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June 16, 17 and 18, 2007 PREPARING THE GROUND 123-128

Workshop: Playback Theatre and Social Justice – What’s at Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression

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Montréal**

I am a child born from the dispersion of Sindhis from post-partition Pakistan who studied within the Francophone Diaspora in Alberta, now residing in the Canadian Diaspora south of the American border. My desires, which are many and changing, have been constrained and shaped by the ever-shifting borders of my material body, my social and political geography, and by the gaze of others.

— Nisha Sajnani

**June 16, 17
(working
sessions on
Playback
theatre) and 18
(presentation
and open dia-
logue with a
broader public),
2007**

I am an interdisciplinary artist engaging with the practices of movement and words; the writing, choreographing, performance and poetics of dance and text. Central to my existence in this world is the fact that as a person I cannot and will not separate myself from my art, my race and my political beliefs. I create art for life’s sake, breath by breath.

— Dawn Crandell

From within the popular form of hip hop, I set out to learn and know its history, to critically engage its current manifestations and to be a part of envisioning new forms and innovations. — Baba Israel

A previous collaboration with the Creative Alternatives theatre company during the workshop Why Art? Had enabled LEVIER to become better acquainted with the work of this Montreal-based Playback theatre company, which was challenging the larger playback theatre community to integrate more people of colour into their practice and to adopt a more diversified cultural approach. The company also offered a creative way of dealing with problems associated with racialized identities, social exclusion and systemic oppression. The idea of presenting a workshop on the question of social justice was developed with Nisha Sajnani, the director of Creative Alternatives.

The decision to ask Dawn Crandell and Baba Israel to co-facilitate the weekend workshop with Nisha came about as a result of connections between Devora Neumark’s teaching at Goddard College (Vermont, USA) in the Master of Fine Arts – Interdisciplinary Arts Program and her work with LEVIER. Dawn and Baba were both students in this program; Devora was introduced to them via a Playback theatre workshop they co-facilitated on campus during a residency. Dawn shared with Devora her experience with Jonathan Fox (a Harvard-educated New Yorker who founded Playback Theatre), and spoken of the need at that time to broaden the leadership of the Playback theatre companies to include more people of colour. Such a process would reflect a greater diversity of experience and show what is possible in this form of practice. This is an example of what is possible in the encounter between pedagogy and critical reflection about community and humanist activist art. Dawn Crandell is a dancer, choreographer, poet, scriptwriter, community cultural activist and educator; she is an active member of Playback Theater NYC (New York, USA), a company that uses hip hop and improvisational theatre. Baba Israel is a hip hop and spoken word artist, and a founding member of Playback Theater NYC. He is also an arts educator and gives workshops in hip hop poetry, improvisational theatre and music production in the United States and abroad.

Nisha had not met Baba or Dawn before this workshop. Thus, by inviting them to Montréal to participate in Playback theatre here, LEVIER provided an opportunity for people working in the same field to expand their network and broaden their practice.

NISHA WROTE THE FOLLOWING TEXT AFTER THIS THREE- DAY WORKSHOP:

The text begins by contextualizing Playback theatre, its history and issues, and then focuses on what came out of the collaborative work in Montréal. Nisha is an active member of the Montreal Playback Theatre Company and the Spanish-language Ollín Teatro Transformación. She is president-elect of the National Association of Drama Therapy and obtained her doctorate from Concordia University, Montréal, with research on performance, oral narrative and social change. She currently teaches a course entitled “Applied Theatre, Trauma and Cultural Intervention” at Yale University, Connecticut, USA.

Analysis of the Workshop: Playback Theatre and Social Justice – What’s at Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression

Reflections from a Montréal Workshop

Nisha Sajnani

There has been growing attention to issues relating to collective trauma, diversity and oppression in Playback theatre praxis in the last few years. In 2005, my organization, Creative Alternatives, held a capacity-building workshop with Jonathan Fox, inviting 20 members of Canadian Playback theatre companies and interested members of the public to reflect on the efficacy of Playback theatre in creating spaces of dialogue to address issues of diversity and social justice. This effort strengthened the network of Canadian Playback theatre artists and resulted in a documentary film on Playback theatre and dialogue. In 2006, the School of Playback Theatre, in association with the Centre for Playback Theatre, hosted a special session on Playback theatre and people of colour as time that a group of people of colour within the Playback community had gathered together. What emerged from both of these events was a renewed awareness of the importance of and commitment to engaging with issues of diversity and anti-oppression through our art practice.

Consistent with a shared objective to raise critical issues related to socially engaged arts-based practice, Engrenage Noir / LEVIER initiated a collaboration between Creative Alternatives and Playback Theatre NYC to present a workshop on Playback theatre and social justice from June 16 to 18, 2006. The workshop, held at Concordia University, was presented in English and French, and the invitation was open for free to anyone interested in potential intersections of performance, dialogue and social change. Approximately 30 educators, artists and creative arts therapists speaking a variety of languages and representing a variety of ages and experience with Playback theatre attended the three-day workshop that culminated in a public performance and dialogue about the opportunities, considerations and limitations of the Playback form in addressing issues of collective oppression and social justice. In the sections that follow, I provide a brief history of Playback theatre, share my thoughts on how this particular workshop unfolded and introduce several ideas regarding opportunities and limitations of the Playback form in addressing issues of collective injustice and oppression.

A Brief History of Playback Theatre

Playback theatre is an original form of interactive theatre developed by Jonathan Fox in 1975 wherein true stories of audience members are improvised by a team of actors who play back the stories through improvised rhyme, rhythm, sound, movement and script. Fox intended Playback theatre to be an extension of a foregone oral tradition within which communities could generate insight and elicit a variety of perspectives regarding their lived experiences by sharing and witnessing each other's stories. He writes: "If oppression can be defined as having no one to tell their and Playback theatre as intervening in a "culture of separation" through the mutual sharing of lived experience. The goal of Playback theatre is to faithfully render, albeit with a varying degree of ease and tension, the immediate, archetypal and sociopolitical narratives available in a sense of collective identity as a community. The structure, roles and techniques within Playback theatre are accessible to learn, as evidenced by the proliferation of this form in over 50 countries. There are, at present, over 300 Playback theatre companies worldwide that have used this form to facilitate dialogue over a wide range of themes, deepening empathy and understanding amongst individuals and groups in educational, organizational, community and health care settings.

The aesthetic space of a Playback theatre performance is rather simple. It can take place in any environment, indoors or outdoors, in which there can be a space created for both audience and "stage." The props used are minimal and traditionally consist of a set of coloured fabrics that can be manipulated to signify emotions, objects and characters as needed. A Playback theatre company is usually comprised of one conductor, who is akin to a master of ceremonies for each Playback performance,

inviting stories from audience members and skilfully surfacing the main points of each experience shared. The company must have at least one musician who underscores the rendering of personal stories within the performance. The company also needs actors familiar with the varied short- and long-story forms within Playback theatre. Perhaps most importantly, Playback theatre cannot take place without storytellers and story listeners, everyday people who are drawn to sharing some aspect of a situation or experience they have lived and listening to one another's accounts. Playback theatre companies perform for others or for members of the company as a form of process group. A typical Playback theatre performance often begins with an introduction sequence in which company members introduce themselves by sharing a brief personal narrative that relates to the theme in question, if there is a theme. As a means of preparing the audience to share their own stories, the conductor may invite audience members to greet one another and then to share a brief experience as it relates to the theme. These initial experiences are played back through a variety of short forms leading to longer ones. Finally, performances are usually concluded by asking the audience to reflect aloud upon the stories shared or by witnessing a culminating enactment or poetic gesture by the company.

The Montréal Workshop

We should not take for granted our capacity to listen to difficult stories

Our workshop was co-facilitated by Dawn Crandell, Baba Israel and me. Both Dawn and Baba had substantial experience with theatre and diverse dance and spoken word forms that they blended to reach new audiences and, in so doing, cultivated new stories through their adapted Playback

form. As for me, I had several years of experience in Playback theatre both as an actor in the Montréal Playback Theatre Company and the Ollín Teatro Transformación, a Spanish-speaking company, and as a co-founder of the Third Space Playback Theatre Company, the mission of which is to give an art form and a platform to experiences of economic, social and political marginalization.

We had not seen each other work and had met in person only a couple of days prior to the workshop to design how the days that followed were to unfold. What became clearer to me as we progressed in our collaboration was the fact that our two companies employed very different aesthetics (I did not do hip hop but was very interested in learning!) and also had to negotiate a way of facilitating together. With regard to the idea of collaboration, having a network of practitioners who can be brought into an encounter and tasked with teaching together is a useful and creative way to elicit each other's underlying assumptions concerning our practice. In the past, as with this experience, I found it most useful to regard our workshop as a learning laboratory where we would not necessarily be imparting pearls of wisdom concerning Playback theatre, diversity or social justice but inviting our Montréal community to investigate possibilities and emerging questions with us.

Reflections on Playback Theatre and Social Justice

Several key insights surfaced over the course of our three-day workshop and culminating performance. I have grouped these thoughts as a set of themes with several examples drawn from our Montréal workshop.

A Partial Knowledge of Storied Bodies

One of my guiding assumptions in Playback theatre is that our understanding of ourselves, and of society, is derived from the stories we hear and tell about ourselves and each other. Many people continue to see their options and choices diminished and their social and economic mobility reduced as a result of how their bodies have been narrated in the public imaginary. Playback theatre provides a means of gathering in the presence of others, representatives of society, and speaking from one's experience. In this way, Playback theatre privileges situated expertise, knowledge that is derived from lived experience. However, as this is the case, the experience available to dialogue in a Playback theatre performance is, on the surface, limited to the bodies in the room and the stories that emerge from their encounters.

I believe it is important for us to see this limitation as less of a liability and more a reality and arena of possibility. Company members will be limited in the experiences they will be able to empathically play back in their embodied reflections of audience members' stories. This is especially true in cases where Playback companies are comprised of members whose socioeconomic status, ethnicity, ability and other differences are largely homogeneous or particularly discrepant from the social locations and experiences of their audiences. On one hand, it is important for companies seeking to enable a dialogue on diversity and social justice to include a membership that is diverse in age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, legal status and so on. Yet, as we will never achieve a perfectly diverse company and because this is largely dependent on

context, it also seems that it would be important to playfully speak to our ultimate failure in being able to fully understand or represent the experiences of another even as we continue and compassionately attend to the challenge of encountering experiences divergent from our own.

It is also important to remain cognizant of the limitations of what can be known about the “other,” that is, any experience that differs from one’s own. Therefore, while one of the goals of Playback theatre is to reflect the “essence” of the teller’s immediate story, its archetypal symbols and its sociopolitical narratives, it is also important for actors to playfully and creatively acknowledge the edge of where their experiences divert from that of the teller’s in order to avoid potentially repeating the violence of uninvited narration, or what Ken Gergen refers to in his articulation of the during the workshop was to ask both company members and audiences to reflect silently or aloud on the stories shared throughout the performance rather than waiting until the end of the performance to ask for audience reflections. By interrupting the flow of stories shared by the audience to invite reflections, it appeared increasingly possible to avoid colluding with the silence that often surrounds narratives that surface conflicting, contested or troubling material. Furthermore, Playback companies are encouraged to reveal a diverse array of personal experience, relating to the theme in question, in their introductions and throughout the performance, in order to share the risk involved in sharing stories that emerge from the often unsettling, disrupted and dystopian experiences of oppression.

Have you ever had an experience relating to diversity and oppression?

The Relationship Between Power, Questions and Analysis

The stories shared by Playback theatre companies as part of their introduction sequence often set the direction for the performance as they subtly give permission to the audience to share a similar range of stories. As I mentioned earlier, it is important for the company to present a diversity of experiences in order to invite a wide array of responses. In the same vein, the conductor often sets the tone of the performance by framing the theme and asking the audience a question or series of questions that might prompt an anecdote.

Over the course of our workshop, Dawn, Baba and I grappled with what questions might best invite the kinds of stories we were interested in hearing; how could we invite stories relating to diversity, oppression and injustice? We found that by directing the audience’s attention towards a particular inquiry such as, “When have you felt like you were a target or agent of oppression?” or “Why is racism wrong?” the conductor holds a position of power, subtly shaping the contours of the dialogue that is invited to unfold and initiates what experiences can become part of our collective memory. The latter question might suggest that only experiences that support a particular view are welcome, whereas the former question seemed to invite stories of complicity as well as stories of marginalization. Another question we used was “Have you ever had an experience relating to diversity and oppression?” This seemed open-ended enough and actually brought out several interesting stories from our audience.

One of her 16 years of employment as a public service employee with the federal government. She described how racism operates in her environment, for example in recruitment interviews

where immigrants of colour are often told they do not have enough “Canadian experience” or “personal suitability.” She described what we would later reflect on as ageist, sexist and racist moments where she was told she could not advance in her job or was outright looked over as her white superiors decided to promote younger and less-experienced colleagues. She expressed her physical and emotional fatigue, and the pain of experiencing and witnessing these attitudes and behaviours repeatedly in her work environment. She described how important it has been for her to stay involved with the National Council of Visible Minorities, an advocacy group that supports the education and advancement of racialized groups across Canada. It struck me during her patchworked and compelling telling that part of what we were doing was finding a way to name the moments that have hurt us: words and gestures for the absences and the gaps created by agents of oppression. So often are these experiences dismissed in favour of survival that the remnants of these transgressions do not easily come together as a story. In fact, we often hear people pause and reflect mid-sentence as they try to collect the pieces of their experience to form a story to tell in Playback theatre. When it comes to inviting stories of oppression, it appeared, as it did in this woman’s story, that these dismissive, possibly traumatic and deeply internalized moments required invitation, encouragement and patience on the part of the teller, listeners and actors.

Similar and divergent experiences worked their way to the surface over the course of our workshop, formed into words, gestures and stories, and entered back into the narration of who we are; they were woven into our collective memory. The conductor is responsible for inviting stories to be told and is, ergo, responsible for ensuring an environment of equitable participation. This mindfulness is paramount when broaching issues of injustice and oppression and especially in mixed audiences where there are those who suffer particular experiences next to those who are not marginalized in the same way or who, dependent on context, belong to a privileged group. Over the course of this workshop, we tried various ways of inviting the audience to make themselves known to each other through introductions and through invitations to share experiences with partners or in small groups near the beginning or in the middle of performances.

On Silence and Beauty

Playing back the silences, the moments when there are no words in the stories shared, is just as important as playing back verbal narratives. In the example of the above story, the gaps and silences in her telling revealed the partial nature of the experience, the moments of oppression when words were stolen and replaced with disbelief, shock or sadness. This silence may be the residue of trauma indicating gaps in one’s authority and self-determination created by perpetrators in the moment or aftermath of harmful encounters. When inviting experiences of oppression or when staging traumatic memory, how do we play back the unplayable, the moments when there were no words? Fox finds the answer in beauty. He writes of striving for a kind of theatre that could provide a glimpse of redemption alongside representations of human suffering and offered Playback theatre as a form that could “describe the most difficult truths in a way that we connection between aesthetics and ethics in Playback theatre continues to be an area worthy of enactments of stories of oppression necessitate a suitable aesthetic for both the verbal and non-verbal expressions emitted by the teller that do not translate neatly into linear dramatization. Playback theatre offers several short forms (e.g., fluid sculptures, pairs, rants and

chorus) that can better reflect the constellation of experience shared in these stories and that can be incorporated into longer re-enactments.

There is also the silence of those in the audience who choose not to share stories. This silence may be kept for many reasons and may be related to who is and who is not in the room, who is guiding the performance and the stratification of power that presents itself over the course of a performance as a result of the kinds of stories that are shared and how both actors and the audience respond to them. Armand Volkas, director of the Living Arts Playback Theatre Ensemble in San Francisco, California, has an interesting way of encouraging a diversity of perspectives within the stories shared. In his “healing the wounds of history” approach, he invites groups of participants from two cultures with a common legacy of violent conflict and historical trauma (e.g., descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors and the Third Reich) into an intimate workshop environment that results in a public Playback theatre performance where participants initiate the Playback performance by retelling a story they told during the workshop process. Armand refers to these tellers as “emotional pioneers” who pave the way for others in the audience who may be in the kinds of stories that are told from the beginning of the performance in the hopes of inviting a similar range of perspectives from among the audience gathered.

Facilitating Deep Listening and Effective Witnessing

As I mentioned earlier, Playback theatre is comprised of storytellers and story listeners. We should not take for granted our capacity to listen to difficult stories. It is not easy to listen to stories of disappointment, destruction and loss, themes that often emerge when inviting stories relating to injustice and oppression. Fox positioned Playback as a means of reviving an oral tradition of building knowledge and achieving *communitas* through the sharing of personal stories. I advance that we must also privilege the development of an aural tradition, that is, the capacity to bear witness through acts of generous listening with a curious ear to the realities lived by ourselves and each other. In order for Playback theatre to be effective in addressing issues of injustice and oppression, there must be space to exercise the capacity to listen.

Fox has underlined the necessity of a strong aesthetic in supporting audience reception. In addition, the structure of Playback itself can be helpful in encouraging our aural capacities. By listening to the teller’s account and then witnessing a dynamic embodied rendering by the Playback company, a space is created to give attention to each person’s experience without the interruption of the next story, idea or comment, as might happen in everyday conversation. This space may invite the teller, the audience and the Playback company to listen in ways that are not familiar and not easily dismissed. This space set apart can also present a challenge when addressing issues of harmful marginalization when it creates an aura of sacredness around each experience. When this happens, the audience’s attention is drawn to what becomes an event or an experience rather than a passing moment and can prevent further analysis. Honouring personal story is the *sine qua non* of Playback theatre. This raises the question of how to effectively create space to listen and reflect the interplay of systemic, relational and interpersonal violence that produce harmful experiences of marginalization and oppression in the stories shared, while attending to the unique experiences of audience members.

Playback companies have responded to this challenge by surfacing the sociopolitical narratives within the stories told, however partial and incomplete their rendering may be. In addition to this, the conductor can also invite the audience to reflect on the stories shared throughout the performance by giving further pause between stories, as is often done, to ask the audience to call out brief associations to the story or intentionally asking the audience to share similar or divergent experiences from the one shared as a means of broadening perspectives on a given issue. Furthermore, Playback can also be positioned as part of a larger exercise that includes dialogue in small groups, caucuses and dyads or as a large collective on the ideologies and relationships identified through performance. Over the course of our workshop, we reflected on who was and who was not present in the room, as this shaped who would be doing the telling and also who was available to listen. Facilitating effective witnessing, from my perspective, moves beyond the single event of a performance or workshop, to intentionally gathering diverse individuals and communities to be both listeners and tellers, each bearing witness to the other's perspectives.

Working in Alliance and Towards Change

When situated as a part of a larger community organizing strategy, Playback theatre can be effective in surfacing the dialectics present in a particular group, grounding ideas in personal experience and establishing compassionate ground from which to build solidarity. In this way, individuals and communities living different experiences of oppression are offered a space in which their realities can be told and heard. To truly engage with the social and political themes in the collection of stories that arise, it is important to see Playback as a part of a larger popular education process that begins with personal experience but moves towards an analysis of common themes of collective action. During the workshop, we discussed the viability of merging of the active participation of audience members or workshop participants, who Boal refers to as "spect-actors" (not "spectators"), in a dynamic search for solutions to their own concerns. It bears mentioning that while Playback theatre embodies the values of participation and dialogue that are also found within Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, the two practices were developed separately. The Theatre of the Oppressed often begins by establishing images or scenes that depict the collective realities and struggles of a group, such as an image depicting racism or sexism, and involves a series of interventions that invite participants to identify and address the interplay of systemic, relational and interpersonal violence operating in a given reality. Of note is the emphasis Boal places on the "response-ability" of witnesses. Many of his exercises focus on supporting the ability of the everyday social actor to respond to injustice. During our conversation at the end of the workshop's culminating performance, participants agreed that it would be useful to draw on the techniques available within the Theatre of the Oppressed to further analyze the way power was organized and expressed in the stories told. They also suggested that it would be important to establish the end of one form and the beginning of another in order to avoid confusion about how participants' stories would be processed. A workshop participant further suggested that there be a different person facilitating the social exploration of themes via Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to differentiate the style of facilitation from that of the conductor in the Playback performance. The idea of blending Theatre of the Oppressed with Playback theatre has been taken up by Hannah Fox and Marc Weinblatt at the Centre for Playback Theatre and has been met with much To conclude, Playback theatre, while it draws upon one personal story at a time, must

be understood within its social context and within the context of a larger performance and dialogue in which many stories are being shared. In this way, the collective experience of the audience emerges over the course of a performance. Fox refers to this as the “red thread” of a Playback theatre performance. At the same time, the sacredness bestowed on each story and the promise of validation and affirmation created in a traditional Playback performance may place limitations on the degree to which we might address the intersections of ideology, power and complicity in the stories shared. With this in mind, I have offered specific sites of inquiry and in(ter)vention that can be made with regard to the social and political efficacy of this form. Further, the opportunity to continue this exploration in this Montréal workshop provided an opportunity to identify and strengthen a network of people deeply committed to the arts and social change from both anglophone and francophone communities in Montréal and also created a relationship between Playback NYC, Creative Alternatives and Engrenage Noir / LEVIER. Working in alliance, we have been able to deepen our collective knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of Playback theatre in addressing prevailing inequities as well as identifying interesting sites for adaptation and innovation within the form.

NOTES

1. See the presentation of the company, p. 91. white, heterosexual males (Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: Race and*
2. See the account of the workshop, pp.91-92.
3. Playback theatre is a form of interactive theatre practice in which members of the public share moments from their lives and watch their stories played spontaneously by a group of actors and musicians. See the following text for further information.
4. Personal communication with Dawn Crandell regarding School of Playback Theatre programming.
5. Jonathan Fox, *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre* (New York: Tusitala, 1994), p. 6.
6. From the mission statement of the School of Playback Theatre ([www. playbackschool.org](http://www.playbackschool.org)).
7. Ken Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
8. The term “racialized” is used here to refer to the understanding of “race” as a socially constituted category. Racialization refers to the process by which one’s physical features become salient and over-determine social relations. Within a racist-sexist-classist society, a society that is organized around a system of advantage that benefits the Eviction of Muslims From Western Law and Politics, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), the term racialization is used to refer to the process by which one’s physical features are conflated with negative status.
9. Jonathan Fox, p.216 (see note 5).
10. Julie Salverson, “Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Eroticism of Injury,” *Theater*, 31, Duke University Press (2001), pp.119-125.
11. Armand Volkas, “Healing the Wounds of History,” in D.R Johnson and R. Emunah (eds.) *Current Approaches in Drama Therapy* (IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2009).
12. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Urizen, 1979). 13. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970). For a presentation of *Theatre of the Oppressed* and of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, see the notes 4 and 5 of Jorge Goia’s text *Soma: Origins and Paths of an Anarchist Experiment*, p. 331.
14. Hannah Fox, *Weaving Playback Theatre with Theatre of the Oppressed*, Centre for Playback Theatre (2007) – available on-line: www.playbackschool.org/articles/FoxH_TO.pdf.