

# Playback Stories

## Visiting the other group

Last Friday I took some of the actors from the Thresholds Playback [see Liz's entry under Moments to Remember, page 7] group to see a performance of Playback Midwest at one of the city's parks. The evening felt like the ending of a story for me. The story began when I left Chicago to help my mate, leaving my dream of Playback behind. It ended as I sat in the audience watching Tim conduct these new, young actors (Playback Midwest now has two performing levels!) in stories from the lives of the actors at Thresholds. It's a story of losing something precious and very close to me—a talent for Playback I feel I possess; my giftedness which I abandoned. It ends with the discovery that I guess it's not really possible to lose something so precious, but thinking that you have can issue forth a lot of insight and... even growth.

One of the climaxes in the story comes when one day I come home from a particularly stressful day at the shop where my mantra is "What the hell am I doing this for? This is not me! I'm no good at this, I have to watch myself on TV tonight, and I know I'm not going to like it 'cause I *hated* doing it even though every actor in Chicago wants one of these gigs, I'm just disgusted by the whole acting business and I hate being an entrepreneur 'cause I'm so lousy at it, how did I get myself here: These were not my choices!". When I get home I listen to my messages and it's Tom Valeo [theatre critic] wanting to see a Playback performance! "The dream of Playback in Chicago is going on without me! How did this happen? This is not what I wanted." So I picked up the phone and I don't care what I sound like, like a baby, like a lost child, I guess but I don't care, I make the call to Jonathan anyway.

I've been meaning to write since that evening not knowing exactly what to say, except thank you for listening to me with understanding and support, without judgement. It really helped a lot.

Last Friday I watched Playback Midwest with gratefulness for inspiring my group; our outing together forging another link between us in a process that is so delicate and *slow!* As I watch I understand a lot, mostly what you told me on the phone, that my identity as a Playback artist is not threatened by others, *it is mine.* As I watch I appreciate the struggle just to do this work in the climate of *gotta-scratch-and-claw-your-way-to-survive* that is Chicago.

At the end I thanked Tim and met the new actors, and as we drove home I listened as the group talked of *our* future performances, of how we need to come to rehearsals and just keep working at it. It's a very rewarding evening and very unexpectedly, I find an ending to this crazy story of losing something that was with me all the time!

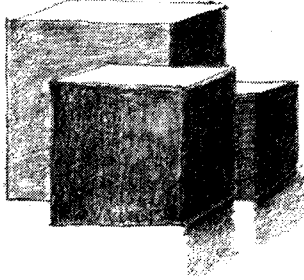
Liz Muckley, USA

## Peter's year

1993 was a journey from old hermit fringe dweller on the edge of the Sydney company, other-focused as I build my wider work in the world, to a return to a central place at the fire as we shape our next stage with a change of leadership and, probably, more new people into the circle.

As a conductor I have become more of a shape-changer—throwing my storyteller's eyes into the cave of structure and playing with themes, rhythms, motifs and laughter... I have encountered public audiences, bankers, nuns, rehab workers, teachers, children.

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**Inside:  
Plans for making  
your own wooden  
Playback boxes.**

## IPTN Directors

Hiroko Ishii and Ingeborg Meyer have been appointed to the IPTN Board. Hiroko, who lives near Tokyo, is a professional interpreter, specializing in the fields of medicine, psychology, and business affairs. She has also studied clinical psychology and practises counselling at the National Children's Hospital. She is a member of R&C Playback Theatre in Tokyo, is married and the mother of two "lively" girls and has two dogs, which are named Luke Skywalker (golden retriever) and Dragon Skymaster (beagle).

Ingeborg comes from Hannover, Germany. After specializing in occupational therapy and adult education, she studied at the Drama Action Centre in Sydney, Australia. Since returning to Germany four years ago, she has finished her education degree and led Playback workshops in diverse settings. She has been serving as the IPTN membership secretary for Europe.

**The IPTN has 152 members, from 14 countries. The number of member companies totals 33.**

## Membership newsflash

In response to feedback from members, we are making a change in one aspect of the membership guidelines. From now on, we will no longer require that a group be led by a current Practitioner. This has felt too restricting for some groups, especially new ones. Instead, we now ask that any group applying for membership name a Mentor—not necessarily a member of the group, but someone in your area who can see your work and maintain a supportive relationship with the group. The Mentor will be a Practitioner member of the IPTN, already well-connected and grounded in Playback Theatre. He or she will be available to advise and support the member group. We hope this will feel more comfortable and workable. Please talk to your membership secretary if you want more understanding about this.

We have also heard that the membership forms have been confusing in some ways, and we'll be revising them to make them easier to understand and follow. When filling out these forms, please give us the information we ask for—it will save us a tremendous amount of tearing-out-of-hair if we have your full address, date, correct name of your company, etc.

**Do you have material  
for the Playback archives?  
Contact Marianne Tobler  
Irchelstr. 17, 8400 Winterthur  
Switzerland  
Phone and fax 4152-212-4961.**

*Error! Last issue we made a mistake with Marianne's postal code. The correct one is printed above.*

The **DIRECTORY** of IPTN members is completed and accompanies this issue of **INTERPLAY**.

It lists each member's name and address, includes personal comment, and groups members according to continent.

It was compiled by Jo Salas and Toni Horvatin.

## **INTERPLAY**

is published three times a year by the International Playback Theatre Network, PO Box 1173, New Paltz, NY 12561.

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Val Wells

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# Learning to be a good conductor

*The following four reports describe the conducting workshop held in London last November, which was taught by Deborah Pearson and attended by 19 persons from eight countries. A performance followed the workshop. This material was collected by Veronica Needa, who writes the first contribution.*

## Letting emptiness work

Karin Gisler and I hatched this idea during the Midnight Sun Conference in Finland. We both wanted more specific work on conducting skills and Deborah Pearson had expressed a willingness to come back to Europe towards the end of the year. Zürich or London? I took it on. I wanted to make this experience easily available to my London Playback family. Several of us were ready to step into the conductor's role. And London felt like a good meeting point for most of our European Playback cousins. It came together so easily. Letters were written, faxes were sent, phone calls were made. Nineteen people gathered in my home on the Friday evening for supper. I served my favorite oriental dishes, roast duck as well as monk's vegetables and tofu! Thus began our weekend.

From novices to old hands, Deborah created a space for all of us to feed and drink from the Playback table according to our needs. My main learning was that I don't have to work so hard to initiate a relationship with the audience. That my natural energy already creates a connection. Taking time to allow something to come out of emptiness. That's a risk! Trying out the different ways of phrasing 'the question' in rehearsal, so that it is easy to answer, and can be answered in a form that is easy for the unique way of communication with the audience—playful, grave, questing or challenging—all of us working with respectful and deep listening.

**S**ince then I have conducted public performances for London Playback Theatre twice. Some useful feedback suggested I contain my urge to be tactile (!) and maintain a neutrality between people I knew in the audience and people I didn't know. Being cozy familiar with people already known to



*From right, Deborah Pearson at work, with Ken Sprague, Veronica Needa, Rebecca Mitchell, and Ari Muttonen.*

me can create an 'us' and 'them' for people who are new. I know I need to keep working (but not too hard!) on economy, on making the connections, holding the opposites, really allowing the dark as well as the light, seeing the bigger pattern for the evening. A lifetime's work! However, a member of the audience did say to me that my conducting made him feel like he had been invited into my living room to watch the performance. It had felt like home. I must be on track!

I was a very solitary and quiet only child, and now that I am older I find that my main impulse is to create family, brothers and sisters, and home around me. Gathering together my extended Playback family last November, bringing them into my real home (I redecorated the hallway and cork tiled the loo specially in time!), making a meeting place for us to play and learn from each other, I love this work! It feels like my journey as a Playback practitioner

is about enabling people to feel at 'home' in the best possible of ways—in themselves and in the 'family' we create in the moment.

*Veronica Needa, London Playback Theatre*

## The performance

King's Cross has a reputation in London as being dark and seedy. A crossroads where people stop, exchange and move on. The mainline British Rail Station and Underground services millions of commuters every day. It is paradoxically both a meeting place and a hollow distancing tunnel. On 29th November 1993 inside a cramped theatre space in the heart of King's Cross 11 Playback practitioners from 9 countries performed for a public audience. London Playback Theatre had hosted a Conductors'

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Weekend Workshop facilitated by Deborah Pearson and this performance was the culmination of a rich learning experience where conductors shared difficulties, rehearsed different approaches and refined skills.

Mirroring the context of the workshop, we chose 'Internationality' and 'Place' as the themes for the show. As one of the 11 actors, spontaneously moving in and out of the designated performance space, together with our musicians Thierry and Yves, I was taken on a Round the World Playback Ticket. Our destinations were painful and exotic, harsh and dreamy. A chilling journey into past life Nazi Germany; a tragic separation of mother and son at Bombay Railway Station in 1948, en route to Israel; Carnival in Trinidad; love moments in the Canadian Rockies; a funeral in Santa Fe; New Year festival in China; ocean delights in New Zealand. The stories flowed, as did the ensemble and the evening was both satisfying and a true reflection of the internationality of Playback. It was a meeting place for a group of fifty people—where the space between the stories becomes a shared experience.

I was, however, aware when I left the theatre (the temporary home of London Playback) that the stories on the streets of King's Cross were left untold; where the meetings are vacant and the exchange is motivated by the need to survive rather than the will to engage. I was reminded of the importance of furthering the uses of Playback; lobbying for funding, of going both underground and in the mainline, to identify where the need for Playback lies and to service that need in the most creative and authentic way possible. Finally I was reminded of Dr. Moreno and his early work with those on the streets of Vienna—different location, different time, same context. He provided a map, let us as Playback practitioners always be mindful of the routes we take.

Julie Lacy, London Playback Theatre

## Back home

I was encouraged to be conductor. When I came to London, I was very unexperienced. Now I'm a little more experienced: in April I conducted a performance in a home for old people. I prepared myself very well: I read the notes of Deborah's workshop (!) and I thought over the questions I would ask, over the themes that would arise, I spoke with the social workers in that home...It turned out to be very hard work. Most of the audience seemed to be half dead. About 30% were interested and involved and we got our stories. The theme of the stories was "What was the best time of my life?"—there was no theme given to them. They decided not to touch the remembrances of the war—of course!

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We are like brothers and sisters without parents, and of course there's rivalry and competition. Who takes the throne?

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There was the story of being in nature as a young woman with her friends; a story about a visit to a zoo as a child with her family (her brother died in the war), the brother hypnotizing a lion; there was the story of climbing up a mountain in the dark and seeing the sun rise (the teller was nearly blind!... from the dark to the light!); the story of an old infirm man who wanted to see himself as a strong young man again—his cue characterizing himself was: like an explosion!

When we saw the video of this performance, our first impression was confirmed: the contact with these old people was similar to that with children. Me as conductor was like a primary school teacher...(Besides, we were shocked to see us on the video, we saw all our mistakes!!!—and got many good ideas how to do the stories better) What was hard work for me (well, it was my second conducting, that's hard, anyway), was to get in contact and to realize that many of them were like "mummies." Nevertheless I found I did a good job.

What I learned in the workshop was to be aware of the "dramaturgy"—the

different phases of a performance: the opening, the development of the breadth and depth of the theme and the closure. Very helpful was to see different ways of making contact, to go to the audience, even to sit in the audience, to lead the teller back to his/her seat and so on. I learned many other things. . .

Some words about our company life and about the question, if the workshop changed my Playback Theatre life.

As you probably know, we have no director since Marlies moved to Frankfurt, in Jan. 1993. Every rehearsal is led by one of us; three of us conduct. That has advantages and disadvantages. Some of us are better than others; all of us could grow, take responsibility for performances, etc. Sometimes it's difficult and frustrating. We are like brothers and sisters without parents, and of course there's rivalry and competition. Who takes the throne? We had a very good meeting to discuss the question. Do we really need a

director, or two? Can't we share the responsibilities like we did until now? It was very releasing to talk very sincerely about rivalry, about informal leadership. We found that's the most important thing: to handle these conflicts directly and sincerely. My role in this group is: I'm the one with the "international flair" and a certain competence based on it. I try to put in the ideas I got in Finland and London—and they have to pass the reality test.

Helga Daniels, Köln Playback Theatre

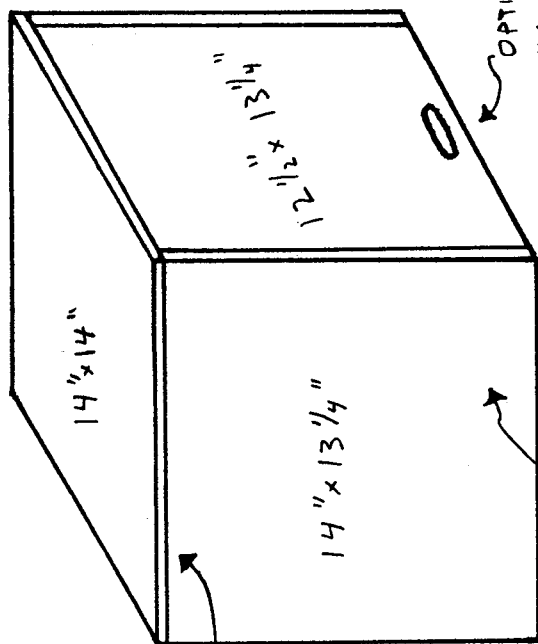
## Insights and changes

[The first part of this report is missing due to fax transmission errors]

During the weekend in London I was able to see how my difficulties as a conductor are closely related to the issue of context, of cultural context. This was a great relief because I was beginning to head for a major crisis of confidence about my own conducting—that it was all my fault when the audience was unresponsive, etc. So this was very affirming

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# TYPICAL CUBE CONSTRUCTION DETAILS FOR PLAYBACK



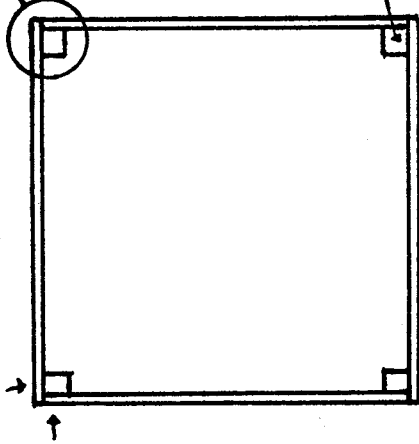
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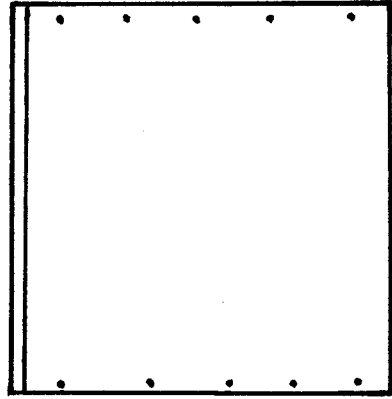
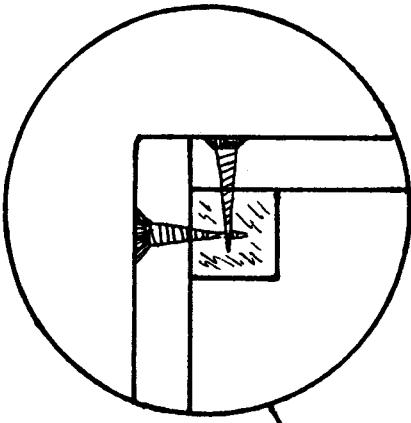
OPTIONAL HANDLE ON LARGEST CUBES

- \* BUT JOINTS AT ALL CORNERS
- \* CUBE SIZES VARY, BUT TYPICALLY A SET INCLUDES TWO EACH OF 14", 18", AND 22"
- \* USE 3/4" BIRCH OR SANDED PLYWOOD

GLUE AND USE 1/8" SCREWS AT CORNERS



5/4" x 5/4" PINE BLOCK



COUNTERSINK AND PUTTY SCREW HEADS (4-5 PER EDGE)



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of the actors, and continuing to conduct from there! *Playback Theatre Adelaide Inc., Australia*

\* When I played a boy on a fishing/camping trip with his family—his mother had an epileptic seizure and fell face down into a fire pit grill— he freaked and ran away into the woods for about 7 hours—his father merely told him his mom was going to be OK when he

returned, didn't ask how he was doing. He never was able to leave that behind. He always runs at trouble now. We did a transformation of the ending—and had his dad talk to him about it—letting him release—it was a wonderful moment for me in my Playback Theatre career. *Kevin Gray, USA*

\* The Conference (NZ)—stories and Playback 3x a day! And wonderful music. *Ann E. Hale, USA*

\* Looking back on what we as a company had coped with, worked through and achieved in terms of work in the country. What a year we had! *Elizabeth Hetzel, Australia*

\* Standing at the front of a big Lutheran church in Rautalampi, Finland waiting to enact a story that was being told in Finnish, standing with three old and dear friends whom I do not get to see very often yet here I am in this far-

off place performing with them, and there are the French Playback Company crawling around on their hands and knees looking like troglodytes with their lamps and torches to light us. A most solemn and ridiculous moment. It is all there. *Bev Hosking, New Zealand*

\* Performing with an international group of ten actors, two musicians from England, Switzerland, France, Australia, New Zealand, and Finland after a

members valued their association with Playback. Their pride of being a "Playback Actor" was so apparent, and I felt very rewarded by this. *Liz Muckley, USA*

\* Telling a story at the Conductors Workshop—having left the Melbourne Company but still feeling a very strong connection with the wider Playback community. *Jude Murphy, Australia*

\* We had grant for 1993 working

with a group of at-risk inner city 11 to 14 year-olds doing Playback which these kids then performed at schools, community centers and churches for the last 6 months. In the beginning the white kids and the black kids did not mix. After about 2 months—1 story during rehearsal—a black girl picked a white girl to play her—a first! After the story, the black girl said (as Playback tells



### ***The Fifth International Playback Theatre Conference***

## **One World, Ten Thousand Stories**

**June 22-25, 1995**

**Olympia, Washington**

Between the Cascade range and the mighty Olympics lie the lush woodlands and waters of Puget Sound. Join us here at the height of summer, 1995 for the first North American Playback Theatre conference. Meet individuals and company members from near and far for an engaging cross-fertilization of ideas, stories, and performance experiences.

Our vision is to welcome a diverse and inventive group of Playback players willing to share knowledge, to learn, and to celebrate our common purpose: creating theater from story which captures the mysteries and tenderness of the human heart. Participants will come from all around this planet, each bringing a multitude of experiences; one world, ten thousand stories.

For more information contact Leticia Nieto-Johnson at 206-754-6053 or James Lucal at 206-365-2352 or write One World Playback Conference, 1367 Bigelow St. NE, Olympia, WA 98506.

weekend conductors workshop—the performance was conducted by Deborah Pearson. Also, becoming 'autistic' in the role of a cat in a story told by Heather Robb. *Tom Kenney-Herbert, England*

\* Moments from the Finland conference came to mind, meeting people, hot steam and icy water, non-verbal play. *James R. Lucal, USA*

\* Conducting for the first time! *T.Z. McKenna, Australia*

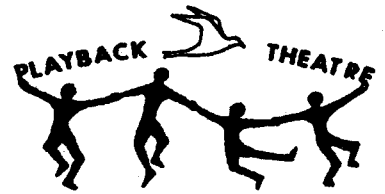
\* Thresholds performance (a Playback group of mentally handicapped adults). I personally felt how much the

often do) "You said all the things I really said—I guess we're not so different after all"—We had a discussion on it, magic happened and the group was transformed. *Roni Ostfield, USA*

\* When the people who came to my workshop on Playback Theatre at A.H.P. [Association of Humanistic Psychology] really were excited about the power and uniqueness of Playback Theatre. *Paula Patterson, USA*

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# Playback Around the World



## Moments to Remember

The following answers are from the IPTN renewal questionnaire question, *What was one stand-out moment in your Playback year?*

\* When an audience of 60 sixth graders sat silently as a young man mourned the absence of his father. *Debe Edden, USA*

\* Boulder Homeless Awareness Show—powerful stories from people who need to be heard. *Playback Theatre West, USA*

\* At an end-of-conference performance for 400 trainers and developers, a woman tells a moment from the powhiri at the beginning of the conference realizing this land is of two peoples—Maori and pakeha—differences and similarities! There is stillness—the actors suddenly take their place in a fluid of silence—and a wave emerges from us that flows over the whole audience in a moment of free-flow—the wash—of community . . . And the response of a Maori elder sitting at the front in a predominantly pakeha professional group—he becomes enlivened, bangs his staff, nods his head in recognition and cries “kia ora, kia ora.” This is why I do it! *Martin Putt, Aotearoa/New Zealand*

\* Getting paid to do the work. *Julia Craven, USA*

\* There were many very challenging ones performing for Ernst and Young (Accountants)—they were all pissed [angry] to some degree and obnoxious, e.g.: “give me a word for your pregnant wife at this time” Teller: “Fat”. A roar of laughter from

audience. While we were doing pairs they seemingly got turned on by our movements—last year they had a strip-o-gram. I think they felt they missed out this year. Has anyone got any tried and true survival skills for performances such as this? We did finish the show and we did all do well, then we hit the champas [champagne]. *Brisbane Playback Theatre, Australia*

\* Performing at the funeral vigil for a 22 year-old woman with an open coffin and a very involved family and church community. Also, hosting the Playback Theatre Conference—welcoming participants in a moving opening ceremony. *Christchurch Playback Theatre Company, New Zealand*

\* Performing for the Justice Department for their training they do with the supervisors from the Court System who have been identified as deficient. Supervisors from all over the country who have very similar stories of difficulty in the role of authority. *DC Playback Theater, USA*

\* Three actors appearing from behind the screen as a chorus of leeches! *Melbourne Playback Theatre Co., Australia*

\* Performance in East Berlin (stories about the reunification of East and West), very exciting! *Playback Theater Köln, Germany*

\* During a workshop—a 70 year-old man told a story of being threatened and pushed around by a gang of kids when he was 11 years old. While watching he got very emotional and felt

powerless all over again. I then gave him the opportunity to rewrite it—with him having the control and power. He was so excited to see this part acted out. *Pittsburgh Playback Theatre, USA*

\* Being for the first time an actress in a performance. *Annette Henne, Switzerland [Annette is the founder and conductor of her company]*

\* Our work with kids in workshop settings is always a stand-out. The process of the emotional, inarticulate, and frequently unheard adolescent finding a means of expression, and making disclosures, is a joy. *SOS Playback Theater, USA*

\* A story in a performance called “women’s stories” about protesting at a missile base in Britain, being arrested with a large group of women singing. The conductor asked the teller to teach the song to the audience. It was a great moment at that part of the story to have such involvement of everyone there celebrating this woman’s story. The second part to this story was the processing of this story when we explored in depth a moment when the whole company on stage got stuck in not being able to move the story forward. It was revealing and exciting to hear/see the individual sub-stories that were occurring. *Wellington Playback Theatre, New Zealand*

\* Conducting from the boxes: turning around a potentially negative comment from an audience member by inviting the teller to join me in the middle

**INTERPLAY** is the newsletter of the International Playback Theatre Network, an association of Playback Theatre performers and teachers. PO Box 1173, New Paltz, NY 12561

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