

## Anthology Vol. 2: Chapter 4 Summary

### Stories in the Moment: Playback Theatre for building community and justice

By Jo Salas

In this chapter Salas, one of the co-founders of Playback Theatre, focuses on two major case studies of peacebuilding performance: addressing school bullying in the United States, and working with victims of war in Afghanistan. Drawing on audience members' personal stories, Playback Theatre creates performances which facilitate social change based on dialogue, connection and empathy. Salas describes both workshop and performance formats: In a workshop setting, a trained leader engages members of a group in telling stories and acting them out for each other. In workshop settings, most audience members are familiar with each other and enact stories in ways that have meaning both for the teller and other group members. In contrast, performance settings have a defined audience and a team of performers, including actors, a conductor, and musicians. The dialogue that occurs in both styles of Playback is an embodied, imaginative dialogue which often results in *kinesthetic* conviction that the teller of the story has been understood. The deep sense that one's story has been heard often creates an increased openness to other points of view, an expansiveness which may accommodate others' humanity.

#### **PARTICIPANT PERFORMANCE AND SCHOOL BULLYING**

Salas describes the role of Playback Theatre in addressing the growing violence evidenced through bullying in schools in the United States. Salas and her ensemble have developed the program "No More Bullying!" (NMB), which works alongside other anti-bullying programs. Through NMB, Playback Theatre engages personal stories, emotions, and embodiment in ways that fostering empathy and enhance capacities for treating others fairly. Children are invited to speak about their experiences as victims, witnesses, or bullies, then watch as their feelings and stories are enacted in front of them.

These performances take place in a carefully designed atmosphere of respect in which children feel empowered to speak up. This safe space is based on several elements: the consistent modelling of respect on the part of the adults; the immediate addressing of disrespect; and the welcoming, nonjudgmental embrace of students' narratives, including those who are marginalized or isolated.

With a preference for using the participant performance model, the NMB Leadership program, meets once a week for 7-8 weeks, during which students learn the basics of Playback and deepen their understanding of bullying. Salas finds that having students' peers onstage increases the impact of anti-bullying messages and strategies, as young people are often more willing to listen to their peers than to respond to lectures from adults. The power of these young people's performances are based in part in their authenticity and their familiarity with the audience members' frame of reference, resulting in enhanced capacities to prevent and deal with bullying.

## **PARTICIPANT PERFORMANCE IN AFGHANISTAN**

In this section, Salas highlights Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn's work with Playback Theatre in Afghanistan, a context where current and historical trauma are constantly present. In this setting, Playback Theatre's impact has been both constructive and at times problematic as it strives to effect some measures of transitional justice. Initially, Joffre-Eichhorn trained 24 men and 6 women in Playback Theatre and other approaches to peacebuilding performance, both through a week long workshop and "on the job training" in 16 performances. Audiences for these performances included victims' and widows' groups, children, and the hearing impaired. Later on a number of participants took part in a workshop facilitated by Karin Bettina Gisler, the founder and director of Zurich Playback Theatre. This training was again followed by multiple performances.

In early 2009 some of these participants created the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), providing opportunities for Afghan men and women to explore human rights, democracy, and transitional justice. Their intent was to build contact and cooperation among victim's groups, strengthening their ability to speak with a united voice when working with policy makers. Throughout 2009 and 2010, AHRDO carried out more than 50 performances, mostly in Kabul, but also in other parts of Afghanistan. Many audience members embraced these opportunities to speak about their experiences, describing appalling hardships, losses, abuses, and injustices. Most of the audience members were people of low social standing, many of them women, whose opportunities to share their narratives had been marginalized by dominant power structures and official accounts. Through the responses of other audience members, people learned that their experiences were shared by others, thus mitigating the isolation often suffered by victims of violence. Although telling stories in these settings provided victims of torture and trauma ways to reconnect with their full humanity, at times sharing these narratives was painful.

Salas contends that in contexts such as Afghanistan it is crucial to have "citizen actors" who emerge from the same population as their intended audience and who are trained especially to enact their stories. She points out that it is hard to imagine performers who did not share the audience members' background being able to effectively enact these stories, or to imagine entrusting such sensitive stories to outsiders.

Playback Theatre honors audience members' narratives, trusting that the sequence of stories within an event will yield a collective story that has meaning for those present - It does not attempt to establish an objective account of the past. However, given the many intertwined histories in Afghanistan, renditions of the past are at times contradictory. Because of the potential contentiousness of this aspect of Playback narratives, the AHRDO ensemble has decided to work with more homogeneous groups before attempting to bring together people whose historical understandings are widely divergent.

There have been other challenges to implementing Playback Theatre in this context. Salas explains that there have been situations in which performers were not sufficiently equipped to address the stories of deep trauma which were elicited. She goes on to outline some basic rules which create resilience and safe spaces for performing stories of traumatic experiences: Stories that are potentially traumatic for the teller should not be enacted literally. Instead, performers may maintain a safe distance by depicting horrific events with minimal gestures and narration,

or by suggesting the events offstage. The conductor might also instruct the actors to use a shortened form rather than enact a story more fully, or more experienced actors might be called on to take these roles. Another safety measure is for the conductor of a performance to sit physically close enough to monitor how the teller is responding as she tells and watches her story. Another is for performers to develop the capacity to work with objective detachment in the face of someone else's anguish, especially if it might resonate with their own.

Salas maintains that with adequately prepared actors and a highly skilled conductor Playback Theatre can provide a safe space for traumatic memories to be transformed into public testimony, in part by implementing ethical standards regarding respect, authenticity, inclusiveness, and avoidance of manipulation.

Salas' chapter demonstrates the ways in which Playback Theatre has provided opportunities to many women and men, victims of the brutal wars in Afghanistan, to find insight, meaning and dignity in their stories, to affirm connections with other victims, to release feelings of pain and anger and to comprehend the humanity of those whose experiences or backgrounds are different. As evidenced in these case studies, Playback Theatre demonstrates potential for transforming conflict in settings of direct and structural violence. Through performing audience members' stories, these groups of people have created collective narratives that embody deeper understandings, new connections, and hope for more just, inclusive, and less violent societies.