

PLAYBACK THEATRE AND ITS THERAPY

BY Jonathan Fox

Playback theatre is broadly therapeutic. How so? This is how I see it:

Identity-formation. The need to tell one's story is primal. Even more, it seems that telling our story helps greatly in defining ourselves to ourselves. This process is compatible with Boal's concept of critical consciousness. The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff talks about the value of "definitional ceremonies." "Life histories," she writes, "give people the opportunities to become visible and to enhance their reflexive consciousness." So in being a teller, we become clearer about who we are; it is a vital act of affirmation.

Dialogue and reconciliation. In the sequence of stories told by any audience, a teller is always responding to what was told before. Tellers comment on previous stories in a complex pattern of alternative truth-telling (we call this linkage "the red thread" of a performance). Thus playback theatre turns out to be a good format for a group to share different perspectives on an issue. Moreover, the context of respectful listening that is so central to the playback theatre process is a crucial condition for lessening conflict. During the playback theatre performance, we hear the narrative of the other.

Recovery. Because of its gentleness, playback theatre is an effective way for an individual (and a group) to make the transition, to use the formulation of Judith Herman, from "traumatic memory" to "narrative memory". Of course trauma is a psychotherapeutic problem. But it is also a social problem. In fact, civic leaders are often at a loss when they need powerful tools for healing a community-wide crisis, such as a natural disaster, or war. The fallback solution is too often to just get on with it and cope. However, I strongly suspect that without finding way to heal from the past, a community cannot creatively face its future.

Moral imagination. This concept, defined by peace building professor John Paul Lederach, involves "the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist." In other words, we need moral imagination to imagine our future when the present seems full of problems and even hopeless. According to Viktor Frankl, for instance, it was the equivalent of moral imagination that enabled him and others to survive the WWII camps, while others, unable to see beyond the bleak and hopeless present, succumbed. It required moral imagination for blacks and whites in South Africa to plan for a peaceful transition from apartheid. Playback theatre, with its spontaneous telling and enactment, invites and inspires such envisioning. For the most part psychotherapy, focusing as it does on curing individuals, stays apolitical. However, when the focus is community-based, questions of social justice and historical oppression demand attention. Who has space to tell their story? Who listens? Who does not? The value pt places on providing access to anyone, even those traditionally silent, makes it a powerful tool for social change. One can say that playback theatre treats not (merely) the individual, but also the society.

Thus while the framework of playback theatre is broader than psychotherapy, and it does not conform to some of its definitional guidelines, pt's effectiveness at ego-building, resolving conflict, working with trauma, and helping people make positive decisions about their future suggests that it can accomplish many of the objectives of psychotherapy.

There is so much that we do not yet know about how playback works. So far most of the evidence is anecdotal. Merely to know in our hearts how effective it can be is not enough. We need to develop

language suitable for an approach that provides a community healing ritual. We need rich descriptions and detailed analyses of a process that is highly dynamic and ephemeral.

What actually happens to the body of the teller seeing her story? What exactly are the processes of communication between audience members and performers? What kind of consciousness occurs among those present in a pt performance? What is the effect of witnessing the telling and enactment of personal stories? What role does the performance arc/structure/ritual/ceremony play in the creation of a lasting positive experience for the participants?

The Israeli playback actor Uri Alon, who is also a professor of molecular biology and physics of complex systems, has an interest in investigating how and why playback theatre works. Other scholars are writing dissertations on the same question from different angles. This is an exciting development.