

## **Playback Theatre, Autoethnography and Generosity**

### **Introduction**

Dramatherapists in the UK are regulated by the Health and Care Professions (HCPC), whose duty is to monitor the “Arts Therapies” to ensure that fitness to practice is maintained. The HCPC suggest that Arts Therapists need ‘engagement in their own arts-based process’ (Health and Care Professions Council 2016, 8) as an obligation for continuing professional development.

The aim of the paper is to consider how an art form practice can inform development as a dramatherapist. I’ll will be sharing emerging themes in my practice as a playback practitioner, drawing on my roles as a playback actor and conductor. I intend to present an honest, open and transparent account of my experience that reflects the nature of the research methodology of Autoethnography. I will develop the themes from my reflexivity by considering how playback theatre is characterised by generosity and conclude by making links with how the art form has impacted on my development as a dramatherapist.

### **What is playback theatre?**

‘Playback theatre is a form of improvised drama in which members of an audience are invited to tell personal stories to a “conductor” who witness their story improvised by a company of actors and musicians’ (Rowe 2007, 12). The stories from the ‘tellers’ have an autobiographical element in that they are personal stories ‘in which people tell real events from their lives’ (Salas 2003, 6). The conductor acts as a facilitator, supporting and listening to the teller’s story, then guides the actors’ improvisations by suggesting dramatic ‘forms’ to

shape the story. Stories may be funny or moving and can have a therapeutic effect on the teller and audience. Salas (2009) recognises the potential for healing in oral storytelling, the benefits of shared wisdom and truth embedded in the stories. Playback theatre may offer the potential to be therapeutic, but it is not a therapy, but a specific form of theatre).

Playback is a ritualised and stylised form of community theatre that helps to structure the performance. The story teller's chair is positioned aside and forward from the actor's chairs, alongside the conductor. It is from this position the teller shares their story. Rowe (2007) suggests that the story teller becomes a performer the moment they enter the stage. Once the teller has told their story the conductor invites the audience to 'let's watch'. The actors stand up and the improvisation in the suggested form begins.

The sharing of private stories in a public space helps to 'counter that most destructive of beliefs: that we are not alone in our experience' (Rowe 2007, 15). This sharing helps with 'strengthening the bonds of understanding' between actors and audience and offer a sense of 'validation and belonging' (Moran and Alon 2011, 319; Rowe 2007, 15). The sharing of stories can reinforce and build community, where the stories connect everyone together. Through co-operation, collaboration and co-creation between actors, teller's, audience and the conductor connections are forged to make a success of the story (Hutt and Hosking 2004).

After the actors have completed the dramatic improvisation the conductor then proceeds to invite the teller for further comment. Witnessing their story in a dramatic form can offer a new perspective to view their experience, whereby the teller might discover new meaning in their story (Rowe 2007). Barak (2013, 111) considers the links between playback theatre and narrative therapy in that both offer 'narrative transformation'. The dramatic improvisation offers a new context for the teller's story enabling the possibility of transformation in the teller's story. In this way the attachment to the teller's single perspective of the story is

challenged by virtue of the actor's involvement and interpretation of the story, offering a different perspective. We can become attached to our stories because of the beliefs, values and feelings associated and embedded in those stories, 'We can become attached to almost anything' Gammage (2006, 11).

The conductor helps familiarise the audience with the playback structure and encourage the audience to share stories (Chesner 2002). By holding the boundaries of playback an 'open and safe environment' is created that helps to elicit stories in a supportive way (Hutt and Hosking 2004, 15). The conductor is 'committed to understanding and honouring the story's essence' that helps to guide the actors' improvisation (Salas 1992, 17). If the essence of the story is not captured, dynamics and deeper meanings of the story remain underdeveloped and depth is lost (Salas 1999). It's this attending to the teller and the audience that helps set up the conditions for openness and generosity to risk sharing an intimate story (Hutt and Hosking 2004). A safe environment helps nurture tellers to take the risk to step out from the cover of the audience and take their place on the stage where they are visible to all.

## **Methodology**

The research lens used was autoethnography which is a qualitative research approach, drawing on individual's subjective experience. In this respect it challenges traditional and positive approaches to research that attempt to remove subjective experience and objectify observations. Leavy defines autoethnography as a 'method of self-study in which the researcher is viewed as a viable data source' (2008, 37), sharing their experiences 'thorough stories or narratives '(38). Autoethnography explores an individual's experience of a particular cultural context, 'in order to better understand this culture' (Adams and Ellis 2012, 190). The paper will explore on-going reflexivity as an actor and conductor that 'displays multiple layers of consciousness'. This will evidence understanding of the culture and nature of the

playback theatre art form and how this impacted on the author personally and professionally (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 739).

Autoethnography explores retrospective experiences and epiphanies in one cultural context and applies them in another (Ellis, et al, 2011). By considering my written reflections and experiences as a playback theatre practitioner as research data I will elucidate emerging themes and re-consider them in the context of my practice as a dramatherapist.

Whilst Autoethnography celebrates the ‘I’ there are risks associated with such a research approach as one can become self-indulgent, narcissistic and pre-occupied with the self (Ethrington, 2004). The research approach thus can weaken the rigor and validity of the research due to a lack of different viewpoints and research triangulation. However, by opening up oneself to oneself and opening to the experience of others, it can become easier to ‘drop some of the resistance to different ideas’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 760) and go beyond the subjective views we can hold on to vigorously.

Autoethnography is not without its risks as it requires the researcher to be vulnerable, honest and open ‘that others might pathologize’ (Anderson and Glass Coffin 2013; Ethrington 2004, 142). However, by being open and transparent one is able to understand more fully one’s experience and go beyond the limits of one’s knowledge.

## **Method**

Over a period of 3- 4 years I reflected on my experiences as a playback practitioner and trainer, through written journals, note taking and discussion with other playback practitioners. I was aware that my personal reflections were not intended or set up as a piece of research, but over time realised I was accumulating data of my lived experience and involvement in playback theatre. My approach used honest accounting so I could reach into the depths of my

experience and understand more fully patterns and tendencies that were arising. The focus of these reflections were on my development as a playback practitioner. It was later I became curious about repeated themes that I re-considered my learning in the different context of my dramatherapy practice. I was aware that the data shared my experiences in relation to others and whilst others are not directly referenced or considered, they are implicated, even by virtue of indirect experiences that they have not consented to (Morse 2000).

### **The author's experience as a playback practitioner**

I had been involved in playback theatre as an actor and conductor for over ten years. Over the past 3-4 years I had been writing and reflecting on these experiences, aware of themes that raised interest and curiosity. The development of the themes helped sustain a criticality about work as a playback practitioner, offering a space to think through more fully the challenges and questions that playback raised. The summaries that follow have captured these repeated themes.

#### *Emerging themes as an actor*

In the playback long form the teller chooses an actor to play them in their story and stands up whilst the other actors remain seated. It is not uncommon in my experience to have felt some pride having been selected, imagining it's because of my 'great' acting ability. As the teller continued to share their story to the conductor I was preoccupied with thoughts and internal chatter that feed my ego. Ideas for the improvisation were generated in my head, perhaps something funny or clever, that mostly served to reassure me that at the very least I had a dramatic idea. They all helped to buffer the impact of uncertainty and growing anxiety about the impending improvisation. Even my anxious thoughts were ego centred, as there was an underlying fear that I'd not be able to do the teller's story justice and consequently be seen as an incompetent playback actor. There was an increasing sense of unease that I'd not connect

with the teller's story. Then the action started and I felt unprepared, wishing I had listened more intently instead of being preoccupied with my own inner voice. As the story evolved my focus slowly began to move towards the teller as I yielded tentatively and uncomfortably towards the events in their story. It was not easy letting go of ego centric thoughts and desires for praise as an actor. But as I inhabited the teller's story more, the attachment to my ego began to weaken and there was a relaxing and letting go that enabled me to be more spontaneous. I was more sensitive to the emerging story and found myself using personal experiences to fuel the performance. Fears that I couldn't connect with the teller's experiences were not realised, as I noticed giving more of myself to their story. By being less pre-occupied with myself I felt less self-conscious and at the service of the teller. Every performance as an actor was characterised by a similar struggle, manoeuvring myself towards the teller and away from myself. Whilst it was often frustrating to keep going over the same internal drama, it was also a humbling experience that helped open me up.

After a playback performance it wasn't unusual to meet and talk with the 'teller', where we shared more of our experience. I often felt a strong connection with the teller and a sense of familiarity that was not easy to rationalise. I felt open, expansive and receptive towards them in a way that was surprising. Whilst I felt more connected to the teller, it was not clear whether they shared a similar bond or experience. The structures of playback theatre enabled predictability and familiarity, helping to minimize risk and offer support for the teller to share their story. However, the sharing of experiences through informal conversations had the potential to offer more risk as they were not held within the safety of the playback theatre ritual. It was also important to be aware of whose need the 'informal conversations' served, aware that such conversations with the teller might have been driven by desire for praise or massaging of my actor ego.

### *Emerging themes as a conductor*

As an actor I felt more involved and included in playback theatre, but as a conductor I tended to feel more of an outsider. It was not unusual after a performance for all the actors to be congratulated and praised for their portrayals to bring the teller's story to life. It was rare in my experience for anyone to comment about the conductor's role. Whilst the conductor is visible, they need to have a discreet role, directing attention to the teller's and the actors and away from themselves. The conductor carries the responsibility for co-ordinating the different roles and creating the kind of conditions where the audience felt safe enough to share a story. An emerging theme in my conducting had been a rigidity and woodenness in my approach. After the teller has shared a story, the conductor summarises the main features of the story and prompt the actor's to begin their improvisation, with the cue, 'let's watch'. My voice often sounded robotic and lifeless, like I was going through a timeless routine. I noticed becoming increasingly bored with the role, retreating from being fully engaged. In order to find a way of engaging more with the conductor's role I played with a new response. After each dramatic improvisation I shared small moments of my experience in response to the teller's stories. At first I wasn't sure what my motivations were and whether my approach would be vilified by the playback theatre community. However, the impact of this change in behaviour was an increasing sense of engagement in the playback theatre experience. I felt less apart and more part of the community. I realised over time that I had taken a risk. It seemed to me that the actors and the tellers were taking risks, but I was resisting taking a risk. It felt I was masking my vulnerability behind a formulaic approach to the ritual nature of playback, over focussing on ensuring the structures of playback theatre was adhered to. By experimenting with the role conductor I noticed new found lightness and playfulness in my approaches. I can see how sharing my connection with the teller's story, facilitated my own vulnerability, yielding and 'letting go' that was generous in nature and within the spirit of

playback. I came to realise that sharing something of myself may have helped others in the audience risk sharing their stories. By opening up myself I was more able to participate fully and gave more of myself that others in the playback experience might have been able to benefit from.

### **The Act of Generosity**

Improvisation is the essential art of the playback actor. They require flexibility and the ability to be open to impulses and uncertainty, requiring a letting go in order to be receptive to others (Sajnani 2012). However, opening up to impulses characterises not just actors in playback theatre, but conductors and tellers too. The conductor also needs to share of themselves and let go of personal self-consciousness and pre-occupation with the self in order to facilitate others to tell to their stories. By focussing oneself away from the self and on others, one is potentially alleviated from an inhibiting self-consciousness that lends itself to being more protective. Acting coach, Sanford Meisner encouraged actors to focus on the otherness, putting their attention on fellow actors so actors became less self-conscious and were thus more spontaneous (Meisner and Longwell 1987). Jonathan Fox (1986), pioneer of playback theatre suggests that theatre requires one to be courageous and willing to be ‘highly vulnerable’ (170). The whole playback experience is characterised by an element of risk and vulnerability that is perhaps exemplified by the teller, who is less familiar with the nature of playback theatre and its customs. The giving of a story by the teller sets the playback experience in motion; with no story there is no playback. It is the vulnerability and risk taking of the teller that enables actors and conductors to respond with equal generosity.

The act of generosity involves focussing on the other and away from the self. Rowe argues that playback actors need to yield to the teller and in this respect there is a ‘relinquishing of self’ (2007, 108). Improvisation requires ‘great generosity’ by actors (Brook 1989, 112) by

putting aside self-interest and oneself at the service of others. Generosity is a feature of improvisation and devising approaches by Jacques Lecoq, which involves actors ‘not holding back in an attempt to safeguard vanity’ (Sherman 2010, 95). By being vulnerable one gives up the tendency towards protective devices that separate oneself from others.

Fox (1994) considers that actors in playback need to be free of ego in order to be spontaneous and flexible and put the needs of the ensemble above themselves. The letting go of ego is characterised by the whole playback experience. Whether one is an actor, conductor or teller there is an opening up and receptivity that enables a shared co-creation of a playback story (Hutt and Hosking 2004, Rowe 2007). The co-creative process is generous in nature, because all are at the service of one another. It is this spirit of co-operation that helps move one beyond selfish interests that characterise the human condition and focus on the concerns of others (Sangharakshita 2009). In this way the collaboration between the actors, teller and conductor are at the service of the story, putting aside their own interests for the benefit of the audience; the whole playback experience is bigger than any one individual.

### **Loosening attachment to personal narratives**

As a playback actor my focus and concern was on the teller’s story, thus alleviating the attachment to my own internal narrative. The narrative I tended to over identify with was that I was different to others, because of my interests, hobbies, education and upbringing. By reinforcing difference I realised I was strengthening a sense of ego and positioning myself as separate from others. By focussing on difference, I was assigning myself some ‘special status’, rather than recognising the shared humanity and its accompanying joys, pains and sorrows. By developing a ‘heightened sense of uniqueness’ I was potentially isolating myself (Yalom and Leszcz 2005, 6). It was by playing someone else and stepping into the teller’s story that I was confronted with a shared experience and struggle. The human condition is

characterised by loss, illness and death and I too was subject to the same challenges. The realisation helped alleviate some of my outsider status, making it easier to accept my own vulnerability. The vulnerability inherit in everyone's playback story helped develop a safety and growing confidence that we were not alone in our experiences.

Once a safe and trusting environment has been developed a playback performance moves from more surface stories to deeper stories such as birth and death (Adderley 2004). Stories help us to connect with one another because autobiography has a universal element to it (Moustakas 1990). A playback performance helps us to establish that we are not separate, but connected with universal themes. By focusing and yielding to the story of the teller I temporarily alleviated a preoccupation with selfish concerns, putting their story above my own and consequently temporarily freed of the habitual narrative that can limit me.

The teller's experience of sharing their story offers them an opportunity to loosen up one's attachment to a story. By permitting the actors to 'playback' the teller's story in a dramatic form offers the possibility of the teller having a new perspective and relationship to the story by virtue of an outside view (Barak 2013). The story is seen, witnessed and 'out there' and thus the attachment to the story is different because it is no longer personal, but in a public arena. The externalising of the story makes it visible to others; visible to the teller and thus one's relationship to the story is transformed simply by having a different view (Bird 2010).

Sangharakshita, argues that we identify with ourselves as being this or that, in that one is English for example, or an artist or a parent (1970). This is the way we tend to think and hold fast to notions, self-narratives and identities that have the potential to limit us. In reality we are in a 'process of continuous change' and a 'flow of ever-changing components, physical and mental' (Sangharakshita 2009, 197). By loosening up the attachment to the stories we tell

ourselves there is the potential to move beyond habitual patterns of thinking that narrate our lives. It is not uncommon in a playback performance for the audience to believe that their stories and experiences are of no interest to others, or their story is not good enough. However, as tellers share their everyday experiences there seems to be a growing realisation that people's stories are of value. In this way the audience and tellers internalised beliefs are challenged by celebrating their stories.

By sharing short moments as a conductor I was able to transform the 'outsider' status I had assigned myself that permitted me to come more into relationship with the tellers and audience. A shared moment might be, 'I remember getting lost in the woods once and how frightening it was'. It's something brief, but helped to create a connection with the teller's story that members of the audience might link with the thread of another story. But in order to share a moment I needed to let go of my fears I was holding onto. I held rigid ideas and beliefs embedded as an internal narrative that conductors don't share their personal experiences. I also feared that if I didn't hold rigidly the boundaries of the ritual nature of playback the performance would fall apart; or rather I feared I would fall apart, that my lack of skill as a conductor would show itself.

The attachment to these fears and beliefs were shrouded in feelings of not feeling competent or good enough as a conductor, separating me from the others in the performance. I tended towards being more distanced and closed. However, when I have opened to my vulnerability by sharing a moment of my own, the pattern of questioning my competency was challenged. By loosening up one's attachment to an idea about oneself, means we can evolve and change, we don't have to be limited by habitual patterns or stories (Sangharakshita 1970). The emphasis on sharing and the spirit of generosity in playback theatre has the potential to break down notions of separateness. Celebrating the sharing of personal stories can help to break down separation, recognising the universality and vulnerability in all human experience.

Through the sharing of experiences from the perspective of actor, conductor and teller there is the potential for recognising that we are not so alone in our encounters, that we share common fears and concerns that are universal. Yet it though sharing these notions through playback theatre there can be a realisation that we are not so unique, offering a ‘powerful source of relief’ (Yalom and Leszcz 2005, 6).

### **How have the emerging themes as a playback practitioner impacted on development as a Dramatherapist?**

Wanting to look good (Fox 1994) and receive audience praise for my performance as an actor or conductor was about self -interests, protecting me from feeling vulnerable. As a therapist these self-interests might manifest as wanting praise for bringing about change in a client, or favourable outcome that make the therapist look good (Gammage 2006). What I have wondered about is how wanting to look good impacts on the forging of a therapeutic relationship. Gammage explores putting aside self- interests is about the ‘relaxation of ego.....not a passive giving up, but a giving in to the process, a faith in something deeper in oneself’ (2006, 11).

My tendency as a playback conductor to rigidity helped me see more clearly patterns of a similar kind in my role as a dramatherapist, emphasising technique over sharing my vulnerable self. I wondered whether reliance on technique had resorted to being over-distanced, fearful of getting too involved or imbued in client material and hiding behind technique (Yalom, 2002). I’d noticed a willingness to be more emotionally involved and prepared to make informed disclosures that resonated with humanistic and existential models of practice as a therapist (Rowan and Jacobs, 2002). Well considered sharing of myself seemed to facilitate the client’s disclosure so there was more mutuality in the therapeutic relationship. The letting go of technique seemed to offer more authenticity, honesty and

mutual self-regard that is not without its risks (Rogers 2003). The uncomfortable shameful feelings that accompanied disclosure offered clues to patterns from the past that prompted further exploration in supervision. I noticed that accompanying the risk there was also a sense of generosity, a willingness to come into relationship with the client and a belief that I had something to offer. By letting go of technique I felt more resourced as a therapist because my emotional self was more present. I noticed I was less-drained and more interested, curious and available to the client. By being less reliant on technique I felt willing to navigate the uncertainty and unpredictability of the therapeutic dynamic and more open. These open discussions helped to develop an authentic relationship, characterised by holding less back, giving more of myself at the service of the client.

## **Conclusion**

Autoethnography helped to view myself through the cultural context of playback theatre as an actor and conductor. These playback roles helped raise awareness and epiphanies of potential patterns and self- narratives that I had become attached. I re-considered the emerging themes as a playback practitioner in the different cultural context of dramatherapy practice, identifying how the art form of playback might inform development as a therapist. The themes emerging in this study are “wanting to look good” and “over-reliance on technique”. Both patterns tended towards habitual behaviours that were ego-centric that can impede sharing oneself with others. By considering generosity I was able to understand how “letting go” of patterns and self- limiting beliefs helped to connect with my more vulnerable self. I was thus more able to be at the service of the teller in playback theatre and the client in dramatherapy practice.

The study could be furthered with another perspective other than the author’s view, by considering the ‘teller’s’ experience and the connection they encountered with the actor

playing a role in their story. The paper would also benefit from consideration of the clients experience and the impact of the dramatherapist sharing more of themselves and how that has contributed to the therapy.

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