the idea that performance occurs in the context of everyday life, in in-between spaces, rather than the idea implicit in the frameworks of Singer, Hymes, Bauman and Barba that performance is "set apart" (Carlson, 1996, p.20). "This image of performance as a border, or margin, a site of negotiation, has become extremely important in subsequent thinking about such activity" (Carlson, 1996, p.20). The first phase is the pre-liminal or separation phase. Guss (2001) reports this as the "period of separation of participants in time and space from their daily life sphere" (p.161). Participants shift to a more "sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time" (Turner, 1982, p.24). The shift opens a performance space that exists in-between rather than set-apart from ordinary life, a space on the "border, a margin, a site of negotiation" (Carlson, 1996, p.20). Within this, subjects encounter the second phase, the liminal or \*transition\* phase. Van Gennep referred to this as 'margin' or 'limen' (meaning threshold in Latin). Guss (2001) writes that this phase evokes "ambiguities of meaning which emerge on the margin between structures of the past and the future" (p.161). Turner (1982) claims that "the ritual subjects pass through … a sort of social limbo" in this phase (p.24). He suggests that this liminal space invokes "anti-structure"

and facilitates an experience of communitas14 (p.45). Exiting the liminal phase evokes the third phase, that which van Gennep called \*incorporation.\* This phase involves the incorporation of the liminal experience. The subject re-aggregates or re-integrates in society (Guss, 2001). They resume their everyday social roles carrying with them the new perspectives they may have from the experience. Guss suggests that this "performative sequencing can effect a transformation of consciousness" (p.161). Cabral (2001) asserts that transformation arises due to the way in which the ritual structure creates a bridge into "situations that would be tense in the real context" (p.56).

Schechner (1988) argues a link between ritual and theatre stating that one develops from the other: theatre from ritual and ritual from theatre (p.112). This circularity is inherent in Playback Theatre with the ritual repetition of the invitation to tell juxtaposed with and contained by the rhythmic theatricality of the conductor and the creation and presentation of the enactments. Performance genres are living examples of ritual "in/as action" (Turner, 1986, p.7). In the ritual containment, the representation of the ordinary life in which we are embedded is mirrored in a way that integrates the reflection of consciousness. We are able to see our living context in the interaction between "aesthetic drama processes and sociocultural processes" at a given time and place (Turner, 1988, p.28). Myerhoff (1990) explains that symbol and object become fused in the ritual process. The ritual frame changes the quotidian into a symbolic rather than temporal realm. This yields an in-between time, in an in-between space, where participants move in and out of the "liminal" (Turner, 1969, 1990). In the ritual frame

> Invisible referents or realities to which ritual symbols point become our experience and the subject may have the sense of glimpsing, or more accurately, \*knowing\* the essential, accurate patterns of human life, in relation to the natural and cosmic order. … Thus transformation is a multidimensional alteration of the ordinary state of mind, overcoming barriers between thought, action, knowledge, and emotion (Myerhoff, 1990, p.246).

>

14 Communitas is discussed in length later in the chapter.

Sennett (1994) argues that ritual is healing and offers a site of resistance. He states that "ritual constitutes the \*social\* form in which human beings seek to deal with denial as active agents rather that as passive victims" (p.80). This notion of personal and collective agency is embedded in the participatory opportunities in the ritual process. Myerhoff (1990), however, reminds the reader that the experience "cannot be compelled, only invited or sought" (p.246). As people enter the ritual theatre event there is a possibility that they will be transported from "a collection of separate individuals into a group or congregate of participants" (Schechner, 1988, p.142). Bailey (2000) questions the notion of collective experience, suggesting that the phenomenon of people feeling and thinking in the same way, remains the "sum of individual experiences" (p.385). While very much predicated on the notion of performance as a culturally conservative activity in tribal and agrarian societies (Carlson, 1996), Turner's interrogation of the 'liminal' is helpful in examining the potential of the in-between or marginal spaces of the public ritual.

\*\*3.2.1 Liminal Activity, Spontaneity and Flow\*\*

Turner proposes that liminal activities are anti-structure or in opposition to the structure inherent in normative cultural operations. Carlson draws on Turner to argue that liminal activities "provide a space removed from daily activity for members of a culture to think about how they think in propositions that are not in cultural codes but about them" (Carlson, 1996, p.23). Like Turner, Schechner's (1985) work also examines the way in which performance evokes liminal or marginal spaces in which the everyday activities are elevated. He states that "in all kinds of performances a certain definite threshold is crossed. And if it isn't the performance fails" (p.10). Schechner implicates the audience in the successful performance, and therefore in the likelihood of a collective crossing of the threshold. He claims that the success of a performance is contingent on there being enough audience members to share the space with the performers so that together they can bring it to life through interaction. He reports that "no theatre performance functions detached from its audience" (Schechner, 1985, p.10). In fact, it is this interaction that generates the level of intensity that enables the participants to cross the threshold, and attain a state of flow; "the state where action and awareness merge (Myerhoff, 1990, p.247, Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1992, 1997).

Turner (1982) differentiates the experience of flow from the experience of communitas that was discussed earlier. He posits that flow is primarily an individual experience, whereas communitas is between or among individuals. Also, he suggests that communitas is more likely "a matter of grace rather than law" (p.58). Csikszentmihalyi (1992) writes of activities where we experience \*flow,\* a concept that provides another way in which to speak of the liminal experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997) shows that the degree of difficulty of a sporting event must not exceed the level at which it becomes unachievable (too hard) for the individual. He proposes that we desire to feel stretched to the limit and yet simultaneously feel as though we are somehow "master of our own fate". The experience of flow equates to an \*optimal experience\* and occurs when our "body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (p.3). Yet it is his reframing of this "sense of mastery" to "a sense of participation" that is perhaps more meaningful in the context of ritual performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, p.4). The sense of feeling that one can succeed in participating adequately in the performance fosters a similar dynamic and could determine whether the participating audience joins in or withdraws, that is, whether they feel included or overlooked. Similar interactive relationships between play, participation and degree of difficulty is documented in the play literature (Carlson, 1996).

By way of explaining flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1992) proposes a simple Cartesian relationship between the two most important dimensions of the experience: the challenge and the skills we possess to meet it. As stated above, flow occurs when the degree of difficulty of the challenge and the skill level of the person are both high, that is, when the person is "fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.30). Either side of this optimum relationship between challenge and skill are the experiences of anxiety or boredom. Anxiety occurs if the challenge exceeds a reasonable gap between current skills or knowledge, and the skills and knowledge required to meet the challenge whereas boredom occurs when the challenge is too low (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). In his later text, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) extends this to include various other experiences outside of flow, anxiety and boredom (see Figure 3).

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) suggests that between flow and anxiety, arousal occurs, that is, skills may not be immediately sufficient, but there is scope for the person to engage in the challenge. Further, if skills are sufficiently high in a low challenge environment, rather than boredom, the person experiences relaxation. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) nominates activities such as "play, art, pageantry, ritual and sports" as ones that induce flow due to the systematic way "they help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable" (p.72).

\*\*Figure 3: Flow: The Relationship between Challenge and Skill\*\*

![Rea%20Dennis%20-%20Public%20Performance,%20Personal%20Story%20A%20%20aa69f3095310455e95ef906fd8770c9c/image4.png](Rea%20Dennis%20-%20Public%20Performance,%20Personal%20Story%20A%20%20aa69f3095310455e95ef906fd8770c9c/image4.png)

High

Arousal

Anxiety

Flow

CHALLENGEES

Worry Control

Relaxation Apathy

Boredom

Low SKILLS High

The quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills. Optimal experience, or flow, occurs when both variables are high

Csikszentmihalyi (1977, p.31).

A seminal arena for the flow experience is in improvisational theatre. Improv15 teacher, Viola Spolin's (1999) concept of intuition developed to maximise how actors learn, and what actors learn, can be equated with Turner's notion of the liminal. She states that

> [T]he intuitive can only respond in immediacy – right now. It comes bearing gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us (Spolin, 1999, p.4).

>

She extends this to claim that in the intuitive act, the (full human) intelligence is freed. Sills (1999) suggests that Spolin is an authority on intuition, and has added his ideas to the mix when he explains that intuition is the "direct knowing of something without the conscious use of reasoning" (p.ix). In her actor training, Spolin identifies seven variables that contribute to the likelihood of the performer responding intuitively. The first of these variables are theatre games and physicalisation. In the games the familiarity with the internal logic of the game and the possibility of excitement assists the student actors to extend themselves. In physicalisation the actor is building a familiarity with their own repertoire of physical experiences and working to extend this. The second variable is freedom from the constraints that come with needing approval or when responding to feedback (or others' responses generally) as disapproval. Fear of disapproval can induce in the students a readiness to respond to attack and hinder their playfulness. The group expression variable is linked to the former two with group membership serving to provide an environment for contest and extension while simultaneously providing a space for students to develop resilience and robustness in relation to approval and disapproval. These four variables are significant in that they refer to the self.

15\*Improv\* is the popular American term for improvisational theatre performance, technique and practice. The Australian equivalent is \*Impro\*

The next two variables are the audience and the theatre techniques of the actors. In both these variables, the students must develop understanding: about the role of the audience, and the structure that techniques provide for the improvisor. Finally, Spolin urges acting students to integrate their learning into their daily life (Spolin, 1999, pp.4-17). Essentially, Spolin's coaching directs students toward heightened concentration and focus, so that they find ways to enter the state of flow and to experience their performing work as a liminal activity.

Moreno's (1949 in Karp, 1994) theory of spontaneity is similar to Spolin's conception of intuition, with respect to the idea that it exists in the here-and-now. In his study of the spontaneity-creativity complex, Moreno (in Fox, 1987) posits a simple model that suggests there is a relationship between "the moment, immediate action, spontaneity, and creativity – in contrast to the customary link between spontaneity and automatic response" (p.40). This latter link is derivative of the Latin sponte, meaning "of free will" (p.42). However, unlike the seven aspects of intuition that Spolin articulates, Moreno articulates four forms of spontaneity: "creative, original, dramatic and having adequacy of response"(Karp, 1994, p.53). Drawing on the fourth element, Nolte (2000) explains that spontaneity can be defined as "an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation" (p.219). The notion of adequacy of response is a key conception of spontaneity integrated into the thinking about Playback Theatre. Previously, I discussed Salas' (1999) explanation of "good enough" Playback Theatre (see Chapter Two, p.15). In the Playback Theatre process, performers and audience alike experience repeated challenges to their spontaneity and thus require a readiness "to respond appropriately to the situation in which they find themselves" (Nolte, 2000, p.219).

\*\*3.2.2 Liminal Activity and Emotional Engagement\*\*

Berne (in Carlson, 1996) advocates that "the most rewarding moments of human experience are to be attained in … 'intimacy' or 'spontaneity'" (Carlson, 1996, p.48). Participating in performance, or drama processes in general, is liable to produce feelings of intimacy. Bundy (2003) states that aesthetic engagement should ideally be an experience of intimacy, that is, of connection, animation and heightened awareness. These experiences of "feeling invigorated", "more alive, more alert", and stimulated to "think about questions regarding humanity in a new light" (Bundy, 2003, p.180) reinforce what Turner claims occurs during the liminal (performance) activity.

Intrinsic to any ritual process are the rules that frame it (Turner, 1982). The same can be said for improvised drama processes (Spolin, 1999, Sills, 1999). Spolin suggests that the ritual frames, or the rules of improvisation, exist to contain the performer and the performance.

Yet, it is not the rules of manners or acceptable social protocols that offer containment (Spolin, 1999) and inhibit spontaneous self-expression (Johnstone 1981). Rather it is the rules of engagement in the particular activity. It is not that there are rules as such, but that the implicit rules are made known in some way. Establishing a ritual frame serves to announce that a certain set of rules are at play here and \*release\* participants to act beyond their constrained domestic roles and engage in other ways with themselves, each other and with the social environment (Turner, 1982, Schechner, 1985).

Turner (1969, 1990) asserts that the potential of this released, shared state is the enabling of liminal activity, i.e., activity that is oppositional to structure and that occurs in a transitional moment. This is perhaps one of the great paradoxes of ritualised activity. Ritual demands a solid structure. This frees participants to dare and to risk as they move toward an experience of flow. In acting freely, the (acceptable social) rules of engagement may be breached, e.g., the disclosure of personal stories in a public forum. The ritual event, therefore, could be seen to promote resistance while seeming to order and control. Where Turner's analysis reveals that ritual processes induce the liminal Schechner's (1993) exploration of the intersections of theatre and anthropology experiments with the ways ritual heightens the theatrical experience. Use of ritual in theatre is linked with notions of maximising spectator engagement within the liminal potential of the performance (Bundy, 2001). It is possible that forms that promote uncertainty and anti-structure will be met with resistance. This is so in theatre forms like Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal encountered suspicion due to the risks involved in making the theatre that he advocates. The following passage reports his experience:

I proposed that we go to the streets to make forum theatre, but they (the organisers) would not accept that because you never know what is going to happen. You are [working at] creating a future and they want to reveal a past (Boal, 1994, p.22).

This caution by public officials toward "released" states can also be found within audiences in performance rituals. Johnstone (1981) asserts that childhood conditioning could act to block participants to this release, and thus block their spontaneity, intuition and inhibit flow. Fear of failure, or getting it wrong, attachment to being original and clever, uncertainty about rules and unexpressed or unrealistic expectations inhibit spontaneity and unselfconscious action (Moreno in Karp, 1994). Karp (1994) expands this theory of spontaneity further suggesting that if the task appears too hard, we feel anxious and subsequently lose spontaneity, that is, experience a diminished feeling with respect to our capacity to respond adequately to the (new) situation. This could induce a drop in our capacity for pleasure; an outcome that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies as a loss of flow. Thus, a perceived pressure to perform that evokes the same response as the pressure to perform in real life can hamper entering the liminal state. Karp reports that anything that causes anxiety extinguishes spontaneity. She states that "when anxiety is high, spontaneity is low, and when spontaneity is high, anxiety is low" (Karp, 1994, p.52). Blatner (1988) argues that spontaneity is essentially a freedom from the pressures and manoeuvres that inhibit playfulness. He proposes that play is inhibited by "the fear of making mistakes, the fear of comparisons, excessive competition, or hostile play"

(p.162). He suggests that Playback Theatre has the potential to invite play in adults as distinct from inviting performance in adults. Yet for some adults these two actions engender the same cautious response.