

P T I N P T I R P H L T A Y P T

• newsletter of the international playback theatre network • po box 1173 new paltz ny 12561 • july 1992 •

PLAYBACK STORIES

From Peter Hall, co-director of the Drama Action Centre in Sydney and director of Sydney Playback Theatre:

I don't change easily.

And yet I flourish as an improviser, which is swimming in a constant sea of change.

So I'm concerned with structures.

An ex-musician from our company came and watched a performance recently, and then rehearsed with us, and gave us feedback. His response to the performance was to appreciate the forum for people's stories to be expressed, but to be disappointed that the form had not changed.

We were stuck. We hadn't grown. We hadn't adapted the form to our own culture. We were still doing the same things that had been done ten years before.

This was hard to hear. I was angry, and defensive.

But aware, too, that he had struck a chord in people in the company, and that this response was out there.

I was challenged.

Had I failed? As an artist? As a director? I needed to reassess.

I remembered as a child, when we would go out, I would ask before we got to the end of the street: "When are we going home?"

That was what I knew.

In the early years of our company some of the people wanted to change the form, were restless with it. It wasn't 'hard-edged' or 'political' enough. It was too 'American.'

My own vision was to work towards getting the form to work. This profoundly subtle, complex organicism.

Over a decade I feel I have travelled a long way towards this. Towards being able to get inside the Playback form as a conductor or actor, and create something that works for people and that is artistically satisfying.

And yet, the question is there. Is the form locked in a time warp? Is it culturally biased?

Does it matter?

As the international Playback community moves towards a more mature structure and vision of itself via this unfolding network, it seems timely to be asking ourselves these sorts of questions. (3/92)

From Liz Muckley, a professional actress from Chicago who is studying psychodrama:

After this summer's institute, I returned to Chicago personally enriched and ready to employ the methods we explored. I got my chance almost right away. My psychodrama trainer, Linnea Carlson-Sabelli, set me up with a practicum at Thresholds, a thriving psychosocial rehabilitation center offering many programs for mental health consumers. I lead a weekly group doing psychodramatic vignettes with members who face daily struggles with living in the community. As soon as I arrived, I wanted to see if I could somehow implement Playback as another form of support and creative expression. Members who are in the Theater Arts Project (they form a network of workers in local theatres doing jobs such as clean-up and ushering, etc. as well as create theatre pieces that they perform twice a year under the direction of Bette Kimmel) became my "guinea pigs." I have spent the last several weeks teaching them the form and honing my conducting skills. We do each other's stories and then discuss the issues inherent in the playback. It not only generates lively discussion of pertinent problems, but the other thing it does, I am finding, is that it helps us develop skills that because of mental illness we are lacking. Skills such as trusting our instincts, interacting with others to create something together, drawing on our own feelings (to which we don't often have access because it is too scary) to play a role for someone else, making a gift of our selves. Well, they are really enjoying this. My group has a very high attendance rate (brag...). It's amazing to me that a form so simple and basic can have such ramifications.

Last Wednesday we had a public presentation of Playback for the Drop-In Center's annual Open House. The audience of 60-70 people consisted of mental health workers, consumers, and folks from the community. It went very well, with many expressing interest in the form, the desire to be part of this exciting process for themselves (more member involvement, yeah!!), and even wanting to know how to become a volunteer at Thresholds!

The highlight was a story from a woman who had just been in a class where the professor had asked a question and she raised her hand to answer but was never called on. After the teacher had called on everyone but her, she put her hand down in embarrassment and



Do you know
where this is?
See page 5.

frustration. I asked what class it was, and she said "social work." PERFECT! My seven Playback actors with mental illness recreated a classroom of social workers with such veracity and humor and insight. It was truly remarkable!

This is hopefully just the beginning. We proved to ourselves that it can work for us, not only as a form of active group support but also that we are able to play back anyone's story, that the grace of mental illness gives us a trust in our acting and we gain a sense that we are connected to society, not isolated and shunned as we often feel. (12/91)

Update:

Well. Playback has really been a big focus for me in the last few months. I still conduct stories and train actors at Thresholds. We had our first public performance at this great, funky cabaret space on the near west side. It went just great. I was so proud of my actors for their concentration and spontaneous enactments. Lots of positive feedback from the audience, especially students and workers in the field. The actors felt very good and our spirits are high. We will be doing Playback once a month there and Bette Kimmel (Theatre Arts Project Director) and I will conduct. We rehearse once a week at the facility and encourage anyone who's hanging out to come in and be our audience. A lot of energy is gathering for our "Playback" thing we do on Monday afternoons in the Living Room. We had a visitor last week, a photographer who's doing a story on our group. We had a great time doing his story of rushing to get his photo to the *Sun-Times* for the front page of the sports section when the Bulls beat the NY team. And of course, we're really excited about being a feature in the Sunday Chicago *Sun-Times*. I always leave feeling exhilarated and exhausted. I'm still so much in the learning phase myself! But the atmosphere is one of exploration and fun and forgiveness abounds.

I've just completed teaching a trial eight-week course in Playback at Rush university under the supervision of Linea Carlson-Sabelli. Students are from the pool of nursing students, psychodrama trainees and anyone who's interested. Our goal is to offer this course as an elective in the Psychodrama Training Program at Rush University. The structure followed the structure of the Institute I attended last summer. Sessions are devoted to the art of improvisation, conducting, using the elements (costumes, music) and ending with two sessions with an invited audience. We will be deciding soon how to proceed with this course; we feel really pleased with how it turned out.

I think people are just naturally very attracted to this form of exchange and it seems easy to generate interest and support for these endeavors.

Future plans include forming a group of actors to perform under the auspices of Rush University. Personally, I'd like to teach this form of improvisation at Second City, the largest training center for improvisation (?!).

From Alfred Hohmann in Kassel, Germany. Alfred conducts supervision and co-directs the Institute for Applied Theatre. He wrote the following in 1991 too late to be included in the last circular letter:

In May I had the opportunity to organize a Playback workshop with Jonathan Fox in my hometown, Kassel, Germany. Many of the participants, as well as Jonathan, stayed in my house. One evening after dinner the group gathered in the living room and spontaneously began to sing songs — songs in German, English, Swiss-German, French. Such a community experience I will never forget. One woman with a beautiful voice from Berlin told us afterwards that she loves to sing but had not done it for the past four years because the friends she lived with had told her to stop.

This is the first time in my life that I voluntarily have become a member of an association. I always fear that I will lose my individuality in organizations, especially in Germany where there is a strong tradition of organizing people in groups with leaders. I don't know why I've joined the IPTN. But it feels right to me to belong to a group of people who in their work pay a lot of respect to the individuality of people with their very personal stories.

From Yvonne Carleton, who lives and work in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA:

On my return from the antipodes in February, I found the Santa Fe Playback group ready to become a Company. Previously I had been teaching two classes a week, so some people have been with me for 3,4,5 years. We had often combined the groups when we felt ready to put on performances. We had been feeling a little unsure about what it meant to be a company or if indeed there were any criteria.

Last year performances were scheduled approximately once a month. Our audiences included the general public, a hispanic agency sponsoring leadership for hispanic youth in the barrio, San Il Defonso Pueblo for Tewa women from the six northern pueblos, the Unitarian church as alternative Sunday morning church, Open Hands, an agency serving elderly and handicapped, and a Theater in a Shoebox (teenagers) benefit performance in exchange for space. Annually we are invited to the New Mexico Art Therapy conference on expressive arts. We charged admission and thought of ourselves as professional. We had a lot of word of mouth publicity and now are receiving unsolicited invitations for workshops and performances. So far we have only used themes emerging from the audience.

So how would we be different if we were a company? We soon found out. I let go the reins and no longer accepted money from the group for teaching or organizing. I handed over financial and administrative responsibility to others. I felt like a mom (for the second time), launching a bunch of teenagers into the world. We laughed at ourselves as mature individuals became such know-it-alls, resistant to commitment, and skittery about

assuming responsibility. I went through the pain of letting go my protege and watching others learn by doing things which, from my years of experience, I could have done faster and more efficiently. However we struggled and fought in this beginning birth process, we came together again to give one of our most creative performances. Does this make us a company? And must we register the new baby somewhere? Perhaps only the head and shoulders have been born, heart and lungs are already well into the world!

Returning from the stimulating Sydney conference via New Zealand to visit my two sisters, I caught a rehearsal of the Christchurch company. Jan Brooker was interested in stopping by Santa Fe to teach a workshop for us. Unfortunately it didn't work out, but my visit with the company was warming and informative. I gave an evening workshop at my sister's house in Whaikane for seniors, and found a heart connection but a marked cultural difference. Looking through my fliers, one participant found Jo Salas's name. She had known the family years ago in Christchurch. Then on to a Playback performance in Auckland, to have an interesting evening with the Sutcliffes, where I spent the night.

In Los Angeles airport I unexpectedly ran into Jane Elworthy of the Sidney company. She was on her way to Santa Fe to apprentice with a drum maker. Sadly for her the drummer did not materialize. I found her a place to stay, and happily for us she was then able to teach some Playback workshops and to act as a midwife in our birthing process. Jane became very much part of our group and we all miss her. We feel quite isolated here. It seems hard for our members to go visiting or for us to avail ourselves of other teachers, so we really welcome itinerant Playbackers.

As a fitting sequel to the Sydney conference, Jane and I and two other company members attended the Hama-Ha Indian Conference. These two conferences had a marked similarity in feeling and philosophy, and there was an incredible warmth and generosity of spirit emanating from the tribal peoples. This conference is happening annually and I highly recommend it. Larry Littlebird, the director, enjoyed our last performance so much he will be joining our classes. We can learn a lot from each other.

And last, but not least, we are at present negotiating with a newly formed Arts Center, who seem to have energy, expertise and right thinking and want us to become a resident company. They also have a beautiful space!

These are some of our stories. It is seven years since I started Playback in Santa Fe and it feels as if something solid has been built in a town where people are known to be unpredictable, uncommitted, and grossly underpaid. The town is also tri-cultural with incredibly strong barriers between each. We are beginning to be invited into the Indian and Hispanic cultures, and my dream is

to bring these two groups together at a Playback function with the company, who seem to remain forever Anglo. Perhaps things will change. I have at least another seven years!

Many moons ago Jonathan told us we were not a theatre. We hope that we have now graduated and will be part of the company of companies. (5/92)

From Ann Hale, a psychodramatist from Roanoke, Virginia, USA:

I have spent a year away from Playback since moving back to Roanoke, Virginia, across the country from Playback Theater Northwest, which I started up when I lived in Seattle. I have missed the company of actors, the stories, *the process*(!), and especially that lift in the heart region which transformed into a whisper when it settled into me viscerally, "everything's going to be all right."

I knew when I left Seattle that I wanted to begin again in Roanoke, and I knew that I wanted to start differently. I wanted to start with a group which represented the cultural diversity of the region. We have a refugee population, a homeless group, unemployed youth, yuppies, both black and white, a large elderly population, and the area's rural culture. There is a lack of substantive events which bring these cultures together.

I have an idea which I am beginning to talk to people about: *Bread and Stories*. What I envision is a company of actors which puts on a day-long event for a group of about fifteen people. We meet where we have access to an outdoor oven which can be used for baking lots of bread, and can be used at other times by people who are potters and ceramicists. In the morning we assemble the ingredients, mix and let the bread rise. Then we do stories. We then put

the bread into the oven and while it bakes we tell/do more stories. At the end everyone goes home with their bread (and stories). When that group gets filled up, we start adding another day, and so on, building the community, adding actors from the group, connecting in this simple and enriching way.

The next steps are getting the idea organized and finding/building the company to support the idea, letting the idea go into the hands of others.

Wish us well.

From Helga Daniels, Vera Dumpert, and Marlies Arping, members of Playback Theater Köln, in Köln, Germany, about the group's activities:

PT Köln started in February 1990 with a small group of five persons. After several changes of members and training places, the company now has eight — five women and three men — all psychodramatists. We are very happy to have a constant training space for our rehearsals twice a month.

In 1991 we did four performances and in many respects each of them became a special experience for us. We found performing a different and important way of learning more about Playback and about one another.

We started with an evening performance at a weekend theatre workshop and did the next one at the 20th anniversary meeting of the German psychodramatists' association (DAGG). The third one was an open-air performance on the Gulf War beneath the Cologne Cathedral, and the last one again at an anniversary of a small clinic for drug addicts.

Last November we did a different job and helped to produce a film about psychodrama: with improvisations on a short story we built up the scenes and dialogues of the psychodrama shown in the film.

During these first two years of trying, experiments, and consolidation we sometime had and still have to deal with interpersonal conflicts and find Playback a helpful way of managing. Even though it is difficult for some of us to balance family and group responsibilities, company life has become more and more important for us. But... we are still at the beginning. (3/92)

In the last issue of INTERPLAY, there was no room to include the IPTN budget as approved at the meeting last January. Here are the figures:

IPTN Financial Statement
30 April, 1990 - 31 December 1991

Revenues	AU\$*	NZ\$*	US\$
Friends			175
Individuals		138	1050
Groups		240	800
Donations	<u>0</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>3094</u>
Total	1050	383	5119

Expenditures	AU\$*	NZ\$*	US\$
Printing—INTERPLAY		145	560
Printing—other			49
Postage			549
Phone&Fax			121
Office supplies			33
Bank charge		2	56
Other	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>615</u>
Total	280	147	1983
Net	770	236	3136

* Separate accounts were set up in Australia and New Zealand to receive dues and pay for regional expenses.

1992 Projected (January, 1992-June, 1993)

Revenues (AU, NZ, USA)	
Friends	150
Individuals	2000
Groups	2000
Donations	500
Subtotal	<u>4650</u>
Fund Balance	<u>3000</u>
Total	7650

Expenditures	
INTERPLAY	2000
Archives project	500
Directory	300
Brochure	500
Postage	100
Phone&Fax	1000
Other printing	50
Office supplies	50
Director's Meeting	500
Contingency	250
Development	2200
Miscellaneous	50
Bank	<u>60</u>
TOTAL	7560

From Amber Gest, member of the Richmond Middle School Playback Company, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA. Participants in this group get credit for a project in community service:

At first when we got to the hospital, we had to walk about half a mile up and down hallways and stairs finally to end up in a small room in the middle of nowhere. I was stunned when I heard that we might even be on the news. "This better be good!" I kept saying to myself. Much to my dismay only four people showed up (not including parents). I kept hoping that Kate [Schaefer, the director] would cancel the show, but now I'm glad she didn't. The first story I got chosen for the main part — and I even got to sing! It was actually one of the best skits I've ever done! After the first story, there were two more, which were equally well done. I realize now that I was sort of scared of performing for people my age that had needles sticking in them. But now I'm glad that I did. (5/91)

From Emily Jaszemski, of the same group:

The most rewarding things I've gotten from Playback so far are laughing, getting to know such a great group of people, and seeing the happiness in the faces of people we perform for.

I have never laughed so much in my life than with Playback. It feels very good to laugh in the smack middle of the week when I am feeling the most stress. To just be able to let go feels great. To be able to convey the emotions of others to others. To be able to learn and help others to learn that down deep we are all the same. To be able to forget everything but the audience and the people around me. That is what Playback is all about.

Working this close to a group of people is really special. They note everything you do and say. It's like having a family. Only this family is a family only when it is together. We are not a family in everyday life. But when we get together it's time to laugh, cry, share, and help together just like any other family.

I love it when we finish a performance and people walk out talking, smiling, and laughing. It is like we have just made their day something special and maybe we have. I hope that every child who sees us will tell their mommy and daddy about us at dinner. And even if the adults don't understand, the child remembers and our hard work made an impact on them. I've had kids who have fought over who gets to sit with me on the bus. It makes me feel like a goddess. I love watching older people remember things as they watch us. They may smile, frown, giggle, but you can tell they just remembered something that they haven't thought about in a while.

I've learned more from Playback than I've learned in all my academic years. I've learned the similarities and differences between children and adults, peers and teachers have the power to destroy someone. I also think that children, being children, is the most important thing in the world. When you are a child you are forced to conform to the strict rules of adulthood. If a child spends all his or her life growing up, when are they supposed to have fun? (5/91)

From Nicole, also a member of Richmond Middle School Playback:

So far, and I'm sure it will continue, I love Playback. The thing I like the most is how different each week is and how we get a taste of a different world every week. It's neat to remember being 6 and to think about being 88.

The thing that really shocked me is how true the saying "children are so cruel" is. Kids are really mean to other kids they don't like. As you get older you learn to be outright cruel to people, but kids are really mean.

Anyway, I do love Playback. And I think it's something that should be continued. (5/91)

From Judy Dolmatch, director of Groups That Work, a consulting agency in Ashland, Oregon, USA:

I am interested in using PBT as a method with professional actors and acting companies to tell and share the stories of those people who have a life in the theatre. Within the last year I led two workshops using the Playback method with the acting company of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, a regional theatre that plays from March to October and offers Equity-quality productions of classic and modern plays. The workshops were held at the start of the rehearsal process as a "getting to know you" and team-building event. There were about 60 people (actors, directors, stage managers) in each session. the Playback work was very well-received, and my goal is to offer some more advanced workshops within the acting company as well as

introduce the method to non-actors at the Festival. I also want to pursue these workshops with other regional theatres. Actors have stories, too! (5/92)

From Deborah Witzel, Denver, Colorado, USA:

I have been a member, or perhaps I should say participant, of Playback Theatre West (PTW), since February, 1991. During the year I have learned some challenging lessons and looked deeper within myself than ever before. I've discovered joy in being human.

I came to Denver to work with PTW as a business manager. My skills in this area were developed with professional theatrical touring companies over the four years prior to 1991. My desire for a change of pace and focus coincided with PTW's call to the universe for something with my skills. Hearing the call and my openness to heal, I came.

Upon experiencing the Playback process for the first time, a layer of roadie protection and grime peeled off of my tired psyche. I wanted nothing more than to take my coat off and stay a while. As I was invited, I did.

The group created an induction of sorts for me several months later. But my membership and training were always an issue with many of the members. Over the course of this year, I have watched and listened as five people left the company. These remaining tell me for several of those departure was a long time coming.

I feel I have only begun to grasp the profundity Playback is having on my life.

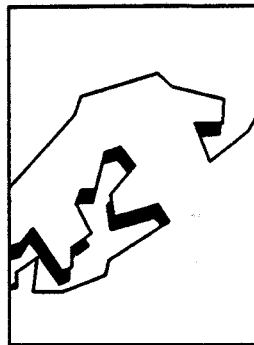
This year I want to develop a young people's Playback company/group. I have been teaching and directing a young people's acting program in Aurora, a suburb of Denver.

With the support and guidance of my fellow PTW members, as well as the wealth of inspiration and experience of the IPTN, I feel the young people of the Denver Metro area will soon be sharing and playing back their stories.

My deepest thanks and appreciation to Jonathan and the Board for the extraordinary creation of the International Playback Theatre Network. I am honored to become an officially recognized sharer of this vision! (4/92)

From Christina Hagelthorn, director of Studens Teater, Göteborg, Sweden, and Theatre of Spontaneity International, both Playback companies. Christina is a director of the IPTN:

Most outstanding memory [of the past year in Playback]: the performances in Milano, Italy, with the international group. Learning Physical Storytelling with Steve Harvey has also given me a lot; it led to some new



It's Finland, site of the next Playback Conference and Board Meeting. Mark the weekend of June 10, 1993, in your calendars now and start saving for Playback in the midnight sun!

structures for short improvisations.

Most difficult problem: dealing with personal and interpersonal problems within the local group.

Discovery: I enjoy trying music improvisations.

Biggest disappointment: Not being able to go the [Playback] conference in Australia.

But new hope: The next conference will take place in Finland next year, most likely, and I will participate in its planning, with financial support from my local group. (4/92)

From Betty MacDonald, who reported on the activities of Community Playback Theater of Highland, New York, USA:

Our active year began with a performance at the First Night Celebration, a town-wide New Year's Eve party in Woodstock. Our monthly First Friday performances continue to thrive and we are happy to note our audience is growing. We enjoy seeing lives unfold in stories shared with us at successive performances by audience members who keep coming back. In April we hosted Boston Playback for a weekend of partying and rehearsing together. We performed for residents of the Vassar-Warner retirement home, and the staff of Ulster County Community Action Head Start Program [pre-school]. Performing at a reception for a group of television journalists from Moscow was a vivid high point of the summer. They visited us shortly following the coup and we were privileged to act out the stories of their experiences during those dramatic days. In October we performed for the New York State Association for Counseling and Development at the 26th Annual Convention. We rounded out the Fall with performances at the Grace Smith House, a shelter for battered women and their children, and at a conference on domestic violence sponsored by the same facility. A public workshop in Playback technique was led by Judy [Swallow] with support by company members.

We hold one regular rehearsal monthly. A second

rehearsal on the Saturday following our Friday night performance has been organized around watching the videotape of the night before, critiquing and working through performance problems. Our annual process meeting was dedicated to resolving differences and to promoting closer interaction and ensemble.

As a group we did a number of things which strengthened our connectedness. We shared a relaxing summer weekend at Vince's house eating, biking, hanging out and floating on inner tubes on the Delaware River. We attended a Hudson valley Storytelling Conference at Vassar [College] and a weekend on "Theatre as Healing" presented by Jean Claude Van Itallie at Rowe Conference Center in Massachusetts. Three of our members attended the Playback Summer Intensive with Jonathan Fox.

During the course of the year we said good-bye to Beverly [Keith], Maria [DuBois], and to our musician, Bram [Moreinis], who took leave from the group.

From Julia Craven, a student from Morristown, New Jersey, USA:

Because of the MSW [social work] program I'm currently in, I haven't been able to do anything in PBT, except for treating myself to Jonathan's four-session workshop series in New York City.

However, I've been very keenly aware in my fieldwork (3 days/week in the psychiatric unit of a local hospital) of how Playback and psychodrama training have helped me with two essential therapeutic skills: 1) empathic skills, "being with" the patient/client and not being afraid of their powerful feelings; and 2) listening skills, getting a sense of the latent content behind the manifest expression (this is obviously the same thing as the Playback skill of grasping the *essence* of a story).

I'm really looking forward to seeing how my fieldwork and academic experience might feed back into Playback. (3/92)



by air

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first class