



# Gathering Voices Essays on Playback Theatre

*Epilogue: The Journey to Deep Stories*  
*Jonathan Fox*

Edited by  
Jonathan Fox, M.A. and Heinrich Dauber, Ph.D.

This material is made publicly available by the Centre for Playback Theatre and remains the intellectual property of its author.

(from *Gathering Voices*, Heinrich Dauber & Jonathan Fox, Eds., Tusitala Publishing, 1999)  
Epilogue

## The Journey to Deep Stories

Jonathan Fox

We come to the end of this book. It has certainly been rewarding for me to spend this time gathering the contributions, immersing myself in the ideas, and letting my own playback experience be informed by the conversation. Particularly compelling for me has been the dialogue about the playback stage as a place for the deepest stories, stories that hold whole worlds of history, pain, and revelation.

This is where I have come to. When I began with playback, my dream was to perform in a New York theatre and be written up favorably by the critics. My orientation was primarily artistic, my goal to create performances rich in their composition of image, texture, energy, and sound. But from the start I also felt drawn to deep stories, at the time no more than a kind of vague possibility, almost like a mirage. If we could reach that place across the distant plain, I thought, then we would really have achieved something, not only for ourselves, but also for the world.

Over the years, I've walked slowly towards those shimmering trees. They are still distant. But I know I'm closer, and I'm still walking. Today my dream has changed. It is to conduct playback in a specially designed "theatre house" located in a park or forest, with people who are there for at least half a day. We will all eat a good meal together, and then we will do playback.

At this point I am less interested in the standard performance context—a 1½ hour show in a small theatre—because I feel that more often than not, the right conditions do not exist for deep stories. Rich stories, yes, but not deep ones.

But what, exactly, is a deep story? For me, a deep story is a story that is first and foremost of vital importance to the teller. It is the kind of story that creates a hush in the hall because everyone is listening so intently. A deep story is fundamentally a story

where the sense of risk is palpable—the teller’s risk of daring to tell or getting it clear; the actors’ risk in trying to get it right; and the risk that certain members of the audience will not be able to bear it. These are the core stories, of a child’s death, of violent attack, of grave social injustice, life’s nightmares. They are not all tragic, certainly—a deep story may be gloriously happy. Whatever it is about, however, when faced with a deep story, we feel the soul of the teller hovering in the room. The teller becomes acutely vulnerable, which gives actors and audience a great power. There can be no neutral outcome.

We can distinguish a deep story in this sense from a rich story, one that may be everyday in its nature but is nonetheless full of possibilities for the performers. A rich story is the kind of story that makes possible the holographic power of playback, when a story about eating breakfast or seeing a swan is enacted so beautifully that we get a sense of the whole—the whole life of the teller, and vicariously, the whole of life.

Ideally, of course, the paths of the rich story and the deep story meet. And ideally, any story told under any circumstance—that is, no matter how anecdotal-seeming—can be rendered in such a way that we all experience it as belonging on that joined path. Such is the power of playback theatre, to lift the ordinary experience of an ordinary person to universal significance.

We may believe in playback that any story, once enacted, can be both rich and deep. It is a lofty goal. As a number of the chapters in *Gathering Voices* illustrate, it takes years to develop the listening skills to create rich stories, and considerable artistic skill. Rising to the challenge of deep stories, however, requires all that is needed for rich stories and more. The skills need to be sharper, knowledge of life greater, and most important, the performers need a kind of ritual strength.

Why are deep stories so rarely told? The interview with Uschi Sperling in these pages, “Emerging from Silence,” gives us a sense—because tellers fear the negative consequences inherent in them. The teller may open her- or himself to a pain that cannot be assuaged. The story may be too much for the actors, who will lose hold of the process. The story may be too much for the audience, causing it to reject the teller and the performance.

When we invite deep stories, our hearts may feel like breaking. It takes strength, even to watch. Our own world-view may get shaken. Handled well, the event will become what Richard Schechner calls transformational (not just transportation, the goal of conventional theatre).<sup>1</sup> Many people in modern society are alienated, without a place to tell their story. Playback theatre can offer that space. As they listen to the story, the attention of the witnesses crystallizes the teller's identity, and community bonds are formed.

One good aspect of modernity is that there has been a growing acceptance of universal human rights. It has become even more important to listen to one another, especially to those different from us. And if you, like me, come from a privileged background, it is especially important to listen to the *everyday* experiences of violence, class oppression, racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice that we can hardly imagine. In this way our empathy broadens beyond our kind.

Furthermore, I believe that the forces for whitewashing history are very strong—often the rich and powerful write it to their advantage—and that therefore it is necessary to make a place for the “unofficial history” of those who suffer and are not heard. Each of our countries has secrets of the past that color our present and narrow our future. I believe playback theatre, by showing the secrets boldly, may be able to help redeem “history.”

Sometimes groups are pressured to bend the playback form to become solution-oriented like Boal's Forum Theatre. Of course, there is a place for such approaches. But I am convinced there is also a place for drama that helps create the kind of dialogue that must take place prior to a search for solutions. Such dialogue, as the scientist and philosopher David Bohm points out, allows us to be in touch with what he calls the “tacit knowledge” that all of us as human beings possess. Bohm claims such interaction is the *prerequisite* for creating solutions to our many problems. I believe the ritual of playback theatre, which propels citizens to leap beyond their normal boundaries, is a wonderful contemporary way to achieve dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

The following conditions may be necessary for deep stories to emerge in playback theatre—workshops that are not too big or too brief, where there is a place for

difference, and where attention is paid to creating an aesthetic environment. Further innovations are waiting to be discovered as we begin to understand more about the nature of playback's dramatic ritual.

I believe research and writing, such as the efforts in this volume, are important, especially since the PT process is so marvelously complex.

I think we have far to go. But this sense of being halfway should not diminish the importance of our journey, since it reaches towards fulfilling what may be playback's most important function—not only to voice, but to embody those aspects of our collective experience that others hide. In so doing, we make it clear to the world that we dare to lift the stones from our hearts and behold the gates of joy.

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), chapter three.

<sup>2</sup> See David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996).