

Beyond the Entertainment Purposes of Theatre: Playback Theatre and Its Implications in a Social Context

By Mily Zhang

Author Biography

Mily Zhang, a rising junior at Rugby School in the UK, is a TEDx speaker, theatre lover, and Chinese dancer. She founded Drama Dream Club to help people relieve stress through drama, hosting events in Shanghai, London, and beyond. Realizing how people get overwhelmed by busy work, she created www.milywhispers.com to encourage others to appreciate life's small beauties and be more grateful.

Abstract

This literature review explores a unique type of theatre, Playback Theatre. It delves into the discovery of the distinct essence and characteristics of Playback Theatre, emphasizing its purposes beyond entertainment and its provision of therapeutic benefits to audiences' personal wellbeing. The review places Playback Theatre in a social context, discussing its potential implication as a valuable tool for community building in society, as exemplified by the establishment of cross-cultural communities and the empowerment of the marginalized community. To present Playback Theatre comprehensively, the review utilizes a large amount of research by scholars in the field of theatre or Playback Theatre. Through the exploration of Playback Theatre, its potential to provide huge therapeutic and mental benefits is clearly revealed. This literature review strongly encourages and advocates for the use of Playback Theatre in society, hopeful that it can continue to heal those who need it. More research about the further implications of Playback Theatre is required in the future.

Keywords: Playback Theatre, drama therapy, healing, improvisation, narrative transformation, personal wellbeing, community building, social development, cross-cultural communities, marginalized communities

Introduction

When Jonathan Fox and his partner Jo Salas founded the first Playback Theatre company in 1975 (Playback Theatre South West, n.d.; Rowe, 2004), their intention was to create an improvisational theatre based simply on the life stories of audiences (Salas, 1993). This idea was originated due to Fox's dislike of "the competitive, sometimes narcissistic aspects... of the mainstream theatre" (Salas, 1993). Taking a closer look, there are reasons why Fox described the popular form of theatre as competitive and even narcissistic. The 1970s saw the rise of blockbusters, shocking commercial movies that gained mass markets by catching the eyes of audiences (Cucco, 2009). Popular Theatre in the 20th century competed fiercely with other increasingly available entertainment in order to maintain its audience population, showing that its main goal was to make a profit "at the expense of... other purposes of theatre" (Manifold Scholarship, n.d.). Therefore, the mainstream theatre in Fox's concept may be pointing towards theatre that only targets at making a profit but does not aim to create a personal and beneficial impact on audience members – hence "narcissistic".

Instead of following the trend, Fox wanted to create "true community theatre", a theatre with emotion that actually "made a difference" to audiences (Fox and Dauber, 1999). This was an innovative and different approach to theatre at the time, determining Playback Theatre's distinct essence and qualities compared to other types of theatre. The Playback Theatre that Fox envisioned was, in short, a theatre beyond the entertainment purposes of theatre. This review paper seeks to first examine and highlight the significance of the distinct essence and characteristics of Playback Theatre in detail, and then demonstrate and promote the applications of Playback Theatre in a social context.

Methodology

In order to gain and present a comprehensive understanding, this literature review contains information from a number of scholarly sources. The information is collected from authoritative and reliable databases including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, APA PsycNet, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and SpringerLink. The articles and books are searched

using keywords such as "Playback Theatre", "drama therapy", "psychotherapy", "community", "history of Playback Theatre", "improvisation", and "healing". Considering the development of Playback Theatre over time, this review includes sources from a wide scope of time periods, including the 1990s, the 2000s, and the recent 15 years.

The Distinct Essence of Playback Theatre

The distinct essence of Playback Theatre shows in the form itself. One significant characteristic of Playback Theatre is its spontaneity and improvisational quality. Viola Spolin, one pioneer of improvisational theatre in the 20th century, defined improvisational theatre as "acting upon environment and allowing others to act upon present reality" (Viola Spolin Official Website, n.d.). In Playback Theatre, actors improvise a performance based on a personal story that an audience member tells (Rowe, 2004). The improvisation involves no preconceptions and anticipations from the actors (Frost and Yarrow, 1990), which makes it spontaneous and authentic, living in the moment of the performance. This shows that the performance highly values and depends on the audience members. Unlike being in commercial theatres where performances are prepared beforehand, the audiences are aware that Playback Theatre is special and intimate to them.

This, importantly, generates a therapeutic effect. As Simon Fisher notes, psychological restoration and healing can only occur by making people feel heard and re-experience their own stories in a protected environment (Fisher, 2000). The performances in Playback Theatre allow the audiences to be heard and seen "without judgement or prejudice" (Prittinen, 2020), which may make them feel truly understood and consequently reduce their stress (Myers, 2000; Lisitsa, n.d.). By bringing their stories into tangible movements, the actors revive their stories, enabling the audiences to think and reflect upon their own experiences in a supported environment.

What Playback Theatre brings the audiences beyond re-experiencing the stories is re-experiencing them at a different point of view than before. The audience members who tell their stories are not only tellers, but also spectators of their own stories (Kowalsky et al., 2019). As they watch the performance, they are essentially spectating their story, which may trigger them to gain a “new, vivid... experience of the life-story” in the process of narrative transformation (Kowalsky et al., 2019).

Because the more subjective point of view of the story is shifted to a more objective standpoint, this new experience can decrease a sense of self-deprecation in the audience member and allow healing to occur (Lyu, 2023). Additionally, it may offer the audience new insights about their story or about themselves, such as a different way to approach something or a discovery about their identity, which may be vital to the audience member as proven in many past Playback performances. For instance, in a performance in New York documented by Jo Salas, one audience member named Paula became more courageous about driving in snow several weeks after the actors performed a story of her fear of driving in snowstorms (Salas, 1983).

Playback Theatre, as a result, is distinct due to its focus on the life and wellbeing of audiences, which is beyond mere entertainment. It establishes an intimate connection with audience members, providing them with opportunities to be heard. It is a platform for audiences to obtain experiences and insights about their life stories, facilitating the psychological processes such as healing and narrative transformation to occur and aiming to enhance the personal wellbeing of audiences.

Implications in a Social Context

The Center for Applied Theatre defines Applied Theatre as the use of theatre in exploring communal issues and shaping social change (The Center for Applied Theatre, n.d.). Apart from its focus on individual audiences, Playback Theatre is also a widely used form of Applied Theatre (Sajnani and Johnson, 2011). This means that it serves as an important role in the social and communal development. When effective, it can be used to address existing problems in society.

Playback Theatre has a major role as a community builder. A community in the human society is a group of interdependent people (Good, 2003). Notably, the word interdependent means “dependent each upon the other” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), emphasising the deep connections between people. In Playback Theatre, when an audience member tells a story, not only do the actors on the stage listen, but so do all the other audience members. The story may be a deeply personal story that has been kept secret for years. Therefore, it is very easy for the other audience members to develop empathy towards the teller as they understand and recognise emotions in the story that is told (Ng and Graydon, 2016). When personal stories are told one by one in this originally public space, trust deepens in the group of people including actors and audiences and the boundary between the personal and the public is broken down (Rowe, 2004).

Essentially, a community is building up, because the people inside it are becoming increasingly interdependent and deeply connected. As Salas once remarked, “Playback Theatre creates movement towards wholeness” (Salas, 2009). The stories and performances bring strangers or loosely connected people together. Looking back to Fox’s intention when founding Playback Theatre, the mission of building a “true community theatre” is successfully accomplished (Fox and Dauber, 1999).

It doesn’t mean that there is only one type of community that exists, however. Among all the different communities in society, this review will specifically highlight two types of communities of considerable importance in social development and promote the use of Playback Theatre in relation to these two communities.

In the context of constantly-increasing globalisation, the building of cross-cultural communities becomes a prominent problem. Due to cultural diversity, it may be difficult to develop cultural connection. Similar to when building other communities, the reason why Playback Theatre is an appropriate solution for this problem lies in the storytelling process. In the sharing of a story, “a deep sense of context” appears (Bauman, 1986). This happens because every story is personal and local to the teller’s life and living environment, reflecting the teller’s identity and culture. Thus, audiences from different cultural backgrounds can collectively

discover and explore the different cultures behind the stories, gradually transforming into a bonded cross-cultural community (Dennis, 2007).

Beside from building and establishing communities, Playback Theatre also plays an essential part in the empowerment of communities. One type of community that needs empowerment and deserves attention is the marginalized community. They include a wide range of people who are excluded or discriminated due to race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and more (The American College of Trust and Estate Counsel, n.d.). Being perceived as lacking traditional forms of power (Alm and Guttormsen, 2021), they may hold back their voices and see themselves as socially unequal to others. It is therefore pressing to provide them with opportunities to speak out in their own voices. Through inviting them to be tellers in Playback performances, Playback Theatre can “offer a home for their voices” (Good, 2003). While having a sense of power and control as they own their stories and contribute to the performance, people in marginalized communities may also begin to appreciate their experiences and encourage others to do the same (Lathrop et al., 2022). In a long term, this empowers them, gives them courage, and enables them to have increased visibility and influence (FasterCapital, n.d.), enhancing their social equality in society.

Conclusion

This review brings readers into the world of Playback Theatre, emphasizing its powerful therapeutic impacts on audiences and advocating for its social role as a community builder across different communities. By looking into the words of the founders and important figures in the history of Playback Theatre, we gain a deep understanding of how Playback Theatre is beyond entertainment. Finally, it is the responsibility of all of us, as a large community, to pass on this ancient but contemporary culture of Playback Theatre to make the world a better place.

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