

A Meditation On The Gold Of Playback Theatre

von

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by

Annette Henne Rittenhouse

with a little help from my friend

Markus Huehn



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to Jonathan and Jo

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PLAYBACK THEATRE

Jonathan Fox of New York was born in 1943 and invented Playback Theatre in 1976 over a cup of coffee. He shaped all his ideas with the help of his wife, Jo Salas, and his friends (the original company). He established a theatre that fits no category, a theatre whose goal and impact surpass our imaginations.

The humility and sincerity of Jonathan's being are reflected in the stage presentation he created. Chairs in front seat the audience in curving rows with an aisle down the middle. Opposite, on the left, sit two chairs, slightly angled. Back in the middle (maybe also a little bit angled) are four or five wooden boxes for the actors. Further back and to the left sits a coat stand with a few colored clothes, and on the right side, in front of the stage, a few unique instruments. That is all. This stage is the same all over the world. From Japan to Africa, America to Europe, Australia to South America or Asia, if you see this setup, you know: Playback Theatre will take place here!

As profound and as loving Jonathan's being is, so is the content of this form of theatre. People are playing their personal stories to one another. As Jonathan says, "We enact what you tell. We accept any story on any subject. Every personal moment and every personal story of your life is worth a theatre piece."

Playback theatre is a special form of improvisational theatre. At the beginning of a performance nobody knows what will be performed, since the content of this theatre is made up of personal moments and stories from the people sitting in the audience. This not knowing is what connects everybody in the beginning. Parts and pieces from all layers of our existence are turned into short theatre pieces, played back in their essence by the actors and the musician without script or preparation. The conductor serves as a choreographer, a mediator between audience and actors, a "Shaman." The actors can take on five to twenty roles in one performance, only becoming themselves

between roles, briefly. The musician has the crucial task of giving form and atmosphere to the theatre pieces. A space of magic and suspense, or a feeling of being deeply touched, opens up. What happens on stage is art. Art reflects the beauty and the clarity of a story. The stage becomes a space which allows access to all levels of life and of being human. Playback Theatre can impact people and society profoundly, because it is grounded in the concept of constructive change. Just as, in the beginning, the not-knowing connects people, the same people feel united at the end by knowing the ease and unease of living on this planet.

Playback Theatre is a little challenging for everybody: for the conductor, for the actors, for the musician, and for the audience. Nevertheless, it can be an experience that reverberates for some time, a theatre for the well-being of man, alone and together with others, an act of service for one another.

Welcome to Playback Theatre! Do you have a story to tell? For without you, the audience, there will be no Playback Theatre.

The conductor, the actor and the musician can be woman or man.

In the text we decided to write only "he", and no she/he or alternating gender. This has nothing to do with any preference of man, nor with any judgments. It simply is for the ease of reading.

FOREWORD

The more I know about Playback Theatre, the more I am fascinated by this unique form of theatre.

I first heard about Playback Theatre in 1986. I was attending a psychodrama workshop in England. On our last evening, during a candlelit storytelling circle, I mentioned to a friend from Australia: "It would be incredible if we could play these stories back to each other. That would be a new kind of theatre!" "Oh," she replied, "but this already exists: a man named Jonathan Fox in the United States is doing exactly that!" This is how everything started: from Switzerland to England, through Australia to America, and all around the world.

At that time, when I got to know Playback Theatre, there were no books about it, nor a school. At that time, when I got to know Playback Theatre, I was always on a search for more understanding of human beings and the world. With psychodrama, I had found an incredible treasure that allowed my inner child to play again. My being could be creative, inventive, and understanding. All parts of me were engaged. It was wonderful! Also I found the wisdom books of the Toltecs, which put into words all of what I felt and believed. A few years later, I found a medicine-teacher and a circle of people with whom I learned to open up in ways I never could have imagined. I got a glance into the richness of our consciousness and a further understanding of my being within the universe and being a part of creation. It brought me closer to what we may name "God," or also "That," because there is no name for it.

And last – but not least – I found Playback Theatre!

Playback Theatre is one of the most beautiful portals that opened up for me. My heart did not expect that much joy, that level of dynamic excitement and that kind of connectedness. It opened up dimensions which appear simply by playing back stories.

Everything concerning the life of human beings was included in a simple, but magical, way. Hope for a future with more joy and equality was not just talked about, but was put into action. We learned to grow up by playing like children, by delving into each others' lives carefully, as a loving mirror, and by experiencing the importance of the connection of the individual to the community by honesty and trust.

The many levels of Playback Theatre have been keeping me busy since the beginning. For this reason, I started to write a long time ago, and I got overwhelmed. I needed a "super-brain," and I found it. Not only did I find a wonderful friend, but also somebody whose spirit was on the same search as my own!

I met Markus Huehn at a German-speaking Playback Theatre meeting.

Since I was the one who brought Playback Theatre to German-speaking Europe, Markus wanted to interview me.

We immediately found ourselves sharing our ideas and our love for Playback Theatre, and an adventure began. We met for six weeks in Switzerland, working on what I had been writing and adding many new ideas. Finally, in 2003, our self-published German audiobook "Die Vision des Playback Theaters," ("The Vision of Playback Theatre") was complete. We planned to translate it into English, but that version never came out for various reasons. One of them was that I moved to Asia. But, it stayed in our heads all the time and we knew in our hearts: "We need to finish what has been started."

But, new material and new insights kept entering our heads. There was no way to just translate the German audiobook. We decided to focus our new book mainly on Jonathan's "Quotes." We had a new focus and also the wish to do it together.

Time passes – sometimes, faster than you realize. We tried to work together over the oceans, by Skype, by emails, and by short

meetings in Europe or Asia. But, it was too difficult to write the book together. Markus was busy in Germany with all his creative projects – with Playback Theatre and his professional work – and had little spare time to write. I was in Bali, Indonesia. It gets dark early here. I started to fill my evenings and nights with writing. Sometimes I couldn't stop. I didn't stop. I didn't want to stop until most of what I had in mind was on paper. More than the audiobook, this book became like my "child."

Even though I wrote most of it on my own, without the support, the encouragement and the input from Markus, it truly wouldn't be what it is now. So, we decided to publish under my name, and "with a little help from my friend Markus Huehn."

INTRODUCTION

One page.

It was only one page.

Jonathan Fox handed me this page many years ago. We met in upstate New York in a small village for two hours, drinking tea and discussing my idea about writing a book with the title, "The Vision of Playback Theatre."

"I have something," Jonathan said, and handed me a paper. It was one page, with only a few sentences. This page had the title, "Some Quotes on Basic Values of Playback Theatre."

On this page were five main sentences representing basic values, and a few citations underneath each of them:

- **We all have a [worthwhile] story**
- **As a community we are wise**
- **Everyone is a [creative] actor**
- **Community spirit [and a mood of positive participation] is transformational**
- **We can connect to a "music" beyond our immediate concerns that will bring peace and joy**

Of course I wondered: What was the reason for noting just five sentences out of millions?

I thought each one must be really important. They must have a connection to one another, and for sure they express more than just a single phrase.

Furthermore, each sentence had a few citations underneath, out of books from different writers, coming from different parts of the

world, writing about different subjects (psychology, sociology, theatre, philosophy, religion, and more). At the bottom of this page was one word like it had fallen down and gotten lost!

This made this paper even more suspicious and more important, and my curiosity increased.

It was the word "remembering."

What was it that must be remembered so it won't be lost?

Markus and I made it our very personal journey to explore and to understand the importance of those sentences for Playback Theatre itself: for its growth, for those who practice it, for all human beings concerned, and for the world the larger scenery involved.

How can we ever understand the world? There are so many different spaces and dimensions. Every human being lives in his or her own universe according to his or her consciousness. We never can compare or judge. We only can try to create beauty within our life with the spaces available in our momentary consciousness. We can enlarge our consciousness and gain more awareness. Our sense of self within the community carries the richness of growth. Playback Theatre highly contributes to this process.

"Some Quotes on Basic Values of Playback Theatre" are our magical wands, the gold to carry to all people. With them, more and more stars will pop up on a dark sky. We don't need to construct, by force, a milky way – it will develop in its own speed by itself. We just need to capture the values and apply them in a gesture of honesty, standing on the safe ground of their basic wisdom.

Having our roots grounded in the basic values and our wings of playfulness spread out, something magical can happen in our hearts. These basic values involve us in an evolutionary process we all are part of, and in which there is no shortcut.

The "Quotes on Basic Values of Playback Theatre" lead, step by step, from the personal to the transpersonal.

A LOOK AT THE BEGINNINGS

How does a wonderful theatre like Playback Theatre come into existence?

In each material consolidation and manifested form of the universe, or of the ordered cosmos, is an idea and its spiritual concept inherent, like the seed which already comprehends the significant characteristics of its evolutionary destiny. All important parts of its essence are already contained in it. No apple tree is ever going to have pears! The successful outcome of the form will be a clear mirror in substance of the indwelled idea.

Playback Theatre started with a thought and with a strong feeling.

The origin of the thought is called inspiration. It comes from deep within the heart and comes out as a vision.

When Jonathan Fox, as a young man, had this thought, it was the idea of an oral theatre without script. This theatre was different, new and reaching beyond. I think it was like a golden ball in his hands and he was very excited about it. It just was not so easy to put it 'on stage' to be what it was meant to be. But, his friends caught fire and they experienced the magic. That's what they wanted to reach: this magical level, which attained at the same time an ethical level.

The beginning was an experimental phase full of questions, full of fun: playing, trying and testing. They recorded every story told in writing to find out the dynamics, the background, and the best way to deal with narratives. It was nearly by chance, that music was added into Playback Theatre. Music opened up to a new space. Jo

Salas, Jonathan's life partner, deepened the magic of music in a wonderful way with her voice and her violin. Discovering music, brought in a new dimension, a transformative and deepening quality beyond words. Slowly, the "what exactly, and how," was gaining form and structure, and the first steps towards a system were set. But it was only years later, in 1986, that Jonathan committed his thoughts, ideas, and their meanings to paper in his first self-published book.

The awe we feel is often not so easy to explain at first. But, time has passed. Many things we already understand.

This one page with "Some Quotes on Basic Values of Playback Theatre" was like one more step. We found more explanation of what we wondered about, more answers about the "why?" and "what for?"

THEATRE OF LOVE

What a beautiful name for a theatre like Playback Theatre!

It is the title of Jonathan Fox's self-published book with the subtitle, "Dramatic Improvisation and Cultural Renewal."

The book's title shows what this theatre should be about: "...a theatre where the qualities of the heart matter most, which has a function for society and has a primary integrating force."

Playback Theatre is two-tracked, which means for the good of everybody (actors and audience), and also for the exchange of personal and transpersonal levels.

"Since Playback Theatre is process-oriented, there is a sense of something 'soft' about Playback Theatre's concept," Jonathan writes. "We are nurturing, caring, concerned to create beneficent atmospheres, while the 'world' we mostly live in values more traditionally masculine rubrics."

Since normal theatre is hierarchical, self-indulgent, proud, and competing, Jonathan Fox wanted a theatre that is directly concerned with social needs. He wanted to create a theatre that is intimate, personal, communal, and also intense, but ultimately a "theatre of love."

Jonathan's primary concern was that, "Playback Theatre should be a community theatre, where it is possible to tell all kinds of stories. In a community theatre there will be memories that tie us to the past and also turn us toward the future as a community of hope."

It has a context which allows us to connect our aspirations with those of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good.

"The richness which is shown in stories kicks us out of our sleeping consciousness, where we drift from experience to experience,"

Jonathan continues. "It makes us more capable persons. Stories are a treasure hoard of wisdom and fun, and connect us to others."

Playback Theatre is an improvisational theatre, which, to Jonathan Fox, means: "...both a practicing ground for life and an arena for exploring further dimensions of mind. Through it we can leap beyond the limitations of our frames of living, risking chaos to find order, daring not to think, to achieve higher understanding, attempting to be both in the moment – so that our inhibitory observer is silenced – and out of it, benefiting from meta-level perspective."

This leads us to spontaneity, "that flow of sensory information, evaluation and action that fuels our ability to adapt with creativity to a constantly changing environment. Our lives consist of a mammoth improvisation, in which each moment is a spontaneity test!"

Theatre can be a strong force for preserving social ecology, the "web of moral understanding," and commitments that tie people together. Playback Theatre can transform individual lives and help people to form a real community.

Through sharing our experiences and by telling our stories in Playback Theatre, we can sense better our needs and this can help us to find new hope, to overcome our fears and to accept our not being perfect. It can be a way to overcome boundaries of different cultures and bring an understanding for all the different ways to live life.

The content of Jonathan's first book is a precious gift. After more than 35 years, there is no better way to put into words what Playback Theatre's meaning and goal is: to inspire people towards new visions.

Playback Theatre turns its view towards a "community of hope," with a context that is meaningful and allows us to get in touch with

a wider view of the whole. It entails the future, involves the joy and the suffering of the present, and contains the beauty of our origin.

A COMMON BASE

How beautiful it is to tell your moment or story to somebody who is listening! How releasing it can be to be captured by what you have been telling! How amazing it is to see your moment or story unfold on stage as a piece of theatre, which is a mirror of what you really felt and experienced! How exciting it is, to play back somebody's moment or story and see a kind of tension in the teller's face changing into a "yes" from his heart! I could add many more "hows!"

To capture and bring the real value of Playback Theatre to the world, we need common ground. We need knowledge about the vision and the mission.

In 1990, the International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) was founded. We were only a few people from different countries. It was a big step, an opening to the world and a clear verbalization of our vision and mission.

The Vision

People engaged in Playback Theatre embrace the unfolding of life and the inherent spontaneity of persons and communities within their own cultural, social and political contexts. We recognize the universal longing for affirmation and for connection with others. The spontaneous enactment of personal experience, the essence of Playback Theatre, builds connection between people by honoring the dignity, drama, and universality of their stories.

The Mission

The mission of the IPTN is to facilitate connections among people practicing Playback Theatre, to support the development of