

**Drumming and Playback Theatre: Partners for Peace**

---

*A working paper of Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts*

**by  
Jonathan Fox**

## **Drumming and Playback Theatre—Partners for Peace**

---

*Jonathan Fox*

This article reports on a workshop integrating two promising methods of reconciliation that draw on the arts. The first is described by Lena Slachmuislder in “The Rhythm of Reconciliation: A Reflection on Drumming as a Contribution to Reconciliation Processes in Burundi and South Africa;” the second by Beverley Hosking and Jenny Hutt in “Playback Theatre: A Creative Resource for Reconciliation.”\* The authors were part of the International Fellowship Program, a project of the Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University.

There are stark differences in the methods described by Slachmuislder and Hosking and Hutt, principally that playback theatre is a story-based process involving narration of personal experience, while drumming is nonverbal. Yet one finds intriguing parallels. Both construct a protected, neutral space. Hosking and Hutt write: “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.”(10) Slachmuislder observes that “drummers have spoken of the joy, the ‘neutral, third space’ created through drumming, and the association of drumming with peace.” (23)

Secondly, unlike more common problem-solving approaches, both drumming and playback theatre value emotional involvement. Slachmuislder writes about the “positive emotional and spiritual impact” reported by the drummers she interviewed. Hosking and Hutt observe that in playback theatre’s embodied format “telling stories involves a move away from a rational, logical approach and opens out the imaginative and feeling dimensions of experience.” (15) They see playback theatre as a positive way to bring to the fore “deep-seated and intense feelings relating to painful events, injustices, and losses.”

Thirdly, both drumming and playback theatre seem to be unifying group experiences, building a sense of what Slachmuislder calls a “shared identity and humanity.” (23) Hosking and Hutt emphasize the building of empathy and social inclusion. (22)

Finally, both drumming with its circle of performers, and playback with its structured approach to dramatization, involve ritualized action that distinguish them from, say, the artistic methods of the other Brandeis International Fellows, such as film making, or creating visual art.

### **The workshop**

A three-day workshop was held at the School for Playback Theatre, a 5-week program that takes place each July at Vassar college in upstate New York. There were 12 participants from a variety of culture and backgrounds. Joakim Lartey, a Ghanaian musician living in the US, taught the drumming. The playback theatre component was taught by myself. Because the course took place in the framework of playback theatre training, all participants were familiar with playback

---

\* Both articles can be found in pdf format on the following website:  
<http://www.brandeis.edu/programs/Slifka/vrc/papers/index.html>

theatre, while only a few were experienced drummers.

The planned format was simple. We drummed, then we did playback theatre. When drumming, we sat in a semicircle facing Lartey, who taught us basic rhythms—Agbadja, Buru, Kolombashi, Kion Konba. After every three hours of drumming, we did an hour or so of our own stories, using playback theatre.

By the time we had reached the mid-point of the workshop, my overarching impression was of the “culture gap” between drumming and playback theatre. I observed that drumming, like the rhythms our hands were discovering, moved on an endless path through time, while playback, with its cycle of stories, each involving a rather complex process of choosing the teller, interview, enactment, and verification, felt much more time-bound. In other words, after acting out two or three playback theatre stories, we were ready for lunch, while once we started drumming, we did not want to stop. Secondly, the methods had different needs for space. Each time we transitioned, we had to remove or replace the drums from the stage area and reset the playback stage. This was a cumbersome process. Thirdly, although both methods involved an active use of the body, the demands of each were, again, very different—playback involving actors on stage improvising together; drumming requiring each participant to beat her or his drum. The team work involved was so different—as drummers, seeking for a common groove; as playback actors, for a way to enact the story with spontaneous energy and artistic form. Finally, of course, playback stimulated an exchange of stories— in the case of this group involving marvelous encounters with strangers, promise of romance, mishap, and the practical disruption and emotional devastation of personal loss. Drumming, on the other hand, took us to a place beyond words, where we left our stories behind.

Because of this sense of incompatibility, I was all the more surprised by the participant comments at the end of the workshop, which emphasized commonality. One student said that both were “liminal” experiences. Another commented, “with both we become aligned.” A third referred to being in the moment, saying that each approach helped him feel “on time.” A number of students commented on a feeling of togetherness engendered by both approaches. One observed that both drumming and playback theatre’s dramatized storytelling harken back to the “roots of culture.”

As the students spoke it was hard not to register their enthusiasm about the experience. It seemed to have vitalized them and brought them closer to each other. It is important to note that this was not an overtly conflicted group, or one containing charged difference, such as the Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities comprising the Burundian drummers Slachmujlder writes about. What we are observing, here, however, is a tendency towards connection that may be useful in conflict settings.

Based on this first experiment, it would appear that the combination of drumming and playback theatre holds some promise in building coexistence. Because of playback theatre’s invitation to share directly about painful losses and violent experience, a sensible option is to precede and follow it with the wordless (and less direct) sounds and vibrations of drumming. Our workshop experience suggests that the transitions between the two activities should be handled carefully and

not rushed. For example, since the physical activity is so different, it is important for actors to have some playback theatre-specific physical warm up after drumming.

Following the workshop experience, a Japanese participant, Miyoko Kita, who was in fact the most experienced of the student drummers, is offering a workshop in drumming and playback theatre in Japan. Afterwards will her students have the same sense as we did of positive release and new possibility?