

Narrative Reticulation

An explanatory theory for playback theatre

By Jonathan Fox

Introduction

In my twenties I graduated from an elite university determined to find an alternative to the model of knowledge that had been handed down to me, in which competitive advantage overpowered solidarity, thoughts trumped feelings, and arguments counted over stories.

Playback theatre emerged as my answer to that search. In playback theatre people draw meaning from each other's shared experience while building a sense of connection with one another. The theory of narrative reticulation described in this paper emerged in turn as an attempt to understand playback theatre, but it may be also applicable to other narrative-based approaches, such as twelve-step self-help programs.

For many years when a playback theatre evening went well, we spoke about the performance having a good "red thread." Narrative reticulation explicates this metaphor by providing a fuller description of what is happening when a group exchanges a richly interconnected set of stories. I will be paying attention to seven intersecting attributes that in synergy point us towards "good," or effective playback theatre.

There is no hierarchy of attributes. For purposes of explaining, I must list one after another. The reader, however, can look at the description of the seven like a map that can be studied from any direction.

Up until now the theory of the "three circles," highlighting art, social interaction, and ritual, has helped us understand how playback theatre can be effective. The theory I present here represents a complicating of the "three circles" in order to better reflect the complexity of the playback theatre process.

The seven attributes

Here are the seven attributes: milieu, atmosphere, story, embodiment, spontaneity, guidance, and collaboration.

Milieu

Milieu refers to the setting for playback theatre. Unlike traditional theatre, playback does not insist on its own curated environment (a black box theatre with a proscenium stage, lights, and scenery, for example), but most often occurs in everyday community settings. Whether the setting is conducive or not will have great impact on the extent to which narrative reticulation thrives.

Ideal is an aesthetically pleasing location, with natural light and freedom from harsh noise and other disturbing conditions, a space where everyone present can easily see and hear one another.

Because the community meeting rooms of a typical playback venue often fall far short of these ideal conditions, the playback event organizer must assess potential negative impacts, such as interruptions, poor visibility, bad acoustics, an inflexible time-frame, or an unusually dysfunctional group. In such cases the organizer must make sure that minimal conditions exist for the playback ceremony to succeed.

Just as important, the organizer must often negotiate with community partners for an optimal audience mix, one that will promote a diversity of perspectives in relation to the purpose of the event. Should school staff be included as well as students? Can survivors be included as well as volunteers? What steps can be taken to encourage minority groups to participate? This task can entail a long, many-step process.

There are many different kinds of milieus for playback teams to choose in arranging performances and workshops, from a very intimate performance for friends to a school classroom to a conference to a community group recovering from natural or civil upheaval. Fitting the level of challenge to the performers' capacity is another milieu consideration. If they

find themselves in over their heads, a natural flow of tellers offering stories will not occur, and the level of narrative reticulation will be slight.

Atmosphere

In contrast to milieu, which refers to the context that we find, atmosphere refers to the mood that we create. Playback theatre performers, in order to build willingness to tell stories among the audience, make efforts to create a sense of neighborliness. Performers introduce themselves, and the conductor usually invites audience members to greet one another. The conductor will use humor and charm to put people at their ease, and the performing team will begin with nonthreatening, easy-to-apprehend enactments as a way of gently leading people away from distracting everyday cares and concerns towards engagement.

The playback team must also quickly establish a climate of co-creativity, making clear to the audience that what will take place is unscripted and that, moreover, the theatre that will unfold is open to, and in fact, dependent on, spectators' input.

Another important aspect of building the atmosphere relates to what playback practitioners term the "ritual," which refers both to the organization of the space and the ceremonial structure of the event, centering around a sequence of audience members who come to a chair at the edge of the playing space to narrate a personal story. While the stories to be enacted are completely spontaneous, the ritual proceeds with a quickly recognizable sameness involving invitation, interview, setting-up, enactment, acknowledgment, and dismissal. This framework builds a sense of safety and trust as the audience comes to appreciate that no matter who the teller and her story, the performers will follow the same pattern of listening, enacting, and giving the teller the final word for each story.

When a positive atmosphere grows to the extent that there is a flow of stories, there can emerge among those present a feeling of oneness that extends both horizontally (all of us present) and vertically (morphically resonant with past and future).¹ At such moments the

¹ See Wilfried Belschner's concept of "non-dual presence" in Belschner, [The Playback Theatre –From the Vantage Point of Consciousness Research](http://playbacktheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Belschner_english.pdf). http://playbacktheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Belschner_english.pdf, p. 13.

intensely communal atmosphere triggers narrative reticulation, which in turn increases the feelings of closeness and communion. The playback performers may be the catalysts for this coming together. But all share in the heightened sense of connection.

Of course such moments are relatively rare. Playback performers often fail to build sufficient atmosphere. Paradoxically, a milieu problem of performing for a group that is riven with mistrust and self-defensiveness will doom even the most skillful playback session. For while the playback process builds atmosphere, a minimal degree of atmosphere needs to be present at the outset for it to work at all.

What is surprising, however, is the extent to which it does work. Even with less than masterful performers, a playback theatre audience will exchange a rich flow of stories and find themselves feeling more alive and connected afterward.

Story

From a very young age, everyone knows what a story is—something that happened, centering around one or more characters, in a particular place and time. A story contains, as Walter Benjamin reminds his readers, something of value.² And it compels attention, whether it is a parent telling to a child, a speaker to an audience, or a survivor to a bystander.

Stories, even traditional ones, call on the imagination, making demands of the expressive and inventive capacities of the human mind. Stories also pave the way for the moral imagination, that ability to envision a way out when none is evident.³

From infancy on, we are likely to associate stories with warm and intimate settings, like being read to by a loved one at bedtime. At the word, “story,” we are liable to relax and open ourselves to a deep kind of listening. In fact, there is research that the story itself may foster deep connecting between narrator and listener(s).⁴

² Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. Page 108.

³ See J.P. Lederach. *the Moral Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, and Bryan Boyd. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009: “Stories in particular foster our ability to multiply options and imagine possible actions in the face of any eventuality.” Kindle line reference, 4473.

Playback performers develop skills at hearing the “story” inside the teller’s narrative and showing it on the stage in a coherent and vivid manner. They do this, of course, in the moment, thus emphasizing human beings’ inherent capacity to be storytelling artists. For some, however, developing this story sense takes considerable training and experience.

The complex process of communication taking place when stories are exchanged in groups forms the crux of narrative reticulation. This is an ancient practice, with a purpose of tribal survival as much as individual expression (it is a very limited modern-minded view to consider playback theatre merely a form of therapy for the teller). In an open format setting, such as playback theatre, one story triggers another according to patterns of association, inversion, and opposition that are for the most part unconscious, yet take place on multiple levels between multiple participants. A strong narrative reticulation will produce a sequence of stories that are deeply interconnected as well as rich with meaning.⁵

We are all part of human history. Yet some of us are conditioned to believe our story is more important than others; while others of us are conditioned to dismissing our story as without value. The success of narrative reticulation will depend on the extent to which the atmosphere encourages the readiness of *all* present to be a teller. Thus a playback theatre team will face the standing task of overcoming any power dynamic that privileges one subgroup’s story over another’s.

When narrative reticulation is weak, the energy for telling will be feeble, and the conductor will have trouble finding a story to dramatize. Furthermore, the stories that do come are liable to seem anecdotal and only loosely connected to the ones before.

4 Hasson, Uri., et. al. Brain-to-brain coupling: a mechanism for creating and sharing a social world. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, February 2012, Vol. 16, No. 2.

5 See Michael Jackson. *the Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a theme by Hannah Arendt*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013. "It is in this unceasing two-way movement between private and public space, between Eigenwelt and Mitwelt, that the purpose of storytelling is consummated, for their meanings inevitably depend on a fusion of both horizons, and that the one is always the condition of the possibility of the other." Page 200.

Embodiment

The expressiveness that is the birthright of all humankind is more or less part of the storytelling experience everywhere. What storyteller does not use her voice in a performative way, change facial expressions, even punctuate her tale with music? In playback theatre we maximize this aspect by acting out the stories after we hear them. This embodiment, which includes music as well as dramatization, allows for a full expression of the emotion contained in the stories. It also helps to create a heightened atmosphere.

Embodiment also helps convey, by means of music and the actor's presence, the sense of ritual, of a ceremony unfolding.

The skill of the performers—specifically, their use of body, voice, pacing, staging, and teamwork, will impact the quality of embodiment, not only in terms of their capacity to draw the audience towards a threshold of revelation, but also in terms of their ability to capture efficiently the shape and meaning of the narratives shared.

Spontaneity

Spontaneity is a complex subject, but most readers are already aware of its core meaning, which suggests not planning, being in the moment, and flow. Many of us have also learned after Moreno to associate spontaneity with role flexibility, giving us the ability to respond nimbly to varying situations.⁶

The quality of emergence so fundamental to playback theatre also relates to spontaneity. What transpires in the event is not fore ordained. It cannot be predicted.

All parties—performers, tellers, and audience—participate in the creation. If any of the parties are too heady or rigid in their expectations, the spontaneity will be depressed and narrative reticulation throttled. The performers especially must marshal qualities of sensory openness that in turn will impact the depth of their listening and the play of their imaginations.

⁶ See J. L. Moreno, writing in *Who Shall Survive?*, quoted in Fox, Jonathan, Ed. *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing, 2008, p. 44: "Spontaneity propels the individual toward an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation."

There is an aspect of spontaneity that relates to having a clear sense of self. To react to information in a spontaneous manner means knowing where my own story ends and yours begins; otherwise I cannot distinguish between the two. Thus there is a connection, I believe, between spontaneity and integrity. Actors who lack this self-knowledge will be befuddled in just what to bring to the enactment, either losing themselves in their own story or blocking in an attempt to avoid it. A conductor without integrity will tend to dominate the teller, failing to pick up crucial clues to the story unfolding. An audience member who lacks authenticity will become a grandstanding teller.

The spontaneous individual will be able to bring her own experience to the understanding of another's and use it to respond creatively, either as an actor or potential teller. Thus a climate of spontaneity will allow participants to spark off each other and generate a profoundly resonant sequence of stories and shared images. The result will be an authentic group creation.

There is a tension of opposites between spontaneity and the regularity of the ritualized elements, which demand repetition and regularity. Thus the attribute of spontaneity will often suggest a break in the ritual. It is often the conductor's call whether such a departure will hamper narrative reticulation or propel its progress by catalyzing a liminal moment. For instance, when the conductor invites the first teller to come to the chair and a man stands up and begins to recite a story from his place in the audience, what is to be done? Does the conductor insist the teller come to the chair on the stage to tell (maintaining the ritual and guaranteeing that the teller will be visible)? Or does the conductor adapt to the moment and call for a short form that suits the story, allowing the teller to remain in place (thus "breaking" the ritual, which calls at this point for a teller to come to the stage)?

To sum up what we have covered so far, the first two attributes—milieu and atmosphere—refer to the mood that is created when we gather in a group to share personal narratives. The next three, familiar to all storytellers of the oral tradition—story, embodiment, and spontaneity—relate to the expressive and artistic aspect of sharing stories. The sixth

attribute is quite different in nature, for it involves various ways in which the performers steer rather than adapt to what unfolds.

Guidance

One key area where the conductor exerts guidance is his choice of the next teller. There are times when the natural spontaneity of a particular group will result in a rich diversity of tellers, and a conductor can choose the first upraised hand he sees. But at other times, when an audience gets stuck with producing only one type of teller, it falls to the conductor to invite diversity (“Let’s have the next story from a woman,” or “Let’s have the next story from someone over seventeen years old.”)

This choosing process becomes especially sensitive when it comes to the last story of the event, particularly if more than one hand goes up at the same time. Whom the conductor chooses at this moment can make a big difference to the narrative reticulation of the overall event.

The conductor is also in a special position to deal with the personality of different tellers, some of whom need management on a spectrum from containing to encouraging.

Playback performers “play back” the story told without inserting their own narrative agenda. However, the artistic act itself demands interpretation. Playback performers’ choices will often bring to the enactment elements the teller was barely conscious of. In the interview the conductor can play a key role in helping to bring out the story by virtue of key questions and comments.

The conductor, musician, and actors are holders of the ritual, and through their conduct instruct the audience on how they should participate. Certain actions are relatively easy to impart; the teller stays in the teller’s chair, for example, and never steps into the action part of the stage. But other aspects, such as striking the right balance of words and action (we do not want the teller to tell too much or too long), are harder to convey.

The spontaneous nature of the playback event can lead at any moment to a rupture of the ritual framework. It is at such moments that the experience and training of the performers

enable them to offer guidance for the audience. Actors will make a judicious choice about how much realism to bring to a traumatic story, for example. Afterward, the musicians might play to offer a soothing interlude. The conductor might suggest a series of short forms to allow many members to share how their own story connects. There might be a few minutes of sharing with a neighbor (giving everyone a chance to tell something). Or simply an invitation for the next teller to come to the stage, thus carrying on the familiar pattern.

Because the respect for individuals that underpins all playback theatre work should be balanced with fairness there are times when the conductor and performers intervene to provide ethical guidance. In this sense the guardians of the process are not neutral. They do not want to be the vehicle for a teller's bile or maliciousness. Nor do they want to become the perpetrators of past or present social injustice.

In a special position as the intermediary between performers and audience, the conductor will exert guidance in relation to choosing tellers, the stories that emerge, the holding of the ceremony, and honoring justice. But at every moment the conductor must also be ready to follow rather than lead, to listen rather than speak. It is a special balance of active and receptive qualities that ultimately demands deep teamwork on the part of all those performing. This brings us to the final attribute catalyzing narrative reticulation—collaboration.

Collaboration

One way to approach a discussion of the final attribute, collaboration, is to consider failures of collaboration—for instance, excesses of guidance when a conductor manipulates a teller, or performers “take the story away from” the teller, showcasing their own idea of the meaning of the story.

Another example of noncollaboration is a failure of trust between conductor, actors, and musician, resulting in a conductor who overconducts, including providing a cue that the enactment is completed (usually by initiating applause), or actors who do not leave space for their musician(s).

Playback theatre teams that are uncomfortable with serious stories tend to steer audiences away from them, thus truncating the natural variability of narrative reticulation. There is no easy guideline marking when guidance becomes manipulation; as with all aspects of the process, it is a question of experience, sensitivity, and spontaneity.

Collaboration implies mutuality and co-creation. It is closely allied with play. Recent research has shown that practice at improvisational play improves collaboration, which may increase the possibility for narrative reticulation not only among performers, but among performers and audience, as well.⁷ The sense of enjoyment and fun associated with child play will also help establish a mood of collaboration. What needs to emerge is group-centered creativity, an energetic give-and-take, motivation for both speaking and listening, and a curiosity about the unknown outcome.

Paolo Freire taught us that it was as important to listen as well as speak, and that no education could be meaningful that did not include the interests of the specific students being taught.⁸

Collaboration does not mean unity of stories, although association will often trigger narratives containing similar elements. Rather it will produce a flow of stories that might be oppositional in theme or contain inversions (told from the perspective of an opposite kind of teller). Thus collaboration is not inimical to honest dialogue. Without a shared commitment to the narrative reticulation process, conflict is likely to be avoided. In fact, a deep collaboration is ultimately necessary for the most difficult kind of dialogue to take place. A big challenge for leaders is to educate participants who may be unfamiliar with the paradigm of narrative reticulation to trust in its efficacy even as it is unfolding.

7 See Noy, Lior. *The Mirror Game: A Natural Science Study of Togetherness*. In *Performance Studies in Motion: International Perspectives and Practices in the Twenty-First Century*. Editors: Atay, Citron, D. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014 PP. 416. Also the Theater Lab of Noy's colleague and collaborator at the Weizmann Institute, Uri Alon: <https://www.weizmann.ac.il/mcb/UriAlon/research/theatre-lab>.

8 See Freire, P. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973. "Knowledge is not extended from those who consider they know to those who consider that they do not know. Knowledge is built up in relations between human beings and the world." P. 109.

To what extent a sense of collaboration has emerged is often clear at the end of a playback theatre event. Continuing to exchange personal stories with energy and verve is a good sign. We know that the event has worked when people want to stay talking with one another and do not want to leave.

Correspondences and Oppositions

Human beings seem to have a primal urge to relate stories to each other. So it is not particularly difficult to achieve some narrative reticulation in any social group. At issue is the degree of narrative reticulation that will be achieved.

The seven attributes of narrative reticulation operate in a similar way to a complex system. Each attribute has own demands, but they ultimately must work in synergy for narrative reticulation to take place. Many factors bear on this, including the skill of the performers, the openness of the audience, and various milieu factors.

By now some of the correspondences should be obvious. For example, without building a positive atmosphere, no one will want to share their story. Without spontaneity, the improvisational actor cannot embody the teller's tale. Without guidance, based on experience of what the playback theatre performance format demands, event organizers cannot make informed decisions about what is a good venue. Without collaboration, a teller will not spontaneously emerge to tell a story to be embodied by the performers.

The attributes may just as easily pull in opposite as similar directions. The conductor invites the teller to tell, but at the same time knows that too long a narrative will threaten the ritual, and so she often must contain the teller. The actors rely on their unscripted spontaneity to create an enactment, but must always keep in mind the parameters of the specific form they are using and be sure to find their ending. Showing the violence embedded in a story fully or with too much realism may retraumatize the teller or members of the audience who have experienced similar events, and thus embodiment may need to be tempered by considerations of guidance.

In fact, the same attributes can either reinforce or be in opposition to each other, depending on the specific situation: for instance, the playback organizer might agree to adapt to unfavorable circumstances rather than insist on stated prerequisites, opting for spontaneity over long-established milieu knowledge.

Thus promoting narrative reticulation is a constant experience of cybernetic adjustments and making on-the-spot decisions. The conductor has special responsibility for this rebalancing, or what the psychologist Wilfried Belschner calls modulation, but the whole team is involved.⁹

Implications and Questions

With the above brief outline of narrative reticulation and its attributes in mind, I would like to offer some comments.

Narrative reticulation, with its focus on the face-to-face exchange of personal material, is an antidote to a too narrow adherence to rationality and the corrosive effect of materialist culture. This helps explain both resistance to playback theatre, as well, paradoxically, its appeal, especially among those thirsting for a style of communication that values group process, emotions, and whole-body integration. An understanding of narrative reticulation may help in the ongoing effort to communicate what playback theatre is to society at large.

The practice of playback theatre provides training in developing skills relating to the seven attributes—that is, by learning playback we can learn skills relating to story, atmosphere, guidance, collaboration, and so forth. Perhaps even more importantly, playback theatre gives us practice in modulation, making nimble decisions in the face of what are often competing considerations in order to stimulate narrative flow.

This short account has not focused at any length on the experience of the audience as opposed to the performers. While clearly they are different in many respects, it is also true that

⁹ See Belschner, *op. cit.* and Heinrich Dauber, Intuitive Modulationskompetenz in der Leitung von Gruppen—ein pragmatisches Ausbildungsmodell [Modulation Competence in Group Leadership: a Pragmatic Educational Model]. *Bewusstseins-Wissenschaften*, Transpersonal Psychologie und Psychotherapie, 2/2014, p. 43.

ultimately all are participating in creating a shared exchange. It is not *just* the conductor who must balance guidance and spontaneity; or *just* the actors who must balance their story sense and building the atmosphere. The performers do not create something “for” the audience (possibly at their own expense). The principles of narrative reticulation engage all parties concerned.

It is possible that the narrative reticulation concept might be useful for assessing a performance or workshop of playback theatre, especially regarding practitioners’ areas of strength and weakness. Moreover, the theory may allow observers to note at just which decision points the level of narrative reticulation markedly shifted.

As we learn more about narrative reticulation and how to foster it, a rich number of questions stand unanswered. How to measure the flow of narrative reticulation and the complexity of stories shared? How to move forward in the face of a prevailing culture that often produces expectations, regarding critical response, for example, that sap the potential of narrative exchange? How to foster inclusivity and the kind of deep democracy demanded by narrative reticulation when the larger society is riddled with prejudice and biases fomented by entrenched power?

How can we present a model of unbounded inclusivity knowing that time and other practical concerns make space for everyone’s story an actual impossibility? How can we find venues that in their shape and ambience promote rather than hamper narrative reticulation? Finally, how can we create leadership structures for playback theatre teams that increase rather than undercut chances for success? These and other topics await our examination in the years to come.