

**Playback Theatre:
A Creative Resource for Reconciliation**

A working paper of Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts

by
Jenny Hutt and Bev Hosking

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
What is reconciliation?.....	2
What is playback theatre?.....	4
Scope of this inquiry.....	4
What Playback Theatre Can Contribute To Reconciliation	6
Opening up a creative communal space.....	6
Building community relationships.....	7
Creating a safe space for feeling and reflection.....	7
Telling personal stories.....	8
Processing difficult events.....	9
Witnessing.....	10
Working in the here and now.....	11
Fostering social inclusion.....	12
Expression of strong feelings.....	12
Generating new perspectives.....	14
A group-centred approach.....	15
Capacity to work directly and indirectly.....	16
Capacity to work with ethnic conflicts.....	17
Engaging in a social dialogue.....	19
Developing abilities needed for reconciliation.....	23
Discussion of Applications and Challenges	25
Current Applications Relevant to Reconciliation.....	25
Work in situ.....	25
Work in international settings.....	26
Further Considerations	28
Limited reach.....	28
Time commitment.....	28
Working across cultural differences.....	28
Risks of secondary traumatisation.....	30
Levels of competency.....	31
Conclusions	32
Appendix 1: Highlights of Playback Theatre Training	34
Authors' Profiles	39
Bibliography	40

Playback Theatre: A Creative Resource for Reconciliation

Jenny Hutt and Bev Hosking

Introduction

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

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

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

Bev Hosking was one of the actors and had been chosen to take the role of ‘the land’. She reflects:

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

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

Since the experience described above, her discoveries as a teacher of playback theatre in many parts of the world have confirmed her initial hopes: that playback theatre can bring people together and offer a creative approach in fostering meaningful community dialogue.

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

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

³ Pakeha are New Zealanders of European origin.

This paper examines playback theatre as a creative resource for community- building, particularly in situations where reconciliation is needed.

What is Reconciliation?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Appreciating each other’s humanity and respecting each other’s culture;
2. Telling and listening to each other’s stories and developing more complex narratives and more nuanced understandings of identity;
3. Acknowledging harms, telling truths and mourning losses;
4. Empathizing with each other’s suffering;
5. Acknowledging and redressing injustices;
6. Expressing remorse, repenting, apologizing; letting go of bitterness, forgiving;

7. Imagining and substantiating a new future; including agreements about how future conflicts will be engaged constructively. (Cohen, 2004: 6)

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

What is Playback Theatre?

As illustrated in the story above, playback theatre is a spontaneous improvised theatre involving a unique collaboration between performers and audience. A playback theatre troupe usually comprises several actors and one or two musicians. In addition, the performance is led and facilitated by a conductor who interacts with the audience, encouraging them to tell stories from their everyday lives. Someone from the audience tells a story from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, then watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape and coherence.

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

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

Scope of this Inquiry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What Playback Theatre Can Contribute to Reconciliation

Opening up a Creative Communal Space

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

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

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

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

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

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

Building Community Relationships

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

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

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

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

Creating a Safe Space for Feeling and Reflection

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

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

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

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

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

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

Telling Personal Stories

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Processing Difficult Events

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

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

This was particularly significant for one of the participants whose mother had been living in Caxito. Until this time he had not realised the seriousness of what had happened. On the fourth day of the workshop he told a story of having lost contact with her after the events there. He had been deeply concerned for her safety and was very relieved when she arrived at his place in the middle of the previous night, having walked the 50 kilometres to Luanda. During these few days he had kept his worry to himself. The opportunity to tell his story and have it witnessed by his community of fellow actors, allowed him to begin to let himself feel both his fear and his relief about what had been happening.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Witnessing

In playback theatre participants are invited to be present to their own experience and to the experiences of others in an open, non-judgmental manner. This process of witnessing is described by Felman and Laub (1992:70) as "a social process that rests on careful attention, 'listening'." This quality of listening creates a space that allows for a teller to be present to their own story and move further towards understanding and integrating their experience.

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

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

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

At times a story can become skewed when the performers' strong ideology blocks their capacity to listen. These skews, both subtle and obvious, can occur in any group or culture. They arise more often when a strong ideology is present and where the desire to teach comes to the fore. For this reason, playback practitioners must get to know their own values and

biases and how these affect their capacity to listen. One of the biggest challenges of this work is to suspend judgment and witnessing requires it.

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

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

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

Working in the Here and Now

Bev Hosking recounts:

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

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

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

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

Fostering Social Inclusion

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

In Kiribati ¹¹ a playback theatre training project complemented other training aimed at increasing the participation of women in decision making. It also aimed to test whether playback theatre could influence and empower women within their families and local communities. The level of social inclusion generated in the playback training and performances had a positive impact on more than the relationships between men and women. One participant in the group was marginalised in his community because of his sexual orientation. He was isolated in the group, and often on the receiving end of harsh jokes. The trainers worked hard to include him at different points in the workshop and to value what he had to contribute. They also worked to build a strong enough relationship with him and with the group as a whole in order to create the conditions conducive for him to tell a story. This was not such an easy task.

Bev reflects,

When we finally invited him to tell a story he accepted and came to the teller's chair with a vulnerability that was very poignant to witness. He told a story about building, then losing, a close friendship. His love for this friend was evident and there was a sense that perhaps for the first time he was able to say his friend's name in public. As they listened, the group was able to go beyond their stereotyped view of this man and to see his humanity. They enacted his story with a great deal of tenderness, compassion and respect.

This proved to be a turning point in the relationship between this man and the group. That evening we observed a warmer more expressive connection between a number of the participants and this man. For the rest of our time together we noticed a marked decrease in people singling him out for ridicule.

Expression of Strong Feelings

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

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

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

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

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

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

During a training workshop for thirty field workers and activists working with issues of bonded labour¹² a man came forward to tell a story:

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

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

Two images from this story were enacted. The inhumanity expressed in the story was almost unbearable for the group to witness. The participants were highly distressed. It became apparent that many of them had stories of a similar nature that they had never told anyone.

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

Following his story, there was an obvious need for others to tell their stories and to have them witnessed by their community. Bev reflects:

We decided that, for the rest of this session, telling was most important and we would not have enactments. So we sat together in a circle and listened to a number of very painful stories - stories of extreme poverty, hunger, shame, rejection and exclusion. The stories were terrible and the walls in the room seemed to bend just to hold them. There were many, many tears.

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

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

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

Generating New Perspectives

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

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

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

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

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

A Group-Centred Approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bev Hosking reflects:

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

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

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

A participant from the 2004 New Zealand Summer School describes her process of 'warming up' to telling a story:

What people said felt extremely honest - this influenced me to want to find a more honest place with what was coming forward in myself. Then as more people told, I was impressed with the diversity of views and experiences; and the clarity with which they were expressed. This was very satisfying and on a couple of occasions I wanted to tell so that I could be more a part of that.

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

Capacity to Work Directly and Indirectly

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

While introducing the idea that playback theatre is a means to work directly with social themes, a brief but potent exploration of the theme of equality between women and men

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

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

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

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

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

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

Capacity to Work with Ethnic Conflict

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Engaging in a Social Dialogue

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

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

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

David Bohm (1996) says "In dialogue people learn to think together by surfacing their fundamental assumptions and developing insight into how they arose." Dialogue involves the deep exploration of different world views by surfacing the experiences that have contributed to them. The outcome of dialogue is that we feel heard and we can hear each other. This is achieved by paying attention to our own assumptions and reactions and those of others with a

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

relaxed, non-judgmental curiosity. In this sense dialogue is a journey of discovery. “The primary activity of dialogue is to see things as freshly and clearly as possible”. (Bohm, 1996)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶ A Chinese person born in the Straits of Malaya

The person who comes to the teller's chair is an indigenous Fijian woman married to an Indian Fijian man. She tells a story from the time of the coup in May 2000.

"It was quite exciting at first as there was something new and different happening. Then suddenly I realised that perhaps my husband was not safe and I began to be very worried. My husband who is a taxi driver picked me up at work and took me home so I would be safe. I wanted him to come home and stay safe, but he was keen to continue to work as there were so many people trying to get out of the middle of the city. In the end I agreed that he would do one more job before going home, but I insisted on going with him. It was terrifyingly chaotic in the town with people looting and running in all directions. Shop windows being broken and Indian people getting beaten up. I realised that my husband was in real danger. I finally persuaded him to go home with me. We picked up our child and hid in our house feeling very frightened and unsure whether we were really safe."

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

The next teller is an indigenous Fijian man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The next teller is a woman from another Pacific nation:

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

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

After witnessing this story, the Chinese woman from Asia is very upset and says to the woman from the Pacific nation:

“I am sorry this happened to you. Nobody should ever have to experience this. Even though I am not from China, I am very sorry that you were treated in this way by Chinese people.”

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

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

Developing the Abilities Needed for Reconciliation

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

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

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

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

A participant at the New Zealand Summer School in 2004 reflects:

Everyone, irrespective of language, was required to be more attentive to gesture, facial expression and mood; to try and tune in to the unspoken frequencies that were passing between us. I really valued being in an environment where the huge number of assumptions we make about what other people understand was always being called into question and tested.

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

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

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

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

Discussion of Applications and Challenges

Current Applications Relevant to Reconciliation

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

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

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

Working In Situ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Working in International Settings

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

He attended a workshop session at which a German man told a story about the family secrets surrounding his uncle's involvement with the SS Nazis in the Second World War. This story was played back very powerfully by a group of Swiss, French, Hungarian, Australian and NZ actors, two of whom were Jewish. The Indian man accompanied them

as the musician. This performance was a strong experience for everyone in the room and the group's courage in listening and enacting this story was impressive.

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

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

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

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

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

Further Considerations

Limited Reach

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

Time Commitment

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

Bev comments:

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

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

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

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

Working Across Cultural Differences

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Risks of Secondary Traumatization

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

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

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

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

Levels of Competency

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix 1: Highlights of Playback Theatre Training

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

Play: An Essential Ingredient

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

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

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

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

Christian is making the physical motions of digging a hole.

Bev: "That's a great hole!"

Christian: "Yes, I'm building a washing line for my family!"

Bev: "I imagine it will be a long one."

Christian: "Yes and it will catch the North sun."

Bev: "I bet Katherine is really pleased about that!"

Christian: Yes, she's so pleased she is taking me out to dinner."

Bev: No doubt you will be on your best behaviour."

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

While they play this game the performers have varying flow and ease in responding immediately to keep generating a 'story' together, which has life, movement and coherence. As they play, saying yes to someone else's initiative involves accepting being taken into new unknown territory. This process builds courage and daring in the face of not-knowing.

Of the two workshop leaders, it is Christian who leads these activities at the Summer School and he does so with a distinctive personal authority both nurturing and provocative. At the nurturing end of the spectrum, he introduces a game by asking: "R., did you play musical chairs when you were a child?" After the first round of the game he encourages participants to voice what he has seen them portray: "As you farewell your first dance partner, you say: 'I

was a little bit shy, but I felt supported by you”’. And after the second dance partner “You know, magically with you I feel even more confident”.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is here that the spontaneity effect familiar to those who have participated in psychodrama or spontaneity training is evident. Both leaders are trained in psychodrama a group psychotherapy method originated by Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974).¹⁸ It is clear that the

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

emphasis on play at the Summer School is not just an instrumental skill-building process. Rather, it reflects a commitment to the development of spontaneity – in the individuals and in the functioning of the whole group.

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

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

Building an Open Group Culture

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

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

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

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

Early attention is also paid to linking participants up with a wide range of people in the group. This prevent the formation of comfortable cliques or language sub-groups. Participants are encouraged to keep working with others they don’t know or know least well. As teams form for performance, Bev notices some participants are less confident to put themselves forward. “Lets have five actors and a musician for a story, including at least one person from Japan.” Later she reflects privately: “Some of the Japanese are only here for a

few days. Also because of the language, it is harder and harder for them to get up if they leave it (until later).”

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

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

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

For example on the morning of the third day everyone responds in turn to Bev’s question: “What is alive in you?” E. comments: “I am surprised by the power of old stories, old losses. I’m a little exposed. During the last six months I have been travelling, I’ve had freedom and adventure and I’ve been alone. Now its nice to be held within a group and be taken care of.” Later M. comments” I feel peace and I think is this real? Scarey things might be coming.” Later T. comments: “I’m floating through lots of different things. I’m tearful a lot and need to rest a lot. I want to go and sleep somewhere if there was a really protected, safe space. I’m not avoiding connection – I just need to look after myself. I’m enjoying the movement and sound. I’m getting feed (by it).”

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

The performers’ self-acceptance gets stronger as their efforts meet with an appreciative response: “Lovely shape, eh. Let’s give them a lovely shape applause,” “Good work you guys.” A moment later this is matter-of-factly balanced by asking the teller “(There was)

something they didn't get?" In these few moments the appreciation visibly warms and buoys the performers and the lightly delivered feedback helps them keep their feet on the ground.

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

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

The pressure performers inevitably feel from time to time to 'get it right', is addressed with an accepting wisdom. Christian: "We know the stage is a lonely place but we are on the stage with our friends. We love our companies! They love us, and mostly they love that we try. They have been to workshops, they know how hard it is." In response to F. who is doubting her work having conducted E's story, Bev says with steady reassurance: Look at E. It was plenty good enough." Christian adds: "If you do a tiny bit for the teller it is enough. And the group is touched."

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

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

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

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

Authors' Profiles

Arts Practitioner

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

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

Documenter

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

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

Bibliography

- Adderley, D. (2003). *Why do tellers tell?* Independent Study Essay: New York: School of Playback Theatre.
- Assefa, H. (1993). *Peace and reconciliation as a paradigm*. Nairobi, Kenya: ACIS.
- Bion, W.R. (1961). *Experiences in groups and other papers*. London: Routledge.
- Bohm, D. (1996). edited by Lee Nichol. *On dialogue*. London: Routledge.
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and thou*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark.
- Burkett, I. (2001). "Creative communities on shifting sands: community development and narratives of globalisation." Paper presented to the symposium on Social work and globalisation. Southampton: University of Southampton. Unpublished paper.
- Brook, P. (1987). *The shifting point*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Buchanan, D. R. (1980). "The central concern model, a framework for structuring psychodramatic production" *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry*. Vol 33, 47-62.
- Cobb, S. (2003). "Fostering coexistence in identity-based conflicts" in A.H. Chayes, and M. Minnow, M. (Eds.) *Imagine co-existence: restoring humanity after violent ethnic conflict* (1st ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clayton, G.M. (1994). *Effective group leadership*. Melbourne, ICA Press.
- Clayton, G.M. (1989). *Group work training manual*. Australian College of Psychodrama, Melbourne.
- Clayton, G.M. (1993). *Living pictures of the self: applications of role theory in professional practice and daily living*. Melbourne, ICA Press.
- Clayton, G.M. & Carter, P. (2004). *The living spirit of the psychodramatic method*. Auckland, Resource Books.
- Cohen, C. (2003). "What is reconciliation?" Boston, USA: Brandeis University.
- Cohen, C. (2004). "Creative approaches to reconciliation". Boston, USA: Brandeis University.
- Felman, S. and Laub, D. (1992) *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*. New York: Routledge.
- Fox, J. (1994). *Acts of service: spontaneity, commitment, tradition in the nonscripted theatre*. New Paltz, New York: Tusitala Publishing.
- Fox, J. (1999). "A ritual for our time" (*Gathering voices: essays on playback theatre*. New Paltz, New York: Tusitala Publishing.
- Fox, J. and Dauber, H. (Eds). (1999) *Gathering voices: essays on playback theatre*. New Paltz, New York: Tusitala Publishing.
- Fox, J. (2003) Burundi Journal, unpublished paper.
- Fritts, B. J. (1998) *The new managerial mentor: becoming a learning leader to build communities of purpose*. Palo Alto, California: Davies-Black Publishing.
- Gobodo- Madikisela, P. (2004) *We Must Restore the Human Spirit in South Africa at Ten: A Nation Under Construction*. South Africa: This Day newspaper, June 28.
- Griffith, J.L. & Griffith, M.E. (2002). *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy: how to talk with people about their spiritual lives*. New York: Guildford Press.
- Heaney, S. (1995). *The Redress of Poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
- Hoesch, F. (1999). "The Red Thread: Storytelling as a Healing Process" in Fox and Dauber (eds.) *Gathering voices: essays on playback theatre*. New Paltz, New York: Tusitala Publishing.
- Hosking, B. & Penny, C. (2000). *Playback Theatre as a Methodology*

- for Social Change*. Unpublished paper presented at Devnet Conference, Wellington, NZ. October 2003
- Hosking, B. & Penny, C. (1998) *Report on Playback Theatre teaching project, stage 1. Women and development Project, Kiribati*. NZODA. Wellington, New Zealand.
- Hosking, B. & Penny, C. (1999) *Report on Playback Theatre teaching project, stage 2. Women and development Project, Kiribati*. NZODA. Wellington, New Zealand.
- Hosking, B. (2001) Interview with Peni Moore (WAC). *Interplay* Vol. XII, no1.
- Howard, T. (2003) "Dialogue in situations of conflict: possible or impossible?" Unpublished paper
- Jennings, S. et al. (1994). *The handbook of dramatherapy*. London: Routledge.
- Krondorfer, B. (1995) *Remembrance and reconciliation: encounters between young Jews and Germans*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lecoq, J. (2000). *The moving body: teaching creative theatre*. New York: Routledge.
- Lederach, J.P. (1997). *Building peace: sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace Press.
- Lederach, J.P. (1999). *The journey towards reconciliation*. Scottsdale: Herald Press.
- Murray, S. (2003), *Jacques Lecoq*. London, Routledge.
- Ross, F. (2003). *Bearing witness: women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press.
- Ruud, E. (1995). Improvisation as a liminal experience: jazz and music therapy as modern 'rites de passage'. in *Listening, playing, creating*. Ed. K. C. Bereznak. New York, State University of New York Press.
- Salas, J. (1993). *Improvising real life: personal story in playback theatre*. Dubuque, Iowa, USA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Scheff T.J. (1979). *Catharsis in healing, ritual, and drama*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schirch, L. (2001) "Ritual reconciliation" *Reconciliation, justice and co-existence: theory and practice*. ed Mohammed Abu-Nimer. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process*. USA: Aldine Publishing.
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. New York: PAJ Publications
- Villa-Vicencio, C. (2001) "Reconciliation as metaphor". Retrieved from http://www.ijr.org.za/sa_mon/recon_d.html
- Weingarten, K. (2003). *Common shock: witnessing violence every day*. New York: New American Library.
- Whitaker, D.S. and Lieberman, M.A. (1970). "A focal conflict model" *Psychotherapy through the group process*. New York: Atherton Press.
- Yalom, I.D. (1998). "The therapist working in the here and now" in ` New York: Basic Books