

The Politics of Playback Theatre. Is Playback Theatre political Event?

A few weeks after the 11th September [2001], we had a show in Freiburg, Germany with the title (in German) 'Zeitgeist' [Zeitgeists – 'spirits of our time']. The practice sessions of our multi-ethnic group had been haunted by stories of burning buildings – the World Trade Centre, as could be expected, but also the Moneda in Santiago de Chile and stories of living in exile in Europe.

In the performance, however, our public surprised us with stories of the ubiquitous cell phone, disappointments over unforthcoming presents for St Nicholas's Day, sugary Christmas muzak in department stores, loneliness on a visit to the parental home because of the teller's unacknowledged homosexuality, the loneliness of the demented old people in the neighbourhood, someone's inability to seek contact at the funeral of a beloved grandmother, the torture of being lost for words on meeting an old girlfriend. There was finally a story of the liberating yapping of a dog gone wild, the dog being the safety valve for tension in the 'ghost house' of a large family. In the midst of all this, seemingly misplaced, were a three-sentence story about television images of the Taliban, sympathy for an ostracised Muslim friend, and the sigh, 'War is terrible'. Did our public really have no other stories centring on political issues? Had we made the theme too unapproachable? Or, was the thread running through in fact, 'wars close-to-home': the failed search for human contact and real feelings being the everyday counterpart of the 11th September in our Freiburg microcosm and in the performance space. Somehow, after the culinarily-reinforced wind-up

to the evening, despite a positively-charged atmosphere, good feedback, and the usual exhaustion, we were left feeling a bit puzzled and not really content – or at least some of us were, including me.

Like many of the Playbackers in Germany, I belong to the first post-war generation. I was an active swimmer in the waves of the '68 movement, was involved in the building-up of the islands set afloat through the swell of the movement, and in their fierce defence during the ebbtide of the '80s and '90s. I then dove into exploration of the depths of the psyche and am now seeking, in my professional activities, in my occasional political involvement and as well in Playback, a way of bringing all these strands of life experience together. Which brings me to the question: Is Playback Theatre in any sense political, in a way that can benefit me, us, today, now? Is there, in the Playback scene, any sort of 'We'?

There are some indications that this could be so:

The political effectiveness of PT: Morals in the era of the post-modern

Playback Theatre is one of those practices which enable the complex event of real contact, real meeting to take place between people. In this, it represents a form of moral learning. The post-modern social situation is characterised by plurality, segmentation and differentiations which lead, at the same time, to both insecurity and new opportunities for contact. The concept of 'morality' has been released from the illusion of a universally-binding ethic (the Enlightenment, Kant etc), which also served to avoid real personal closeness through standardised social codes

of interaction. Today, we no longer find a state-controlled ethical monopoly; a variety of ethical systems have been left to the mercy of market forces.

The responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions has been brought back to the individual. In the private arena of getting on with life together, we need to learn a moral way of being which results from the necessity of finding a balance between taking responsibility for both others and for oneself. This is one of the prerequisites for the development of non-violent behaviours, in particular without racism, and in so far touches on what is at the heart of present-day political issues. Moral behaviour today is not (any longer) something which can be regulated by convention. The meetings which occur between people happen countenance to countenance, there is an emotional relationship. The Playback Theatre artform has the potential to approach this area in some quite specific ways – but with the attendant risks. Some examples of both are given here:

- **Breaking taboos through the expression of feelings instead of indifference in interaction**

Working with feelings is central to the Playback Theatre method. Feelings are not investigated, dissected, measured, or categorised, but are rather the key to the essence of the story. How well the players can spontaneously grasp the feelings of the teller in all their complexity, without passing judgement, determines the quality of the contact that takes place here. The necessity for intense attentive listening, demanded by the rules of the form and moulding the attentive attitude of players and conductor,

opens the public space for personal experience and for the expression of feelings, even though, or just exactly *because* they do not correspond to the usual norms of social interaction. The concentration on the emotional core of what is told counterbalances the respective reality of social taboos like homosexuality, fear of weakness and death, the denial of family conflict or experience of being discriminated against – just as happened on that evening of the 'Zeitgeist'. In playing these stories, we give up again and again the safe distance between the 'I' and the 'Other', and must constantly re-establish our moral responsibility - in negotiating the balance between ourselves, the tellers and the public, and the many ambivalences present in all these aspects.

- **The strengthening of community spirit**

Playback Theatre strengthens the feeling of community and the experience of connection to others:

- through the actors' achievement of putting themselves emotionally and cognitively in the position of others, who are in most cases unknown to them,
- through the group's achievement in creating a spontaneous scene on the stage,
- and through the ambiguous, metaphorical forms used in staging a scene or feeling.
- The audience can identify themselves in their own way with the ritualised, rhythmic, body and

sound images and find intimations of the deeper layers of meaning - the 'echoes' of the story.

'Through the doubling in the mirror, the world keeps its distance'. (Michel Foucault)¹. We don't need to cite examples here – everyone who knows Playback has experienced the spell it casts.

- **Acceptance of difference, and conflict resolution**

Playback Theatre accepts differences between people and uses this productively through the aesthetic of the mirroring of one's personal experience in others. Clarification of one's own attitudes is often first made possible through recognition of differences to other people's approaches: *'As I was watching, I saw, I realised that I wasn't nearly as angry at the time. Maybe I should be sometime.'*

Playback Theatre can help to clear conflicts: a conflict story can be played from the two opposing perspectives – as for example in a recent story of a quarrel between two schoolgirls. The respect for both of the seriously, energetically-displayed perspectives, astounded not only the tellers but also their schoolmates. Here was an immediate effect to be seen – the performance led directly to the resumption of a broken-off dialogue between the two. At the same time, the players, a group of student teachers, had the experience of ac-

tively respecting two perspectives at variance with each other, instead of hastily summing up and passing judgement; for teachers-to-be, no small challenge.

- **Opening up dialogue through individualisation of 'the others' instead of stereotyping.**

Playback works against stereotyping, in that it gives every role a name and individual characteristics, and at the end, honours the teller with the respectful gaze which 'gives the story back'. This has the potential to broaden the teller's available strategies for dealing with particular situations, in that stereotyping of 'the other' not only reduces these 'others', also harms the stereotyper by reducing the range of perception available to him or her.

So it was important that the teller's Moslem acquaintance in a story of discrimination during the time of the war against the Taliban, was to be played as a real person, with a name, age, favourite colour and her own characteristic quality ('very vivacious, a bit hyper sometimes') not as 'the Moslem woman' with no name, with a headscarf and lowered gaze. To have reproduced the cliché of the 'Moslem woman' on stage would not have matched the intention of the teller to criticise the powerful racism of the Bush administration. On the contrary, it would have reproduced a similar type of power - the power of the sympathising, superior Central European woman, in fact covering up

¹ transl. JSS from German *Die Ordnung der Dinge*, 1971, p. 41)

her own sense of inaction in the face of the war.

A different tale was the story, told during a Playback seminar, of an encounter with young skinheads at night. The teller couldn't remember any of the individual faces of the 'homogeneous crowd of skinheads' – his fear held tightly onto the faceless menace. Both facelessness and fear were clearly visible in the acting out of the scene.

This reminded a participant of a situation she had experienced in the Underground after a football game, where 'a group of drunk, brawling men' caused her to feel afraid. She happened to be sitting next to the 'alpha male' of the group and began a conversation with him in which he related experiences of being a fireman. After the scene, in which we experienced Ulrich as a very special, chatty sort of fireman, the teller was able to say that in fact she had found him rather nice. In the mirror held up to her by the scene, she could see that her view of the football fans had refined itself somewhat. A more self-confident approach with one of 'them' had become possible and a threatening or confrontational situation could in this way be avoided. Naturally this is not a universally-applicable recipe for handling conflict situations with aggressive groups, but is nevertheless an encouraging example.

- **Strengthening of confidence through letting oneself experience uncertainty**

Playback Theatre encourages the acceptance of ambivalences and provides a means of dealing with them – most obviously in the form of Pairs, but also more fundamentally in the recurring situation of allowing oneself to experience and explore uncertainty, being torn without seeking quick answers, finding closeness without being judgemental and in spite of everything, in full awareness of one's responsibility towards the teller, the audience and oneself. A position, which is, according to Zygmunt Bauman, the meaning - and in fact the only meaning - of morality today, or, in other words: to encounter the ambivalence of good and evil (rather than dividing the world into Good and Evil... JH)

The remaining questions (or some of them!)

Can we now trust to the fact that this 'moral' outlook, which we are able to implement in our Playback Theatre work, encompasses the issues which are politically relevant right now? Doesn't it seem sometimes as if we are merely navel-gazing? Are there themes which we sometimes avoid? We can only enact what our public has experienced, which leads us to conclude that it is on the one hand important to play for a public which tells stories ignored by our society, as sometimes happens (with minority or fringe groups). However, in order to be able to risk taking on delicate or difficult, tricky issues, the key question is: do we truly succeed in telling and playing the stories of our own group members, with all their political im-

plications? Playback groups often have a great desire for harmony. To make the echo of our own stories audible in the moral-political dimension as well requires great trust in the ability of the group to work through conflict – and can at the same time be the means of creating this trust. Can we really show ourselves as we are? Are we seen in all our difference from each other?

The balance of responsibility for oneself and others necessary for the emotionally-created encounter is inseparable from the question of the balance of power in the relationships – not only with regard to the public, but also in the group itself. It is up to the individual to choose between surrendering to the others, avoiding the issue (remaining indifferent) or assuming responsibility for the others without taking over from them – whereby the question of ambivalence, which resides in every act of moral significance, raises its head once more. *'The Scylla of indifference, of not-accepted responsibility and the Charybdis of stolen autonomy, of responsibility which has got out of hand, seem too close for one to be able to sail through in safety.'* (Zygmunt Bauman)²

Our voyage under the sails of Playback Theatre will continue to remain unsure, and must remain so, if it is to be politically effective.

I would be very glad to hear from any of you with comments, thoughts or experiences related to this topic.

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² transl. JSS from German, *Flaneure, Spieler und Touristen. Essays zu post-modernen Lebensformen* Bauman, Z Hamburg, (1997) p. 111. Original in English *Life in fragments: Essays in postmodern Morality* Bauman, Z. (1995) not available to us. Apologies Transl.