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Playback Theatre
A Method for Intercultural Dialogue

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Abstract

Playback Theatre (PT) was created in New York State (USA) in 1975. As a particular form of interactive theatre, PT strives to encourage dialogue and create connections among people. In his article, the author introduces the method's basic forms and practical implementations as employed in his teaching at the J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main (Germany). A brief historical overview highlights the paths of his own practice-based research. The aim of his innovative courses is to methodologically integrate theatre, psychodrama, sociodrama, supervision, coaching, and bibliographical work. The article shows how, through action methods, active self-reflection can encourage autonomy and self-determination in post-secondary education. Moreover, the author investigates how PT can be useful both for mediation and for sensitization in multicultural situations. Further examples show how these innovative forms can be implemented in teacher training and EU projects in order to foster the development of democratic participation in linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic education.

1 Introduction

In 1975, an exceptional form of interactive theatre was created in New York State by Jonathan Fox, Jo Salas and their original Playback Theatre company. "Playback Theatre" (PT) is an improvisational theatre form, in which individuals recount personal experiences that actors immediately enact or mirror on stage. PT aims at encouraging dialogue and creating bonds between people and can be carried out in any location and in any space.

Today, PT is used in many diverse cultural and social contexts, such as educational and social services institutions, adult and continuing education, theatre training and cultural contexts, and organisations such as corporate theatre. It is used for coaching and supervision as well as in therapeutic settings.

Similarly, PT is gaining increasingly in significance in socio-pedagogical and pedagogical institutions, schools and universities. In connection with the training concepts of the School of Playback Theatre, Playback Theatre methods

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have been increasingly introduced into educational institutions and become an accepted part of study programmes. This has been supported by educational opportunities offered through the international network (IPTN). Playback is seen in these contexts as a method for the development of key social skills in pedagogical practice through the promotion of interactive, communicative and creative skills.

PT is currently gaining popularity world wide. This phenomenon is possibly due to PT being not only a mode of performance, but also constituting, due to its great flexibility and a multitude of application possibilities, a form of direct encounter between people.

2 Basic Forms of an Open Dramaturgy

A fixed structure is seen as a frame, a kind of ritual, which serves respectfully to encourage and enable people to recount their personal stories.

In the original Playback Theatre dramaturgy, the intention was to recreate events, experiences, and lived situations told as stories by spectators – then to immediately translate them into scenes on the stage set up for that purpose, acted out in an abbreviated form and, so-to-speak, "played back" (hence "*Playback*").

A part of the room is set aside for the stage, where the actors sit facing the audience. As a rule, a musician sits to the right, with an array of musical instruments. On the left of the stage stand two chairs, one for the director (*Conductor)*, the other for the person from the audience telling a story (*Teller*).

A first exchange with the audience about their present mood and perceptions leads to the spontaneous mirroring of these using short dramatic forms (e.g. a moving statue form (*fluid sculpture)*. After this a Teller is invited to tell his/her experience (*Story*). The Teller relates his/her story, which is structured through questions and prompting from the Conductor. After this interview, the Conductor passes the story to the actors and musician. Using movement, words, pieces of cloth as props, and with accompanying music, the story is expressively portrayed in such a way that its essence is vividly experienced. After the scene the Teller's ownership of the story is acknowledged and the Teller comments on the spontaneous re-enactment of his/her story. Normally, the first story told stimulates further Tellers, each story linking to the other, forming a thread – or "*red thread*". Personal and individual experiences become a collective event happening *in situ*, whereby the common dialogue is supported by speech, music, dramatic metaphor and a range of dramaturgical forms (*Pairs, Chorus, Tableau,* and *Story* among others).

Through the sharing of biographical moments in narrative form and through their immediate transformation into a dynamic mirroring, what is shared becomes incorporated into one's resource for self-knowledge or perception of oneself and others. The method becomes a medium of communication – both magnifying glass and megaphone at the same time – between the individual and the group. Thus PT shows itself to be an important tool for identity work:

it enables and promotes the formation of a "*narrative identity*“ (cf. Ricoeur 1985, 1990) between the individual and the community. While voicing one's own story in this way means, on the one hand, discovering one's story anew; it also means being seen and heard. The result is that a form of mindfulness of others arises. The dialogical value exists in the sharing of one's own life stories and experiences and in cooperation with others in the here and now, bringing them to life, allowing the stories on the stage to have an effect on oneself, and to examine one's present, personal reality. In this way new, creative paths and processes can be called into existence.

3 Lessons from University Teaching Practice

Playback Theatre has also become part of my everyday practice at the university where I teach. As a lecturer in French language at the Institute for Romance Languages and Literature at the J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, I have been using active forms in my teaching since 1979: dramaturgical and psychodrama processes as innovative teaching methods.

Since 1977, there has been ongoing development in Germany of pedagogical methods for foreign language teaching which involve using psychodrama and theatre. Collaboration with Willy Urbain marked the beginning. In the early 1970s in France, he had designed methods using psychodrama and theatre in foreign language learning at his Paris centre *CESDEL (Centre d'Expression Spontanée Dramaturgique et linguistique)*. From that time, a phase of creative development which was stimulated by my training in psychodrama (at the Moreno Institute of the FRG), in theatre, in drama and theatre education began for me at the *Centre de Psychodramaturgie,* which I founded jointly with Marie and Bernard Dufeu in Mainz.

While Dufeu chiefly developed the method of the *Psychodramaturgie Linguistique (PDL)“* (cf. Dufeu 1991, 1993, 2003) and principles of a "*relational pedagogy*" (cf. Dufeu 1983), I concentrated chiefly on the development of a "*relational dramaturgy*" at the university in Frankfurt am Main (cf. bibliography). My aim in the research and development work at the *Centre de Psychodramaturgie* in Mainz was to transfer psychodramatic and dramaturgical principles to language learning. We took fundamental concepts from psychodrama for use in foreign language teaching, while a wide range of resources and practices were taken over from the theatre and from drama in education.

I was deeply influenced on the one hand by the jointly undertaken action research and the experience gained through practical application of PDL in the work with Marie and Bernard Dufeu. On the other hand I was influenced by my intense preoccupation with the methods of humanistic pedagogy and by training in French approaches to theatre in education (*Jeu et Expression dramatique*). Through training and collaboration with Augusto Boal and later with Jonathan Fox (cf. Feldhendler 1992), I applied myself with renewed vigour from 1981 to developing a "relational dramaturgy". It promotes the activity of learning and

the creativity of participants in foreign language training and is a method which can be used for groups of different sizes. This hands-on approach, with its orientation towards the self-experienced story, gives participants an immediate understanding of an intensive, learner-centred way of acquiring and furthering knowledge of the target language. (cf. bibliography).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, I have also employed Playback Theatre selectively as a method in my courses. Being an integrated, practical form of language training (target language French), it functions as a tool for innovation in alternative teaching and learning methods in beginning or advanced studies, and in the theory and practice of foreign language instruction for the basic training of teachers (in the lecture/workshop series: *Dramaturgy & Pedagogy – innovative ways of learning and teaching*). Parallel to these, further developments and integrative models have also been offered in teacher refresher courses (schools and adult education).

In this pedagogical context, Playback Theatre actively trains the skill of reflection as a mode of enhanced perception of self and others in communication. An integration of the underlying Playback skills which is of great significance in verbal communication takes place: active listening, hermeneutically deepened understanding of a message, transposing through a variety of modes of expression (body, voice etc.), learning of appropriate verbal and non-verbal interactive response, dealing with feelings, learning as a transformative process and deepening of awareness, adoption of integrative feedback methods, building a pool of shared experience through process analysis, and perception of interpersonal and thematic connections.

The use of PT opens up new possibilities for such learning processes. Everyday experiences or special moments or conflict situations can be actively explored in that fragments of these kinds of individual experience become incorporated into the group's life stories, which leads to a group exchange on shared reality. On top of this, the PT method contains useful tools for mediation and sensitisation for multicultural situations.

4 Theatre and Life Story Approach

Since 1997, I have offered integrative ways of working in teaching and action research using Playback Theatre in combination with life story approach, creative writing workshops and enactment. In the practical language workshop setting and in lectures, this has been aimed at encouraging the students taking part to participate in an exchange of their (multicultural) personal histories, training paths and language backgrounds, promoting reflection and the growth of bonds between them. Individual life paths become collective, leading to concentration on certain themes. In the individual groups, these integrative approaches result in the emergence of specific themes and areas which are more deeply explored:

- My life as a student now

- My motives for undertaking university studies
- My first experiences at university
- My relationship to foreign languages and to French
- My motivation for studying the French language and culture
- Transgenerational influences in the choice of a course of study
- Exchanges and stays abroad
- Intercultural experiences abroad in direct contact with other cultures
- Perception of self and others in unfamiliar surroundings
- The discovery of the sense of alienation and Otherness
- Cross cultural experiences in various stages of life
- Socialisation experiences in schools
- Early learning experiences (first and second languages, multilingualism).

Further courses or lecture series are to be incorporated into the academic area. Under the general umbrella of "Theatre and Life Story Approach" in Romance language studies, they also address students from different faculties and taking different subject combinations (English or German philology, linguistics, cultural studies, theatre and media studies, musicology, cultural anthropology, and so on). Increasingly, students from other European countries are taking part in these courses under the auspices of the Erasmus programme. The special atmosphere which these kinds of courses engender leads to greater mindfulness in relations among participants, countering the climate of growing anonymity at the university.

Since 2003 newer kinds of courses using integrative techniques have been offered under the heading of "Coaching for everyday life study and profession". This module is to be offered in advanced level programmes on a regular basis. The target group is students who are soon to sit exams or finals. Here, integration of methodologies can take place. Combining theatre, psychodrama, sociodrama, supervision and life story approach, the course provides tools for active self-reflection and promotion of autonomy and self-determined activities. Students maintain a portfolio to accompany their active experiential process which documents the individual students' own learning paths both as learning biography and also as reflection on their career path. Thematic connections regarding the position of the work in a society undergoing change are created and actively worked on. The process of imparting the students' own personal stories and the enactment of those stories, followed by sharing responses in the sense of deeper understanding through enactment (*"szenisches Verstehen"*) helps them to orient themselves and make career decisions.

5 Intercultural Training with Playback Theatre

The PT method has shown itself to be a tool suited to the development of appropriate skills in intercultural communication (cf. Feldhendler 2005). An intercultural encounter is an especially complex, multilayered event which can be compared to an enactment using the Playback method.

In PT, one endeavours to grasp the heart of the story, aiming at finding the essence. Through the re-enactment of intercultural "snapshot" moments, awareness of, and "*szenische Verstehen*" of cultural conditioning are set in train, as well as accessibility to deeper processes. Dauber (2000) designated PT as a form of "*Transkulturelle Tiefenhermeneutik*" "cross cultural deep hermeneutics". The emergence of coherent and central connections in the enactment of individual moments, forming a continuing thread of significance ("*red thread*") makes PT a powerful tool for integrative processes, smoothing the way to openness to others.

The following example may serve to illustrate this. In 1999 I was invited to run a two-week refresher course for teachers. This programme was organised by the CIEP (*Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques, Paris*) as part of the summer school at Caen University (France). It was directed at teachers, trainers and other educationists. In this context I led a seminar entitled: "Dramaturgy, life story and intercultural encounter". The goal of this seminar was an introduction to the "integrative biography approach".

There were 365 participants at the summer school with 69 countries represented. The 12 people who attended my workshop came from nine different countries, representing very different cultures. Working in the medium imparting and enactment of personal experience, this heterogeneous group came to the expression of very personal feelings in connection with their travel, their stay, their living conditions in France and their social and cultural backgrounds.

The stories told linked themselves into a meaningful continuum while the framework of collectively shared experiences showed itself to be an important learning process. In the range of stories told and their re-enactments, the following themes surfaced.

> Leaving home in order to travel abroad for professional educational purposes and the ambivalence felt on leaving; the experience for some of traveling without the family for the first time; arriving alone and telling how it feels; feeling alien; receiving a good or bad welcome; being frustrated because of some situations in the guest country; being confronted with open racism or latent rejection; feeling protected; seeking places and people in order to relate authentic feelings such as sadness, stress, homesickness, fear, attraction; being listened to and understood; opening up to others and speaking about one's own cultural idiosyncrasies; relating positive experiences with mutual acknowledgement and respect; using one's own first name as the starting point for revealing one's personal intercultural story in the presence or the group; preparing for the return home and taking leave symbolically in the group.

In such a context, staging fragments of life stories requires not only a high degree of sympathy for all those involved, but also their readiness to work with techniques which were very unfamiliar for most participants. Correspondingly, this process must be reflected upon by both individuals and groups, as well as mediated and supported by the teacher. For systems and teacher training institutions and further professional education, this offers a challenge to embark on new and innovative paths.

6 European Educational Projects with Playback Theatre

Current European developments and the re-organisation of university curricula (modularising courses and setting up new courses of study; for example, the bachelor's and master's degrees) are creating new opportunities for incorporating innovative ways of working into study programmes; for example, the PT method. The aim is to encourage the development of democratic participation through linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic education. In connection with this, it is of note that the Common European Reference Framework for languages, developed by the Council of Europe to enhance cultural cooperation, lays particular value on the notion of the biographical: "*With the language dossier or biography, one can record one's own linguistic and intercultural learning*" as an opportunity to "*design and take responsibility for one's own learning*".

As an illustration of this, a brief description of a European project which took place between 1998 and 2001 follows. Five countries were involved in this three-year project: France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland. Coordinated by CIEP (*Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques, Paris*), we took part in this Comenius project in the Socrates programme entitled "European Correspondences: Education, Creativity, Commitment and Civil Society", (corresponding to the French term "Citoyenneté"). The aim of this action research project was to identify relevant and effective techniques with regard to present day "virtual mobility"; to support these with theory, to implement and integrate them into further education courses for teachers.

With its international and interdisciplinary mode of proceeding, the project can be seen as a contribution to a paradigm change in the development of innovative techniques in education. During their time together, the work undertaken by the team focused on the following points:

- developing innovative practices for encouraging communication
- opening up and transforming the pedagogical relationship
- the intercultural dimension of learning.

In the different phases of our action research, the integration of PT methods into this international educational project was encouraged and used with teaching

staff and education officials in the countries involved. New thoughts regarding the prospects for a future European teacher training programme arose for using PT methods which invite both exchange and change in perspective through sharing experiences from school socialisation, "School in Europe – retelling personal stories and History".

Playback Theatre demonstrates its value increasingly as a tool for dynamic learning and for cultural and anthropological exploration. It offers heuristic qualities in the encounter with the Other. PT serves to promote attitudes conducive to peaceful coexistence by enhancing fundamental interpersonal skills and basic communicativeness: empathic listening, mindfulness of oneself and others; poise and physical awareness; intuition; intellectual, affective, and emotional openness; appropriate responses; perception of oneself and of others; flexibility in adopting roles; acceptance of responsibility; and creative spontaneity.

The underlying dynamic of mirroring through staged scenes works as a catalyst for hermeneutical learning stemming from an aesthetic interpretation. The processes of deepened understanding open up dimensions of the collective consciousness and collective unconscious between the individual and the society (Feldhendler 2005). Playback Theater is a forum for intersubjective dialogue, a vehicle for memory rooms (Assmann 1999) and awareness of history; it provides the opportunity to be the author of one's own story and of one's self, and in addition, to develop a collective identity (Niethammer 2000).

Now, the challenge is for institutions, for those in positions of responsibility and initiators to take advantage of this phase of change and upheaval, to come up with meaningful, progressive concepts and to implement them.

Translation: JANET SALAS

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