Introduction

In 2011 I embarked upon a research journey that would irrevocably change my life – a journey with roots that stretched back several generations into my own family history.

In 1907 my great grandfather, Yosef Nachmani set sail from the Ukraine towards Ottoman Palestine. Like many of his Zionist contemporaries, he envisioned a homeland for the Jewish people – a geographic sanctuary guarded from the violent pogroms and anti-Semitic policies that threatened his European, Jewish kin.

For a Zionist leadership captured by the 19th century trend towards ethnocentric nationalism, Palestine was viewed as the ideal choice for the establishment of a Jewish state (White, 2014). In a world that continued to espouse Darwinian notions of racialized hierarchy and related practices of colonization, the presence of an indigenous Palestinian populace was viewed as a mere inconvenience that could be effectively dealt with through a series of geostrategic, legalistic and militaristic tactics (Qumsiyeh, 2011).

My great grandfather became a loyal and somewhat prominent figure within the Zionist movement. In 1911, he joined Hashomer, a Jewish defense organization founded in 1909 to provide guard services for Jewish settlements. Later Nachmani became a high-ranking member of the Haganah, an underground militia that would amalgamate into the Israeli Defense Forces, founded in 1948.

By 1935, Nachmani had joined the Jewish National Fund, becoming director of the JNF offices in Tiberias. In this role, he was responsible for acquiring land throughout the Galilee and Jezreel Valley regions.

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1 Yosef Nachmani (1891-1965), was born Yoseg Agronovsky in Oleksandriia in the Ukraine.
Established in 1901, the JNF played a major role in the colonisation of Palestine.

[The JNF’s] infamous history attests to its key role in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and its subsequent settlement by incoming foreign Jews. Following the destruction by Zionist forces of over 500 Palestinian villages whose lands were then appropriated by the new Israeli state, a ‘Custodian of Absentee Property’ was appointed to oversee the fate of these lands. The JNF purchased over 1 million dunams of these lands for the exclusive use of ‘the Jewish nation’. The land could not be sold or leased to non-Jews, and it was developed into Jews-only settlements and new forests, all designed to prevent the return of the land to its original owners and to forestall their physical return. (Karmi, 2010:2)

Nachmani’s activities in the Haganah and the JNF clearly indicated his support for the establishment of a settler-colonial and apartheid state that would award special privileges and entitlements to its Jewish citizens. Nonetheless, his diaries also communicate profound distress at the gross violations that characterized the nature of this enterprise. In the following paragraph, he speaks of the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in the villages of Safsaf and Salha

They separated the men from the women, tied the hands of some 50 to 60 peasants and shot and killed them, burying them in a single hole. They also raped a number of the women from the village ... In Salha, which raised a white flag, they carried out a real massacre, killing men and women, about 60 to 70 people. Where did they find such a degree of cruelty like that of the Nazis? They learned from them. (Morris, 2000)
Nachmani’s son, Shimon Nachmani also became a member of the Haganah (and later the IDF). In 1948, following the exodus of over 700,000 Palestinians, he ordered the destruction of Arab homes in Tiberias and in Lubyah, a tactic used to prevent the return of their inhabitants. Nachmani’s other son (my grandfather), Gabi Nahmani\(^2\), worked as a scientist for the IDF where he developed and invented military explosives.

Against this backdrop, my father, Avner Nahmani, chose a radically different path. Coming of age during the late 1960’s he was deeply influenced by anti-war sentiments that characterized popular youth culture abroad.

Military service is compulsory in Israel and failure to complete it can have severe consequences upon a person’s career and social standing. After one year of service though, my father presented himself as mentally unsound in order to gain a military discharge. He then left Israel with the intention of studying Chinese in Taiwan. On his way, he visited Samyeling, a Tibetan Buddhist centre based in Eskdalemuir, Scotland. It was there that he met my mother, Julie. Together they embarked upon a life as farmers, integrating themselves into the diverse community of Eskdalemuir. (My father’s dreams of studying in Taiwan were never to be realized!)

I can’t say that I remember my father being overtly political. This was the purview of my mother. After moving to Australia in 1980, she became actively involved in civil rights, environmental issues, and the anti-nuclear movement. From an early age I was taken to seminars, meetings and protests. In this milieu, I developed a worldview that was critical of power and simultaneously committed to egalitarian values.

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\(^2\) My grandfather adopted this new spelling of his surname.
My father’s childhood stories stimulated a particular desire to learn more about the Middle East. And later, as my own family history became clear, I developed a resolve to participate in the global civil society movement for peace and justice in Israel-Palestine. As a theatre practitioner and drama therapist I was especially drawn to related initiatives that employed arts-based methodologies. (In terms of my professional background, I specialize in the use of therapeutic and participatory theatre for community mobilization and collective trauma response. I have taught and practiced in Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and North America, working extensively with communities impacted by structural oppression and political violence. I hold a Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology with a concentration in Drama Therapy from the California Institute of Integral Studies, USA. I’m a Registered Drama Therapist with the North American Drama Therapy Association, an Accredited Trainer at the Therapeutic Spiral Institute, Virginia, USA, and an Accredited Playback Theatre Trainer through the Centre for Playback Theatre, New York.)

After deciding to pursue doctoral research in Peace Studies I reached out to The Freedom Theatre (TFT) in Jenin Refugee Camp to see whether they would be interested in hosting a participatory action research project focusing on the use of Playback Theatre and Drama Therapy as a response to the impact of political violence in Occupied Palestine. The response was positive. After an 18-month period of joint planning and fundraising, I commenced a 2-year work contract with TFT starting in September 2011. During this 2-year period and in the year that followed I undertook the bulk of research that constitutes the body of my PhD thesis.

3 TFT sourced initial funding from the Swiss Consultate in Ramallah, Medico International and Unicef for the Playback Theatre Program and the Trauma Response Training Program that I subsequently led.
Presented in journal-article-format, my writings investigate the use of Playback Theatre within the Palestinian popular struggle movement. Two of my articles however, broaden this scope to investigate the use of Psychodrama and Playback Theatre within other movements and initiatives that aim to redress social injustice and collective trauma.

My findings indicate that a process of sharing and enacting personal stories within a supportive, communal context, and against the broader backdrop of civil resistance, can hold various functional attributes at the psychological and sociopolitical levels. My research also identified certain limitations that Playback Theatre holds as a form of intervention in scenarios of conflict and oppression. It lacks robust mechanisms for the facilitation of in-depth, explicit dialogue. It also stops short of seeking solutions to the problems that appear during a process. In addition, Playback is unsuited to large-scale gatherings and other events that lack necessary intimacy and containment.

In the following section, I provide a brief description of The Freedom Theatre - its history, operations, and the philosophy that guides its practice. I also speak about Playback Theatre and its evolution over the past 40 years. In the remainder of this introduction, I discuss my methodology and summarize my research findings and discussions as presented in the 7 articles I wrote.

*The Freedom Theatre*

During the 1980’s, the Israeli political and human rights activist, Arna Mer Khamis, established Care and Learning, a project based in Jenin Refugee Camp that aimed to address childhood trauma arising from the first intifada. In addition to Care and Learning, Arna Mer Khamis went on to establish The Stone Theatre, a small community theatre destroyed by an Israeli bulldozer during the 2002 Battle of Jenin.
Several years later, Zakaria Zubeidi, a former youth member of the Stone Theatre, and Jonathan Stanczak, a Swedish-Israeli activist, contacted Juliano Mer Khamis, Arna’s son, with the idea of establishing a new theater project for children and youth in Jenin Refugee Camp.

In 2006, Mer Khamis, Zubeidi and Stanczak opened The Freedom Theatre as a venue to join the Palestinian people through a cultural means of resistance. “The Israelis succeeded to destroy our identity [and] our social structures, [both] political [and] economical. Our duty as artists is to rebuild or reconstruct this destruction [...] We believe that the third intifada, the coming intifada, should be cultural” (Mer Khamis in Mee, 2012: 168). To this end, The Freedom Theatre established courses in acting, creative writing, film making and photography.

The work of The Freedom Theatre has however garnered controversy. Conservative elements with Jenin Refugee Camp viewed the liberal values of Mer Khamis as a corrupting influence upon their youth. Some Israelis also took offence, accusing Mer Khamis of enabling Palestinian resistance. Indeed, Mer Khamis faced several death threats. On April 4th 2011, he was assassinated outside the theatre by an unknown, masked gunman. To this date, his murder remains unsolved despite investigative attempts by Palestinian and Israeli authorities (Fox, 2012).

My own work at TFT commenced in September 2011. Initially I was contracted to implement a trauma response training program for Palestinian mental health workers and a Playback Theatre training program for students of TFT’s acting school.

In October of that year, the Israeli army carried out repeated nighttime incursions into Jenin Refugee Camp, arresting numerous residents including several members of TFT. The Israeli authorities claimed that these activities were part of their
investigation into Juliano’s murder. However, the physical maltreatment and lack of due process experienced by detainees, was interpreted by TFT leadership as an indication of other motives, namely a desire to further erode the morale of TFT staff and their families, and to sow discord between TFT supporters and other residents of the camp who might view the incursions as an aspect of Juliano’s legacy.

In response to this situation, TFT decided to hold a Playback Theatre event in the streets of Jenin Refugee Camp. Anyone who had been affected by the recent incursions was invited to come forward and speak. A group of TFT students, newly trained in Playback, would then turn each story into a piece of improvised theatre. Media representatives, along with TFT’s own film unit, helped to document and broadcast the event as part of a strategy aimed at raising awareness and mobilizing support against the harassment suffered by TFT staff and other residents of the camp.

The event sparked a second, and larger Playback performance focusing on stories arising from the experience of political imprisonment. Based on our observations of audience engagement, it appeared that Playback Theatre held potential as an effective medium for Palestinian communities who desired direct, participatory forms of expression. It also became clear that Playback Theatre aligned with the strategy of popular struggle committees who recognized the importance of personal narrative in media campaigning.

Until this point, TFT had largely limited its operations to Jenin Refugee Camp with the exception of international tours of scripted productions. Following the first two Playback events however, a small group of TFT actors and myself began meeting with cultural and activist groups across the West Bank to gauge interest in ‘The Freedom Bus’, a new, participatory action research project that we were proposing.
Driven by a desire to forge alliances with the broader Palestinian popular struggle movement and international activists, we proposed an initiative inspired by the historic freedom rides of the USA civil rights era. Central to this concept was the idea that people from around the world would travel together through West Bank villages, Bedouin communities and refugee camps to learn firsthand about the realities of life and struggle under Israeli occupation and apartheid. Playback Theatre, educational seminars, guided walks, community visits, home stays and other activities would help to provide these ‘freedom riders’ with a visceral experience not readily available in other sociopolitical tours.

The response to this concept was overwhelmingly positive and a number of communities across the West Bank were suggested as potential candidates for inclusion in the first freedom ride. The core team of TFT staff then visited and presented the concept to these communities. In most cases these initial visits also included small Playback events attended by community leaders and key activists.

Through this process, eleven communities were selected and agreed to participate in, and help organize the first ride scheduled to occur in September 2012.

In the lead-up to the ride, we attempted to conduct as many visits and performances as possible in each partnering community. These face-to-face meetings helped in the organization of logistical matters. Most importantly though, these meetings and performances enabled us to engage in a process of relationship building that would hold significant and unforeseen positive consequences. At the same time, my own research, involving interviews and discussion groups, helped to establish a foundational understanding regarding the utility of Playback in the Palestinian context. This was to be developed in much more depth over the following two years.
The articles contained in this thesis, together with the summaries below, provide a narrative description and analytical response to these events and findings.

*Playback Theatre*

In 1975, Jonathan Fox, together with Jo Salas, founded Playback Theater in the Hudson Valley, New York. In a Playback Theatre event, audience members are invited to share true stories from their own lives. After a volunteer ‘Teller’ is selected, the event facilitator, known as a ‘Conductor’, asks that person to join them onstage, where they are subsequently interviewed. During the Teller’s interview, the Conductor asks questions that help to shape a basic narrative structure for their story. Meanwhile, a group of 4 or 5 actors, and 1 or 2 musicians listen to the story. At the conclusion of the interview, the Conductor asks the Teller to choose one actor to play him or herself. This person then stands. With the injunction of “Let’s Watch!” all remaining actors stand and leave the stage. As the musicians begin to play, the “Teller’s Actor” enters the stage and begins the first scene of the Teller’s story. Other actors join as needed. In a series of subsequent scenes, the main events, emotions and meanings of the story are represented through dialogue, gestures, movements, song and metaphor. All scenes are improvised, occurring without any prior discussion or pre-planning by the performing team. Typically, an enactment takes no more than 5 minutes. The actors aim not to produce a realistic, detailed recreation of the Teller’s experience. Rather they attempt to offer an essentialized rendition that emphasizes the core elements of the Teller’s story.

At the conclusion of the enactment, the Teller is invited to comment. If the actors misrepresented, or failed to include an important aspect of the Teller’s story, the Conductor in collaboration with the Teller can request a corrected enactment.
After the Teller returns to the audience, another story is invited and the process is repeated.

Some performances are structured around a predetermined issue that carries relevance for the target community. On other occasions, performances are held without a theme. In such cases the Conductor welcomes any story that a person wishes to tell.

A Playback performance usually takes place over 1.5 hours. However, as an improvisational process, flexibility exists around the length of an event.

During a 90-minute performance, 4 – 6 full stories might be shared and enacted. Audience thoughts and feelings towards a particular situation, including their response to the stories heard, might also be evoked and performed during the event. Through this process, a spontaneous, and often implicit dialogue between stories frequently emerges. In Playback Theatre terminology, we refer to this conversation between stories as the ‘Red Thread’.

In addition to the use of Playback Theatre for public performance, it can also be used in workshop settings to generate communication, understanding and relationship building between participants. Like many other applied theatre forms, training in Playback Theatre can also nurture participant creativity, spontaneity, imagination and expressiveness together with skills in listening, attunement, empathy and teamwork.

Playback was first conceived as a remedial response to the alienation that is associated with contemporary, post-industrial societies (Fox, 1994). From the early years Playback’s ability to promote community cohesion through inclusive practice, personal storytelling and performance by non-professional ‘citizen’ actors, was
recognized and embraced by pioneer practitioners (Salas, 2013; Fox, 1994). By 1999, after nearly 25 years of existence, Playback was also being used in the fields of education, mental health, organizational development, and in the social service sector (Fox, 1999).

In my article about Playback Theatre and social movements (Rivers, 2015d) I note the further evolution of Playback, pointing to its growing use within the context of social movements that address issues of poverty, racial discrimination, violence against women, homophobia, militarism, environmental degradation and climate change.

The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus initiative has helped to extend the practice of Playback in new directions (Salas, 2013). In particular the development of multi-day ‘solidarity stays’ has enabled actors and participants to build relationships that transcend the time-limited encounters that characterize conventional applications of Playback Theatre. Likewise, the Freedom Bus with its grounding in popular struggle has evolved new contributions of praxis to the global Playback community. This is particularly evident in our attention to the development of cooperative, long lasting and strategic alliances\footnote{The Freedom Bus holds close working relationships with a number of popular struggle committees, village cooperatives, grassroots activist groups, journalists, filmmakers and researchers. In addition, the Freedom Bus is endorsed by the Boycott National Committee (the largest coalition of Palestinian organisations, trade unions and networks) along with many prominent artists and activists including Ali Abunimah, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu, John Berger, Judith Butler, Mazin Qumsiyeh, the late Maya Angelou, Noam Chomsky, Omar Barghouti, Peter Brook and Remi Kanazi.} - a philosophical and tactical cornerstone that has enabled us to embed our efforts with a broader network of social change initiatives.

**Methodology**

Mer Khamis, acknowledging the utilitarian function of cultural resistance asserted that, “art, in our case, can combine and generate and mobilize other aspects of...
resistance” (Gharavi, 2011: para 27). He also held that cultural activity could play a vital role in establishing the foundations for a “healthy, equal society” (Explore, 2013: para 13) based on a respect for fundamental human rights.

Other arts practitioners working in zones of conflict propose that artistic activities “reinforce a sense of being ‘human’ at a time of dehumanization” (Thompson, Hughes and Balfour, 2009: 37), and that theatre and the arts are “essential life-preserving activities that express a profound resistance to the wider context of threat, destruction, senselessness, chaos and loss within which people exist” (ibid: 28).

By conducting firsthand research into the use of Playback Theatre in occupied Palestine, I hoped to investigate these claims with an aim of discovering what, if any, value the performance of personal testimony might hold for a population impacted by, and resisting, various forms of structural violence.

Broad questions informing my research therefore included: “Can Playback Theatre effectively respond to the need for grassroots political action in occupied Palestine?” and “Can Playback Theatre effectively respond to the need for trauma response in Palestinian communities impacted by political violence?”

While considering these questions and the methodology I hoped to adopt, I also examined the implications of my own involvement in this proposed study. As a theatre professional and doctoral student, it remained highly possible that career-oriented self-interest might predominate without certain safeguards. In addition, the positioning of myself (a White Australian) as an organizer and activist within the popular struggle movement was likely to awaken valid concerns regarding the colonization of resistance activities by non-Palestinians. For this reason, it felt
essential to adopt a more open and democratic approach to research, one where a range of local stakeholders would join in processes of planning, implementation and critical reflection. Based on this rationale, I chose to conduct the study through an ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) framework.

As mentioned above, participant communities were identified through consultations with organizations and groups across the West Bank. Key partnerships were then established on a local or regional level. These included the Jordan Valley Solidarity Campaign, the South Hebron Hills Popular Struggle Committee, the At-tuwani Women’s Cooperative, and the Popular Struggle Committee in Nabi Saleh. In most cases, these were identified as the premier organizing bodies for non-violent popular struggle activities in each village or area. A range of other individuals and community-based groups and associations were also engaged in various levels of analysis, decision-making, implementation and evaluation.

The establishment of working relationships with a broad range of Palestinian partners was a new development for The Freedom Theatre. As mentioned previously, our focus had until then remained limited to Jenin Refugee Camp with occasional tours abroad. This localized focus was due in part to resource issues and managerial decisions regarding TFT’s core mission and objectives. As we sought to expand our focus though, it became clear that the very architecture of military occupation conspired to inhibit inter-communal contact and exchange. Roadblocks, checkpoints, settler-only roads, military patrols and the Apartheid Wall coalesced into a machinery of control that made movement between Palestinian communities a physical and psychological ordeal. In this context, The Freedom Bus was perceived by Palestinians as a welcome challenge to the alienating effects of restricted movement.
In many communities, residents expressed their appreciation for the sustained presence and involvement of Freedom Bus actors – many of whom came from other parts of Palestine. This engagement in village life was often experienced as a form of moral support that community members valued more than theatre! On the other hand, the relational context does enhance the overall communicative – and artistic - experience of a Playback event. The existence of trust, rapport and even friendship influence the type of stories told and the quality of performance. Hasan Taha, commenting on the personally enriching nature of ‘immersive experience’, also noted that the building of relationships enabled a form of embodied research that resulted in more authentic enactments.

As a Palestinian who lives on the other side of Palestine, it was good for me to stay for extended periods of time in At-tuwani. By spending many days and nights together - talking, eating, playing, working, and struggling side by side - I got a much better understanding for how my people live and resist in this part of the occupied West Bank [...] In fact, in At-tuwani I didn’t feel like an actor coming to do his job. Instead, I felt like a family member and a part of the community [...] We [members of the performing troupe] worked the land, demonstrated, shepherded and confronted the Israeli army. Having these experiences - which At-tuwani people must face every day – allowed me to identify with them. During a performance, this helped me as an actor. When a teller was sharing his story, I felt like it was my own, as if his experience had happened to me too. I connected deeply and this, I hope, was reflected in the enactment. (Taha, 2014)

The centrality of relationship is something I write extensively about in my articles. It has also influenced the development of a specialized Participatory Action Research
tool for Playback Theatre practitioners (see appendix to my article on Playback in Social Movements).

In addition to data gathered through PAR processes, I also collected findings from over 50 formal and informal interviews held with male and female artists, activists, organizers, and other community members involved in the Freedom Bus initiative. On average, interviews took place over the course of 50 minutes. Interviews were held either in community settings or in the family home of interviewees. Interviews were conducted in English by myself with Arabic translation provided by Palestinian employees of The Freedom Theatre. Approval was granted from the UNE Ethics Committee for this research.

During interviews with tellers, I would typically invite people to reflect upon the motivations that brought them to the teller’s chair. The responses to this question provided insight into the various psychosocial and political imperatives that underpinned the desire to share testimony. I also enquired into the experience of teller’s during and after the Playback event. This allowed me to understand the impact of the experience itself.

The interviews took place separately to performances. I would typically visit communities some time after an event in order to gather data.

The quotes provided throughout the dissertation were drawn from interviews I conducted at various stages of the participatory action research process.

I also conducted a number of interviews and focus groups in India, Egypt and Lebanon. These findings were used to inform my article on Psychodrama and my article on Playback Theatre in social movements.

*Article Summaries*
The following section summarizes the main points of each journal article.

**Playback Theatre as a Response to the Impact of Political Violence in Occupied Palestine.**

This article was published in 2013 in *Applied Theatre Research*, a peer-reviewed journal based in Australia.

The main body of this paper explores the utility of public testimony and its performance as a response to Israeli military aggression and other forms of state-sponsored violence. In particular, the article explores the therapeutic mechanisms of Playback Theatre in Occupied Palestine.

My discussion defines trauma within its socio-political context. The occurrence of PTSD and other forms of psychological distress are viewed largely as a consequence of poverty, military occupation and settler-related violence. The article notes that access to conventional forms of treatment in Palestine is limited and suggests that, “Communal story telling and interactive theatre may offer a culturally recognizable alternative, or complementary addition, to the psychotherapeutic paradigms that currently operate in occupied Palestine” (Rivers, 2013: 159).

My research identified three key motivations that underscore the decision of participants to share their story in Playback Theatre events:

1. “To share the psychological burden of traumatic events, with the belief that understanding, acknowledgement and accompaniment will lead to the reduction of psychological suffering
2. To provide an international audience with insight into the realities of life and struggle under occupation, in the hope that a more visceral
understanding will motivate committed action in solidarity with the Palestinian cause

3. To remind fellow Palestinians about the oppressions and sacrifices that have been endured in the struggle for freedom, with the hope that this reminder will challenge complacency and stimulate active struggle” (ibid: 161).

As these findings indicated, the psychological and political dimensions of personal/collective experience could not be easily separated and categorized. This pushed me to adopt what might be called a ‘psycho-political’ perspective in this and future writings.

The article discusses the therapeutic mechanism of Playback itself, using interview excerpts to present the ideas and experiences of Tellers and audience members. The sense of acknowledgment and validation that arises from sharing one’s story in a structured public forum is granted special importance. However, value is also attributed to the “aesthetic, embodied and active form of empathic mirroring” (ibid: 162) that occur in Playback Theatre. According to neurobiological research, exposure to life threatening situations may result in the temporary suspension of the Broca area (or ‘language centre’) of the brain. In such cases the traumatic memory is stored at the kinaesthetic level – rather than at the verbal level - and can only be accessed and integrated through modalities that engage our sensory capacities.

My research did not attempt to establish the legitimacy of claims that suggest arts-based and somatic approaches to trauma response hold an advantage over conventional “talking cures”. Nonetheless, some Teller’s did report that the act of witnessing a performance helped to generate a novel engagement with the original experience. As one participant reported, “When we tell our story and see it enacted we
also learn something new about ourselves. We see our self from the outside and this gives us a new way to view our experience.” (ibid: 163)

As I propose in the article, these experiences help to destabilize fixed patterns of memory and perception thus enabling the survivor “to attribute new, more life-affirming meanings to their story” (ibid: 163).

Later in the paper, the discussion turns towards the Playback actor and their ethical responsibility to the Teller

The artist must learn to listen for the ‘double-storied’ (Denborough 2008) dimensions of an account – to recognize and reflect not only the oppressive and traumatic incident, but also the varied ways in which the protagonist responded: how they tried to protect themselves; how they helped others; the skills and values upon which they drew; what resources were mobilized and so on. Through this process, the legacy of resilience is inscribed in narrative form, and the audience comes closer to their own source of healing, strength and empowerment (ibid, 170).

Importance is given to the context within which a Playback Theatre intervention occurs. The primacy of trust, respect and long-term involvement with partnering communities is especially emphasized.

The possibility of retraumatization through Playback is also discussed. Technical conventions for the enactment of ‘trauma stories’ are presented along with cautions and practices that can minimize harm for the actors themselves.

The article concludes with a reflection upon the need to integrate ‘truth-telling’ practices within a larger framework of justice-oriented initiatives such as the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.
The Freedom Bus and Playback Theatre: Beyond Neo-colonial Approaches to Trauma Response in Occupied Palestine.

This article was translated into Russian and published in a 2013 edition of the Journal of Practical Psychology, a professional mental health journal based in Russia. It was subsequently republished in a book of collected articles titled Playback Theatre Practice: Selected Articles. (Edited by Zagryazhskaya, E. and Zagryazhskaya, Z.)

The article builds upon my first paper by suggesting that biomedical models of trauma response hold limited currency in situations where entire populations are impacted by political violence. The Freedom Theatre’s use of Playback Theatre - via the Freedom Bus initiative - is presented as an alternative, community-based intervention that promotes various protective factors whilst acknowledging the structural roots of psychosocial distress in Palestine.

In contrast to my earlier writings, this piece takes a reflexive position. I examine my own assumptions and conditioning as a white, middle-class, psychotherapist raised and educated in Australia and the USA. I explore how my inherited worldview shapes my understanding of the Palestinian response to political violence. In particular I conclude that I, along with other international mental health workers (and our employers), are quick to impose interventions and corresponding discourses that automatically assume the prevalence of trauma. As the paper suggests however, the construct of ‘trauma’ is one that many Palestinians do not identify with – for in general, trauma discourse tends to emphasize a narrowed definition of psychological distress – one that ignores or minimizes the structural context. I argue that reflexivity is essential for Playback Theatre practitioners, lest our ‘reading’ and
subsequent response to a Teller’s story be overly restrained by inherited discourse. As I propose, “to relate to someone as wounded, vulnerable and distressed (when they are not), may in fact lead to iatrogenesis – an effect that occurs when our attempts to “heal” inadvertently cause harm” (Rivers, 2013b).

I suggest that Playback practitioners, schooled in the apolitical, ‘disease-oriented’ model might fail to identify, appreciate and enact the sources of strength that Palestinians themselves value in their struggle for social, psychological and cultural survival. In particular I point towards the significance of concrete protective factors such as social networks and organized resistance. I also discuss the important protective function of ideology.

During the paper, I recognize that “trauma arises from a combination of interlocking political, social, historic and economic issues. A trauma approach that ignores these determinants can result in band-aid measures that further reinforce decontextualized presentations of psychosocial issues in Palestine” (ibid).

I suggest that The Freedom Bus initiative signals an attempt to “develop a model of psychosocial intervention that reflects a more “holistic, community-based and culturally grounded approach” highlighting the importance of “community mobilization, culture, social ecologies, and social justice” (ibid). This is evident in the variety of Freedom Bus activities that are organized in partnership with popular struggle committees, village cooperatives and grassroots activist groups. The paper explores how this model has enabled us to “participate in a social ecology that nourishes samud (steadfastness) and other factors that protect against trauma” (ibid).

In particular, the development of multi-day events - known as ‘solidarity stays’ is seen as a valuable step in enabling us to engage in a range of cultural and non-
cultural activities relating to the struggles and predicaments of partnering communities.

A number of interview excerpts suggest that immersion in the daily life of a community bears influence upon the Playback process itself. As I note, “people are generally eager to transmit their stories, but within a social context that honours the importance of relationship between teller and audience, community and visitor” (ibid, 2013).

The paper concludes with a discussion about Playback’s potential for fostering gender inclusivity. Examples are provided from women Teller’s in the village of At-tuwani who use the Playback process to assert their own narratives of political engagement.

**Playback Theatre, Cultural Resistance and the Limits of Trauma Discourse**

This article was written for a 2014 edition of *Interplay* (now titled the International Playback Theatre Journal). The edition focused upon the use of Playback Theatre for trauma response in various settings around the world.

In the article I emphasize that communal story-telling practices provide a natural opportunity for local knowledge, skills and values to be heard and validated. Within this context, protective factors such as community cohesion, ‘meaning-making’, and political mobilization should take precedence over the deficit-oriented interventions that predominate in biomedical approaches to trauma response.

Although these points were made in my prior articles, this paper develops upon my earlier work by clearly defining and describing several psychological functions that Playback serves in the therapeutic journey. These include
1. “Strengthening fortitude:” The Playback event can become a vehicle for the transmission of certain values, attitudes, strategies and narratives that counter the oppressor’s attempts to systematically humiliate and degrade the oppressed community. Playback Theatre as a form of cultural resistance thus operates as a simultaneous inoculation against the risk of traumatisation.

2. *Empathic joining:* The supportive and empathic response of actors and audience members provides the teller with a sense of being joined in their predicament and struggle. This experience of “solidarity” helps to relieve feelings of isolation.

3. *Emotional release:* The act of sharing one’s story and seeing it performed can help to relieve the psychological pressure that accumulates in response to various sociopolitical stressors. In particular, many tellers comment upon the significance of the actor’s ability to give full expression to the emotional dimension of their story.

4. *Distance and perspective:* The experience of witnessing the enactment of one’s story can produce an empowering sense of distance. The resultant shift in perspective allows for the occurrence of personal, social and political insights that were previously undeveloped or inaccessible.” (Rivers, 2014: 17)

The paper suggests that these psychotherapeutic outcomes of Playback are not unique to the Palestinian context. I conclude however that “their features do assume a distinct nature when contextual dynamics are taken into account” (Rivers, 2014: 17).
Narrative Power: Playback Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Occupied Palestine.

This article was published in Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance. This journal is a peer-reviewed publication based in the UK.

While my first three articles discuss the use of Playback Theatre as a form of collective trauma response, this article focuses on the use of Playback Theatre as a form of cultural activism in occupied Palestine.

I discuss the idea that peace processes built on ideas of symmetry (“we have all suffered equally”, “we are equally to blame”, “peace will come when we dismantle mutual hatred and misunderstanding”) are viewed by Palestinians as an attempt to maintain the status quo, while whitewashing and obscuring the true structural mechanisms that protect and entrench Jewish power and privilege. For this reason, the Freedom Bus initiative has never sought to address occupation and apartheid through Playback processes that subscribe to intergroup contract theory. As noted however, the Freedom Bus initiative, along with many Palestinian activists, does welcome the participation of Israeli allies who share a common platform dedicated to ensuring civil rights and equality, and the honouring of international law throughout Palestine-Israel.

I suggest that Playback in occupied Palestine should be used within a strategic framework (Schirch and Shank, 2008) to promote conscientization and community mobilization – tasks that Adam Curle (1971) and others (Dugan, 2003; Galtung, 2004; Lederach, 2003) associate with the necessary struggle for a better bargaining position.
with asymmetrical conflicts. From this paradigm, effective negotiations can only occur once gross imbalances of power have been corrected.

In particular, I point to the ‘narrative power’ of storytelling for raising awareness and mobilizing witnesses to take action. I propose however, that Playback Theatre contains “a combination of features that add value to traditional forms of story-based advocacy, campaigning and community building” (Rivers, 2015a). I illustrate my argument by referring to the ‘artistic’, ‘social interactive’ and ‘ritual’ aspects of Playback Theatre. The conceptualization of these three domains – initially articulated by Jo Salas (1999) and Jonathan Fox (1999) – are developed and elaborated upon in this paper, thus providing Playback practitioners with an expanded framework for informing theory and practice.

The paper concludes by reflecting upon the limitations of Playback Theatre as a form of cultural activism. I note particularly, that Playback works best in more intimate settings and is thus unsuitable for large gatherings such as protests, rallies and public meetings. I also assert, that unlike Boal’s Forum Theatre, Playback does not contain clear mechanisms for the facilitation of discussion, debate and problem solving. In addition, I propose that Palestinian theatre as ‘cultural resistance’ remains largely within the purview of professional actors and internationally funded NGO’s. I suggest that a truly ‘people-based’ theatre movement must emerge if cultural forms of resistance are to play a significant role in the movement towards civil rights and equality in historic Palestine.

Cherry Theft Under Apartheid: Playback Theatre in the South Hebron Hills of Occupied Palestine
This article was published in The Drama Review, a USA theatre journal edited by Richard Schechner.

‘Cherry Theft Under Apartheid’ presents a detailed case study of TFT’s use of Playback Theatre in the South Hebron Hills village of At-tuwani. The article examines the development of Playback Theatre as a strategy for alliance building, awareness raising and political advocacy within that region. I also discuss various ethical issues including the need to honour the integrity of the Teller’s subjective experience whilst attending to the broader sociopolitical realities that frame the story. Additionally, I note that care should be taken to avoid the replication of oppressive power dynamics within the Playback Theatre process itself.

The paper begins with an account of an early Playback performance in At-tuwani. In this performance, an aged woman by the name of Uhm Saber, speaks about a time where she was attacked by Jewish settlers on a nearby hill while looking after her sheep.

Taking this story, I investigate the way an actor might impose their own interpretation upon a Teller’s account. Uhm Saber can either be viewed as a helpless victim, a heroic defender of her land (she had been attacked there before but defiantly chose to return), or some combination of the two. In Playback Theatre though, we aim to honour the Teller’s own version of an event. To assist with this process, and to avoid the actor’s ‘colonization’ of a Teller’s story, I suggest that performers consider Jerome Bruner’s (1986) notions of the "landscape of action" and "landscape of consciousness". The landscape of action refers to the objectively perceived events that occur within the story, whereas the landscape of consciousness indicates the subjective experience of the protagonist. For these two landscapes to be evident however, the
Conductor must ask questions that help to clarify both the sequence of events and the way the Teller responded to them. The performers must then strive to maintain these dual landscapes as they appear within the Teller’s account.

At the same time, I acknowledge that performers (and spectators) cannot escape their own “personal, cultural, and sociopolitical frames of reference as they interact with a testimony (Rowe, 2007). This is not a negative phenomenon, for the ensuing negotiation of meaning and content can give rise to new and constructive perspectives (Dennis, 2008)” (Rivers, 2015a). I also note that if we rely only upon the Teller’s account, we might “fall into a narrow and personalized engagement with the event. The performers may thus fail to identify and represent the broader sociopolitical features” of a Teller’s experience. I therefore suggest that performers aim to honor a careful balance between individual testimony and collective narrative.

The paper then explores the strategic use of Playback in the South Hebron Hills, noting how it intersects with a local media strategy aimed at raising awareness and mobilizing audiences. I note however that

Diversity of audience structure compels the Teller to mobilize spectatorship in different ways. For example, some Tellers state that their story was aimed predominantly at people from their own community with the aim of reinforcing values of steadfastness. Others seek to mobilize non-local Palestinians. As one Teller stated, “Through my story, I wanted to tell Palestinians who are living in Area C5 and other parts of the West Bank, that we need to be in solidarity with ourselves. We need this more than international support. (ibid)

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5 Under the Oslo II Accord of 1995, the West Bank was divided into 3 administrative regions know as Area A, B and C. Area C includes 61% of the West Bank and falls under complete Israeli civil and military control.
In addition to the more pragmatic functions of Playback, I discuss its ability to stimulate reflexivity. Taking the case of Sami Hureini, an 18-year old activist from At-tuwani, I share his own reflections about the ability of Playback to stimulate new insights. Through the process of sharing and witnessing enactment within a communal setting, he was able to build a clear narrative that held “constructive implications for his definition of self and identity.” (ibid)

I also propose that Playback in At-tuwani has allowed for “mediated social transgression” where men and women have used the process to assert alternative narratives, especially around gender norms.

In prior papers, I present arguments in favour of extended, community stays by the performing team. As mentioned above, these immersive experiences are seen to hold relational, strategic and artistic benefits that cannot be easily achieved within the conventional parameters of a theatre event. In this paper, I develop my argument further with a focus on the actors’ experience.

In the last two years, youth from At-tuwani began requesting training in Playback Theatre so that they themselves could become actors. Considering the advantages and challenges of this project, I again note that “cultural activism will suffer certain limitations where the artistic means of production remain within the control of “expert” practitioners.” (ibid)

**Mobilizing Aesthetics in Psychodramatic Group Work**

‘Mobilizing Aesthetics’ was published in the Drama Therapy Review, a peer-reviewed journal linked to the North American Drama Therapy Association.

This article differs from my prior writings in its focus on psychodrama rather than Playback Theatre.
Psychodrama usually operates in a group context. During a psychodrama session, an individual member, or ‘protagonist’, works on a self-chosen issue of concern with the support of other group members. The issue is shaped into an enactment and ‘worked through’ with the support of a psychotherapist, referred to as a ‘Director’. Other group members (auxiliaries) may perform roles inside the drama, or they act as witnesses. In contrast to Playback Theatre, the protagonist actively participates in the drama. At the conclusion of the session, all group members share verbally, relating how the protagonist’s drama connected to issues and events in their own life. Playback also differs from Psychodrama in that it is a form of participatory theatre. Playback is generally used in a public context and while it can provide therapeutic outcomes, it is rarely presented as “therapy”. Playback events therefore do not necessitate the construction of therapeutic goals by participants. Nor do the parameters of confidentiality apply as they do in psychotherapy. Nonetheless, Psychodrama and Playback Theatre do share common features. In fact, the theory and practice of Psychodrama played a significant role in Jonathan Fox’s own development of Playback Theatre (Fox, 1994). Both methods include some process of personal storytelling and subsequent enactment. And both methods propose that spontaneity, creativity and empathic attunement hold healing and transformative effects.

The article signals a shift on my part towards a closer investigation of dramatic form itself, exploring how the aesthetic experience “promises to leave a deeper, multisensorial imprint upon the protagonist and other players” (Rivers, 2015c). In particular, I note that

Successful mobilization of the aesthetic dimension often results in a form of engagement that transcends purely cognitive modes of being (Jennings 1997)
Our sensory faculties are awakened, and we are inducted into a more holistic encounter with the emotions, themes and events of the protagonist’s story.

I also assert that shared aesthetic experiences can help to strengthen rapport between participants and the facilitator. In addition, I provide examples of aesthetic options and preparatory approaches that can be used for mobilizing the full artistic potential of therapeutic and participatory drama. The article, with its focus on method and technique, therefore offers a supplementary function to my prior articles. In drawing my conclusions, I use case examples and participant reflections gathered from my research in Palestine, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

**Educate, Agitate and Organize! Playback Theatre and its Role in Social Movements**

This article was published in the International Playback Theatre Journal (formerly *Interplay*). It builds upon my prior papers by widening the focus to include projects around the world that use Playback Theatre within the context of social movements.

The paper is aimed at the Playback Theatre community on its 40th anniversary, and is structured around the following questions: What theories of change seem most appropriate to our endeavours? How can we be more strategic in our interventions? How can artistry and ritual best serve our objectives? And what limitations of form might require us to adopt other modes of social, cultural and political action?

I begin by suggesting that Playback Theatre has grown to adopt a more affirmative stance in relation to social injustice. While early applications focused on community building and social service, we are now witnessing a more principled commitment to certain sociopolitical causes. As I note
One might wonder [...] whether the Playback Theatre community has moved into a new era – one that contains elements that are more politicized and more direct in their allegiance to particular causes. Could it be that we are beginning to incorporate a more radical language of activism – one that moves beyond the lexicon of nonpartisanship in our journey towards a better world? (ibid)

Using theories of Friere (1970) and Gramsci (1971), I suggest that Playback, when used for social change, should align itself with the “long battle over those perceptions, myths and ideologies that induce collaboration, submission and obedience to repressive structures” (ibid). In other words, the potential of Playback lies within its ability to effect a shift in consciousness.

In a Playback event relating to a particular injustice, stories will be shared that constitute a sort of “community conversation”. Through this conversation, dissent and resistance to the oppressive status quo is expressed. And through these expressions, “a counter-hegemonic position is established – one that calls for the awakening and action of those gathered” (ibid). I illustrate my point by using case examples drawn from workshops and performances with Palestinians and Dalit communities in India.

I note however that in some cases, the Teller’s “impulse towards dissent is strengthened not by the validation of their current stance, nor by the inspiration gained from hearing of someone else’s resistance. Instead, an awakening occurs through the recognition of one’s own normalized response to the status quo” (ibid). This point is emphasized in the following quote taken from a member of the South Hebron Hills Popular Struggle Committee

Unfortunately, adaptation is a common response to the perverse conditions under which we live. It is easy to become accustomed to the daily realities of land confiscation, home demolitions, settler violence and military occupation.
However, when we see these realities represented through theatre, it causes us to look again and see our situation from another perspective – one that reveals its abnormality (ibid). While much of my writings focus on the use of Playback Theatre for conscientization within oppressed communities, this article suggests that the sharing and enactment of personal stories can also help to raise the awareness of those who possess more power and privilege. Nonetheless, I state that

The task of sensitizing the dominant group should not rest alone with those who struggle under their discriminatory rule. Allies can also play a role by engaging members of their own group in the examination of ingrained biases, taken-for-granted privileges and histories of perpetration (ibid).

I provide an example of this in the race-relations project led by the Philadelphia-based group, Playback for Change.

The paper also stresses the important of Playback practitioners themselves engaging in processes that contribute towards their own education, self-awareness and capacity for critical thinking. Without this prior work, I suggest we may “unwittingly comply with hegemonic discourse by enacting problematic typecasts (stereotypes) or by falling into psychologised renderings that negate the broader political dimensions of a story and its potential as a catalyst for social change” (ibid). I also propose that the “performance space itself can become a microcosm of the broader society – along with its patterns of blindness, discrimination and inequity”. For example, we may “find that the Teller’s seat remains occupied by people who enjoy greater status in the world outside” (ibid). This places the Conductor in a position where they must “ensure that other voices are also heard. Additionally, the Conductor must communicate their non-complicity in cases where the Teller’s story condones a
worldview that is racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise oppressive in some way” (ibid). I also propose a number of interventions that actors can use when faced by the challenge of enacting stories that contain oppressive tropes.

The latter part of the article addresses the importance of an appropriate methodology for organizers. I recommend using a Participatory Action Research approach, suggesting it offers one way to ensure that community members remain engaged in all aspects of a project’s lifecycle. I speak about the use of PAR in the Freedom Bus initiative but go on to develop a PAR tool that can be used by Playback Theatre practitioners in other contexts. This appears in the appendix of the article.

The article concludes by examining some of the tensions inherent in the Playback practice

In general, Playback Theatre deals only with the lived accounts of Tellers. The form is not designed to accommodate the overt analysis of injustice, nor the interventions that might lead us towards a preferred reality. How then can we imagine and portray that which has not yet appeared in the social realm? As cultural activists, are we restricted only to the domain of truth telling, or can we also point towards the world we are working for?

In response to these questions, I present examples of Playback troupes that incorporate supplementary practices that allow for direct dialogue and action planning.

Conclusion

While applied theatre practitioners remain my primary audience, I believe my research also holds relevance for the broader field of peacebuilding. By examining the challenges and benefits of participatory theatre (particularly Playback), I provide
peacebuilders, community organizers and cultural activists with greater insight into how, when, where, why and with whom we may effectively use such interventions.

Throughout my writings I note that Playback Theatre is not a panacea. There are times where other methods might better serve the needs at hand. I do suggest however that Playback offers a radical form of pedagogy – one that does not depend on didactic instruction or consciousness raising imposed from the outside. Instead, the process of political awakening occurs through the sharing and embodiment of real life stories – stories that are replete with examples of confusion and certainty, hardship and struggle, steadfastness and hope. (Rivers, 2015d)

I also suggest that the Playback process itself offers opportunity “for the modelling of values and behaviours that counter systems of domination and discrimination. Through our expressions of respect, deep listening, empathy, solidarity, and creativity, we embody a reality that directly contradicts the dehumanizing forces that act upon us all” (ibid).

My research was based largely in historic Palestine, a place embroiled in a protracted, asymmetrical conflict characterized by settler colonialism, military occupation and structural apartheid. In this context, the investigation of Playback Theatre for later stages of conflict transformation (including negotiations and reconciliation) was not relevant to the immediate objectives of my study. Instead, I focused upon the use of Playback for conscientization, community mobilization, political agitation, and the fortification of psychosocial protective factors. The field of Playback Theatre does however require further research into the use of this method for all stages of conflict transformation including situations where greater parity of power between conflicting parties has been achieved.
References


Chapter 1

Playback Theatre as a Response to the Impact of Political Violence in Occupied Palestine


For over six decades, the indigenous people of historic Palestine have countered a racialized ideology that endorses egregious violations to every aspect of the Palestinian body politic. Territorial conquest, forced expulsion, restricted movement and the destruction of entire villages have displaced and alienated millions of people from their homeland and heritage (Pappé, 2007). Monolithic systems of inequity have taken shape in the form of economic embargos, seizure of environmental assets, discriminatory laws and governmental policies that structurally reinforce the power and privilege of one ethnoreligious group (Jews) against another (Christian and Muslim Arabs). On the level of culture and identity, Israel has historically attempted to eradicate Palestinian cultural resistance and collective memory through the censorship and repression of prominent artists, and through the institution of legal mechanisms that effectively criminalize commemoration of Palestinian history (Shalan, 2011). In
the West Bank today, the extended project of occupation and control is perhaps most concretely evident in the routine practice of land confiscation, home demolitions, settler violence, military incursions, political imprisonment and torture (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2012). Within this context, the long and vibrant history of popular resistance (Qumsiyeh, 2011) remains an unquestionable priority. At the same time, the psychological consequences of politically motivated violence must be attended to.

In this paper I will examine the utility of public testimony and its performance for various West Bank communities impacted by Israeli military aggression and other forms of state-sponsored violence. In particular I will explore the therapeutic mechanisms of Playback Theatre, basing my assertions on findings gathered from field observations and structured interviews, and from existing theory in the field of trauma studies and applied theatre.

Response to Adversity

It is important to note that experiences of extreme adversity can result in a variety of internal states and external behaviors. Papadopoulos (2012) proposes three categories of response:

1. Negative responses: including psychiatric disorders (e.g. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)), distressful psychological reactions and “ordinary human suffering”;
2. Neutral responses: existing positive qualities that survive the experience of adversity (otherwise know as “resilience”);
3. Positive responses: new positive qualities that were acquired as a result of the exposure to adversity – otherwise known as “Adversity Activated
In this paper, I will use the term “trauma” to encompass the broad range of responses that fall within the first category named above.

Trauma Response in Occupied Palestine

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, exposure to uncertainties associated with poverty and occupation/settler-related violence are having a profound impact on the mental health of the Palestinian refugee population within the West Bank and Gaza. Women, children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable (UNWRA, 2011).

Although stress related disorders and other mental health problems are on the rise, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), agency estimates that up to 73,000 Palestinians who suffer from mental health conditions cannot access appropriate services due to lack of funding. Sparse provision of mental health services is further compounded by the social stigma surrounding symptomatic psychological distress (American Charities for Palestine (ACP), 2012; Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 2012).

Communal story telling and interactive theatre may offer a culturally recognizable alternative, or complimentary addition, to the psychotherapeutic paradigms that currently operate in occupied Palestine. Indeed, preliminary findings based on feedback and interviews conducted for this study, suggest that Playback Theatre can contribute towards the amelioration of psychological distress incurred through exposure to occupation-related violence in the West Bank.
The Freedom Theatre

We believe that the strongest struggle today should be cultural, moral. This must be clear. We are not teaching the boys and the girls how to use arms or how to create explosives, but we expose them to the discourse of liberation, of liberty. We expose them to art, culture, music — which I believe can create better people for the future, and I hope that some of them, some of our friends in Jenin, will lead [...] and continue the resistance against the occupation through this project, through this theatre (Mer Khamis, 2011).

The Freedom Theatre is a theatre and cultural centre based in Jenin Refugee Camp. The theatre was co-founded in 2006 by the late Jewish-Palestinian theatre director and political activist, Juliano Mer Khamis; Zakaria Zubeidi - the former Jenin chief of the Al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade; and Swedish activist Jonatan Stanczak.

Utilizing culture and the arts, The Freedom Theatre provides the children, youth and young adults of Jenin with a venue through which to explore their creativity and emotions. The theatre also provides youth with opportunities to develop “skills, self-knowledge and confidence that can empower them to challenge present realities and speak out in their own society and beyond” (The Freedom Theatre, 2012).

Since its establishment, The Freedom Theatre has become an internationally recognized symbol of Palestinian cultural resistance. The theatre has toured several highly acclaimed productions through Europe and the USA and has helped to raise
awareness about the oppressive realities of life under Israeli Occupation and the Palestinian Authority.

In April 2011, Juliano Mer Khamis was assassinated in front of the theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp. To this date it remains unclear who was responsible for his murder. Following his murder, the Israeli military attacked the theatre’s premises on several occasions, arresting and imprisoning numerous employees, including The Freedom Theatre’s Artistic Director, Nabil Al-Raee. And in May 2012, the Palestinian Authority arrested Zakaria Zubedi and imprisoned him on the basis of unsubstantiated charges for over 4 months. Despite these repeated hardships, the theatre continues to function and engage in cultural resistance alongside communities throughout the West Bank.

*The Freedom Bus*

The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus utilizes Playback Theatre and “cultural activism to bear witness, raise awareness and build alliances throughout occupied Palestine and beyond” (Freedom Bus, 2012). The Freedom Bus initiative typically engages Palestinians and Internationals in multi-day events that occur in geographic sites of popular struggle against the Israeli occupation and its deleterious practices. Since its inception in December 2011, the Freedom Bus has held Playback Theatre events in towns, villages, Bedouin encampments and refugee camps throughout the West Bank, and with Gaza via Video Conference. The Freedom Bus ensemble has also traveled to Jordan and Egypt where they have held Playback events relating to various aspects of the Arab Revolutions.

In addition to Playback Theatre, Freedom Bus events also include seminars, community discussions, live music concerts, guided solidarity walks and home-stays
in host communities. More recently, the Freedom Bus has also co-organized building and protective presence activity in regions subject to home demolitions and settler violence.

At the time of writing, the Freedom Bus troupe itself consists of 3 Palestinian male actors, 4 Palestinian female actresses, 1 Palestinian-based Portuguese actress and 2 Palestinian male musicians. All the actors have a professional theatre background and have received specialized training in Playback Theatre by myself (Ben Rivers) and other trainers. In addition to training the ensemble, I also coordinate the Freedom Bus initiative.

The project itself was designed and developed in partnership with several Palestinian cultural, human rights and community-based organizations throughout the West Bank. A number of Palestinian and International artists and activists continue to play a key role in the planning and delivery of Freedom Bus activities.

The Freedom Bus troupe is uniquely positioned to work with Palestinian communities impacted by political violence. Almost all of the Freedom Bus performers have lived their entire lives under occupation, thus providing them with an intimate understanding of the psychological and sociopolitical context of the stories they encounter. As one interviewee stated:

I’m glad the actors were local Palestinian actors. That’s very important – the local element. If it was Playback Theatre with some foreigners acting it, it wouldn’t mean anything... Well, it would mean something, but it wouldn’t be as strong.

Freedom Bus events are also imbued with elements that are congruent with the cultural context. Folk songs and songs of popular struggle are used to open an event, and Arabic music and poetry are frequently used within enactments. These aesthetic
elements help to build positive rapport by framing the performance of testimony in terms that are immediately accessible to the assembled participants. (References to popular culture also help to link the personal dimension of a story to more universal themes.) The prohibition against theatre that exists in more religious communities is eased by the fact that actors do not import an exotic entertainment or educational product that might include haram (forbidden) content. Instead, the substance (i.e. stories) of a performance is sourced directly from the assembled audience. It has also been noted that Playback Theatre is congruent with the ancient Hakawati tradition of oral storytelling that originates from within Arab cultures (Abu-Hijleh, 2012).

**Playback Theatre**

Playback Theatre as a distinct form, emerged during the mid-70’s with Jonathan Fox’s vision of a grassroots theatre in which ordinary people would make theatre on the spot from the true stories of other ordinary people. This theatre would release drama’s magic from the rarefied world of proscenium stages and the finely crafted stories of fictional characters, and return it to its place as an accessible part of ordinary life (Salas, 2011, p.93).

Jo Salas and the original Playback Theatre company (based in Hudson Valley, New York State) played an instrumental role in developing the form. Today, Playback is applied in over 50 countries in a wide variety of settings, including arts festivals, refugee camps, community centres, prisons, shelters, schools and theatres.

In Playback Theatre, a facilitator, known as the “conductor”, invites members of the audience to share thoughts, feelings, stories and experiences from their own life. When an individual “teller” steps forward, they are welcomed to sit at the side of
the stage where the conductor then interviews them. During this interview, the conductor asks questions that help the teller to establish the basic elements of their story (i.e. time, place, characters, emotion, relationship, plot and significance). The teller is also invited to select actors from the ensemble who can play one or two central characters from their story. Once the teller has finished narrating their account, the actors enter the stage area and perform the story as a short piece of improvised theatre using words, sound, movement and dance to portray the central themes of the teller’s story. Musicians who sit to the side of the acting space accompany the enactment with improvised sound and music. At the conclusion of the enactment, the conductor checks in with the teller to see if the enactment resonated with their subjective experience of the events described. If the teller is satisfied, they are thanked and returned to the audience. A new teller is then welcomed to the stage. Alternatively, the conductor might ask the audience for thoughts and feelings that arose in response to the prior story. The actors will then “play back” these feelings using an abbreviated response known as a “short form”.

Playback Theatre praxis is based on the assumption that stories are told for a purpose: to remember, to transmit a message or to evoke certain responses in the audience. It is also assumed that stories are told to create order, or to make sense of ourselves, others and our environment (Papadopoulos, 2012).

Through this study, 3 key motivations emerged for why Palestinian audience members chose to share their story in Freedom Bus events:

1. To share the psychological burden of traumatic events - With the belief that understanding, acknowledgement and accompaniment will lead to the reduction of psychological suffering;
2. To provide an International audience with insight into the realities of life and struggle under occupation - With the hope that a more visceral understanding will motivate committed action in solidarity with the Palestinian cause;

3. To remind fellow Palestinians about the oppressions and sacrifices that have been borne in the struggle for freedom - With the hope that this reminder will challenge complacency and stimulate active struggle.

*Metabolizing Trauma Through Playback Theatre: Witness and Accompaniment*

In Playback Theatre, the revisitation of traumatic material occurs within the context of a witnessing and supportive presence. The person who shares their story is no longer alone with their memories and feelings of violation. Instead, the teller is literally accompanied in their return to the events they describe.

In one Playback Theatre event, Sa'ed Abu-Hijleh from Nablus shared a story about attending a street protest during the first intifada. At the time, Sa'ed was just 15 years old. During the protest, an Israeli soldier shot him 3 times at close range: one bullet in his left leg, one in his abdomen, and one in his left shoulder - just a few centimeters above the heart. In an interview several weeks after the performance, Sa’ed shared the following reflections:

> It is important that people share their stories and people share their wounds. Because when somebody is wounded, and when somebody is hurt, and somebody is oppressed, it's very, very important that their pain is recognized. And that it’s recognized in a healthy way - not recognized in an official way, but in a human way. When people listen to you and recognize your pain - this helps mitigate the pain and also contributes to the healing process.
The practice of acknowledgment and validation is central to any type of therapeutic endeavor. In Playback Theatre however, an additional process takes place. The witness/performer responds with an aesthetic, embodied and active form of empathic mirroring.

This was the first time in my life I saw somebody trying to re-act my story. It really touched me, it touched me - I almost cried. I mean my eyes started watering. I thought “Wow!” To not only listen to the person, but to try to re-act, or act in a very dramatic way what happened to the person, is something immense (Abu-Hijleh, 2012).

For the performers though, the ability to attune, empathize and respond with emotional energy and artistic creativity is not always easy or consistent. Like any human being, these capacities fluctuate in the body, mind and spirit of the performer. And yet, as we shall see later in this article, the teller who does not receive the desired response can become hurt or disappointed.

*The Mirror of Agency*

When the survivor tells their story during a Playback event, they are no longer powerless in the way they were. Ultimately they *choose* to enter the stage. They *volunteer* to tell. They cast the actors. The teller’s participation in this reconstruction of events, allows them to effectively separate past from present and thus engage with the traumatic material from a more empowered stance.

In recounting his experience of bearing witness to his own story, Sa’ed mentioned that he sympathized with the younger version of himself that he saw on stage. By activating his own internal resources of agency and compassion, Sa’ed was
thus able to challenge the sense of helplessness that typically accompanies exposure to traumatic stressors.

The experience of witnessing the dramatization of one’s life and that of others, also allows for new perspectives to be uncovered. As Manal Tamimi (2012) points out:

In Nabi Saleh we all know each other and each other’s stories. However, through Playback Theatre we learn more about the details of our experiences. In this way we discover something new about each other and this helps us to feel closer as a community. When we tell our story and see it enacted we also learn something new about ourselves. We see our self from the outside and this gives us a new way to view our experience.

The ability to provoke discovery of “something new in the familiar” is a central objective of all art. In the context of a therapeutic endeavor however, this shifting of perspective can play a defining role in the path to health. By destabilizing oppressive patterns of memory and perception, the survivor is enabled to attribute new, more life-affirming meanings to their story.

Dialogue Between Stories

Playback Theatre promotes both personal affirmation and social cohesion (Fox, 1999; Hoesch, 1999; Garavelli, 2001; Rowe, 2007). This dual action offers a powerful response to the alienation and disconnection that many trauma survivors experience. During a performance, one story will often beckon and prompt another in an unconscious pattern of dialogue referred to as the “red thread6” (Hoesch, 1999; Fox,

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6 The “red thread” is a metaphor borrowed from the German language, referring to a weaving process, where a red thread allows the weaver to keep track of the pattern s/he is creating.
This dialogue, rooted in the language of image, rhythm, sound and emotion, invites the audience to suspend regular modes of cognition and enter into a state where diverse storylines can be accommodated within a larger, unfolding framework of understanding.

Indeed, when the audience responds to one story with a similar or related story, the recognition of shared experience can result not only in new, or renewed knowledge about the larger matrix of control, but also in heightened awareness about the popular mechanisms for it subversion. This phenomenon took on special significance when members of a multi-day Freedom Bus event traveled together between different geopolitical sites. Sani Al-Araj, a young man from Al Walajah, had this to say:

I loved Nabi Saleh because it is the same: The demonstrations, the prisoners ... everything the same [...] Everywhere we go we see the same. It felt good to see that we are all fighting for our freedom. It was good to see that people are not afraid. That people are fighting! We aren’t just sitting down and accepting what is happening.

For Sani and possibly others, the motifs that appear and communicate between stories (and places) contain a common theme of unity and affirmation. The collectively summoned narrative thus becomes a tool for “cultural and spiritual resistance; conscientization and empowerment” (Chung, 2012).

Trauma, art and neurobiology

A growing body of evidence indicates that the human brain contains two types of memory system - one that is characterized by verbal processes and another that is
mainly non-verbal (Van der Kolk, 1996). In normal conditions, these two types of memory function in an integrated way. However, contemporary neuroscience suggests that when we are overwhelmed by fear and stress, the language centers of the brain cease to operate in an effective way (Bloom, 1999). Instead, “memories of traumatic exposure are stored in the brain’s right hemisphere, an area identified as preverbal or nonverbal” (Harris, 2009, p. 94). In this mode, the mind shifts to a form of recognition that is characterized by images, sounds, smells, physical sensations, and strong emotions. This method of processing information may protect the psychological integrity of an organism under conditions of severe stress. However, when these deeply engraved nonverbal memories cannot be articulated, they will often surface at a later date as images, sensations or even as a spontaneous reliving of the traumatic incident. In order for integration to occur, the survivor must find some way to place their experience within a narrative that can be recognized and shared with others (Bloom, 1999; Harris, 2009). As Papadopoulos (2012) notes, people who can develop a coherent story about their past trauma display less symptomatic distress than people who possess a less coherent story, regardless of how acute the traumatic stressor was. In other words, “lack of ‘coherence’ is a stronger indicator of ‘pathology’ than the severity of trauma” (p.12).

In Playback Theatre, when the teller narrates a story and witnesses its subsequent enactment, their trauma is revisited and re-examined. The aesthetic dimension of the event can stimulate a “right brain” mode of consciousness that enables access to the non-verbal and kinesthetic dimensions of traumatic memory – the physical sensations and memory fragments that remain unprocessed and that cannot be expressed through words alone. Indeed, tellers often report that during an enactment they are able to spontaneously recover memories that were long forgotten.
By bringing these split-off experiences into awareness, the teller is more readily able to acknowledge and metabolize them.

As Cohen, Varea and Walker (2011) suggest, performance in zones of conflict, offers a space where experiences that are difficult to face or comprehend “are condensed, given dimension, and framed so that they can be recognized and re-viewed” (p.162). Inside the “nucleus” of the performance, these elements are transformed and subsequently brought back into the everyday consciousness and actions of those who participate in and witness the event.

**Nabi Saleh**

Nabi Saleh is a village under siege - a community whose 500 residents are facing a protracted campaign of organized violence, intimidation and harassment. Since 15 December 2009, weekly protests have taken place against settler confiscation of a water spring and other land belonging to residents of Nabi Saleh. During these weekly protests in Nabi Saleh (and other West Bank sites of popular struggle), the Israeli military attempts to deter unarmed demonstrators through the use of tear-gas projectiles, stun grenades, pepper spray, rubber-coated metal bullets and at times, live ammunition (B'tselem, 2011). During Friday demonstrations in Nabi Saleh, the army is also known to declare the entire village as a closed military zone. This “allows” the army to enter and occupy the village where they frequently damage property and shoot tear-gas, as well as a foul-smelling liquid called “The Skunk” directly at residential buildings and water tanks (Popular Struggle Coordination Committee, 2011). In addition, Nabi Saleh experiences frequent night raids and arrest operations by the Israeli military. During these raids, men, women and especially minors, are
abducted, detained, and forced to endure inhumane treatment (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2011; Popular Struggle Coordination Committee, 2011).

The Freedom Bus troupe have visited and performed in Nabi Saleh many times since early 2012. On one late summer afternoon, fifty residents of the village gathered in the central square, under the branches of a giant Mulberry tree to share their stories. A young man, Karim, came forward to speak. He told us how one day, the Israeli police entered the village and arrested him for the alleged crime of throwing stones. After taking and handcuffing Karim, they transported him to Halamish Detention Centre where they interrogated him with a gun pointed to his head.

Unfortunately, Karim’s account is not atypical. In the past 11 years alone, around 7,500 children, some as young as 12 years, are estimated to have been detained, interrogated, and imprisoned under Israeli military law. This averages out at between “500-700 children per year, or nearly two children, each and every day.” (Defence for Children International (DCI), 2012, p.7). In January 2012, DCI submitted a report to the UN Rapporteur on Torture with findings that a majority of Palestinian children detained in the West Bank are seized in the middle of the night in what are often described as terrifying raids conducted by the army:

Most children have their hands painfully tied behind their backs and are blindfolded, before being taken away to an unknown location for interrogation. The arrest and transfer process is often accompanied by verbal abuse and humiliation, threats as well as physical violence. Hours later the children find themselves in an interrogation room, alone, sleep deprived, bruised and scared (DCI, 2012, p.7).

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7 The DCI report was based on four years of research during which time sworn testimonies were collected from 311 children held in Israeli military detention (DCI, 2012).
During another Playback event in Nabi Saleh, Hamuda Tamimi, a 12-year-old boy, narrated his account of being deliberately targeted and shot by an Israeli soldier during a demonstration. Hamuda survived but was hospitalized for two weeks due to internal bleeding. Again, his story is not unusual. In the first five months of 2012, Israeli forces injured a total of 1,204 Palestinians during West Bank demonstrations. 37 were children (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, (OCHA) 2012).

In a subsequent interview for this study, Hamuda shared the following:

I chose to tell this story because it was at the front of my mind. The pain of the event was stuck inside of me. I wanted the audience and actors to feel my pain, to join in my experience, to stand in my shoes. I hoped this would make me feel less alone [...] I hoped this sense of being joined would give me power to continue to face the occupation.

But after telling his story, Hamuda reported that he saw “no reaction from the audience”. This lack of response may have been partly due to the fact that all assembled were family members who had heard his story before. Nonetheless, for Hamuda Tamimi, this was a disappointing experience.

After hearing Hamuda’s feedback, I was reminded of a Playback Theatre performance I attended in Berkeley, California, where members of the local Tamil and Sinhalese community recounted stories from the Sri Lankan civil war. During the event, one Tamil man came forward and told a horrific story about surviving a massacre during the outbreak of fighting in 1983. The actors performed his account with creativity, skill and sincerity. However, at the conclusion of their enactment, the audience remained silent and still. Sensing the teller’s need, the conductor invited
people to share their feelings in response to the story they had heard. One audience member spoke about the deep sadness she felt when hearing about these events. Another person shared his wish to reach out and comfort the teller. The performers played back each of these responses, and the man who shared his account was able to know that his story had not disappeared into a void, but that it had actually landed and moved those who were present.

Ritual and Divergent Narrative

In a Playback event, audience members participate in a ritual defined by pattern, time, tempo, containment and emotional safety (Salas, 2011). Through this ritual, participants transition from their everyday reality into a liminal space - an "elastic social atmosphere" where the usual customs and conventions of society no longer apply (Davidheiser, 2006). Sensory awareness becomes heightened, and complex information is distilled into deeply resonant images, sounds, and physical sensations. As Schirch (2001) notes, ritual holds together “ambiguities, complexities, and paradoxes in a way rational, logical thought cannot” (cited in Hutt and Hosking, 2004, p. 9). Space for complexity and paradox is especially essential in regions of oppression and violence where the overwhelming need for a cohesive, large-group identity can result in the exclusion of divergent narratives. For example, In Nabi Saleh, a story was told about Mustafa Tamimi, a 28-year-old man who died from injuries sustained after an Israeli soldier shot him at short range with a tear gas canister (Mondoweiss, 2011). Like most Palestinians who lose their life due to Israeli military violence, Mustafa’s death was proclaimed as an act of Martyrdom. This “canonization” of the resistance fighter/target/victim is an understandable imperative in the context of a struggle that has lasted over 60 years and which has no
immediately foreseeable end. However, the story narrated at the Playback event was told by Bahaa Tamimi, Mustafa’s cousin, and helped to reveal alternative perspectives surrounding Mustafa’s life and tragic death. In the story that was told, we heard about Mustafa as a “cousin, brother and friend” who was “always dreaming about a free country.” We heard about him getting ready on the day of his death, putting on his best clothes prior to joining the weekly demonstration. The teller stated that Mustafa’s death was not only “a loss for Palestine. We also lost someone we really cared about.” As Bahaa spoke these words, he began to silently weep. The audience who sat gathered under the tree joined him in this expression of shared sorrow.

After the event, Ahmad Al-Nimer, Palestinian activist and photographer who regularly visits Nabi Saleh made the following observation:

This event helped me to see things with another perspective. At most events – where we remember the death of a Martyr - we experience anger, or we turn the person into a hero. Alternatively, we watch from a distance [...] And then we try to forget. But seeing these enactments helps us to connect with other feelings – like sadness. People made Mustafa into a hero – but they didn’t hear his family.

Manal Tamimi shared a similar reflection:

When Bahaa told the story about Mustafa Tamimi, he reminded us that Mustafa died fighting for our freedom. But his story also gave us an opportunity to mourn. Everyone in the audience cried. Sometimes it is important to release the pressure otherwise we would burst.

Another person from Nabi Saleh noted that, “It is important to tell these painful stories, to release the pressure and to refresh ourselves.” Indeed, the
opportunity to express vulnerability, grief and other emotions can bring immense relief. The expression of withheld emotion also becomes a creative moment where the participant regains power and spontaneity, and is freed to view and respond to their situation with clarity and renewed energy.

As Boal (1979) suggests however, theatre that holds catharsis as its goal, may in fact sustain the status quo. For if critical consciousness and the desire for action have not been evoked, the audience member, having experienced catharsis, may return to their society as an unchanged and compliant subject. On the other hand, it is clear from this study, that the Palestinian audience is already highly politicized, and understands well the utility of art and media for conscientization. Indeed many tellers choose to share their story as a way to raise awareness about the realities of life under occupation – or as a way to awaken fellow compatriots to the path of struggle. At the same time, audience members have expressed their appreciation for an aesthetic space that welcomes diverse emotions and complex narratives - an opportunity so often denied in the prevailing quest for order, sense and survival.

Jenin

Between October and December 2011, a higher than usual rate of Israeli military raids took place in Jenin. During this period, over 30 people were arrested and detained, including 8 members of The Freedom Theatre. These staff members were arrested under the pretext of an investigation into the April 2011 murder of Juliano Mer Khamis. However, the nature of interrogations, which included mistreatment and torture, have led many to believe that the army is engaged in a deliberate campaign of harassment and intimidation towards the theatre and its staff. Military attacks on
theatre property and subsequent arrests – despite the willingness of staff to participate in a legal investigation, have fueled these conclusions.

To raise local, regional and international awareness about these incursions and arrests, two performances for ex-detainees/prisoners and their families were convened in Jenin Refugee Camp.

It is usually taboo for Palestinian men to speak openly about personal experiences of torture and mistreatment in prison. It is harder still to reveal associated feelings of shame, vulnerability or fear. To do so challenges cultural notions of masculinity. During one performance however, Loai who had been imprisoned for 3 years due to his affiliation with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) shared the following testimony:

Psychological torture was the worst aspect of those 3 years in jail. One time they put me in solitary confinement for 10 days. While I was there, they tricked me into thinking my mother and sister had been killed, that my father had been seriously injured and that our home had been demolished. They showed me fabricated images of the funeral – photographs of coffins draped with the Palestinian flag. I remember going completely numb. I could not feel anything. This was their way of trying to break my spirit.

Reflecting on his experience as a teller, Loai shared the following:

It was difficult to share my experience because it is a painful one. I wondered how people would react. Perhaps they would not believe me. They might think that I had exaggerated certain parts of my story. It was also difficult to tell, because when we choose to recall a painful story we are somehow returned to that experience [...] The prison experience influenced everything in my life. My
character is formed from this experience. It is a big part of my memory and it’s hard to forget. I wanted people to hear my story though. I hoped that telling my story would lift some of its weight.

Two male actors, Ahmed Roch and Faisal Abu Alheja, performed Loai’s story. Using poetic language, movement, song and metaphor, they succeeded in crafting a highly charged response to his account.

I was very happy with the enactment. In watching it I saw and remembered many details of my story that I had not mentioned. After telling my story, I also felt a sense of distance between the prison experience and myself. This was something new that I had not felt before [...] After the performance many people came up to me, wanting to connect.

Loai’s account was an affront to the implicit social contract requiring the survivor of torture to remain silent. However, his decision to speak openly led to a personal shift of awareness that also held resonance for those gathered.

_At-Tuwani_

The South Hebron Hills are located in “Area C”, an administrative division established under the Oslo Accords, which places 61% of the West Bank under complete Israeli civil and military control. Since the 1970’s, firing zones, closed military areas and illegal Israeli settlements, have threatened the existence of agricultural communities that have existed there for hundreds of years. Many of these communities lack paved roads, electricity, telephone lines, running-water, or a sewage system. Infrastructure built to meet these needs is usually destroyed under orders issued by the Israeli Civil Administration. In addition, Palestinian residents frequently encounter violent
harassment from settlers, military/police impunity, home demolitions and restricted access to farming land.

The Freedom Bus troupe has visited the South Hebron Hills on several occasions. During one Playback event in the village of At-Tuwani, an old woman came forward as the opening teller. Known as “Uhm-Hafeth” (Mother of Hafeth) she was, like most people in the village, a shepherd. Uhm-Hafeth shared with the audience a story that began in the nearby hills:

One day a settler came onto our land and tried to steal the sheep. I was not afraid though and I pushed him away. Seeing what was happening, more settlers came. When they reached us, they took my stick and beat me with it. They also threw rocks at me. Somehow I managed to escape and make my way back to the village. When I arrived, some villagers and internationals encouraged me to go to the local Israeli police station to complain. I spent 5 hrs there lodging a complaint, but in the end nothing came of it.

On the face of it, this is a story about purposeful humiliation and degradation. However, in her countenance and version of events, Uhm-Hafeth asserts herself not as a victim, but as a “fighter”. In her account, she did not succumb easily to the settlers. Nor did she express fear in the presence of their brutality. In fact, despite her age and limited agility, Uhm-Hafeth used what strength she had to defend herself and her flock. Ultimately, she was able to protect herself by returning to her village and community.

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8 Operation Dove, Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPP) and other human rights organizations provide regular monitoring and accompaniment programs to At-tuwani and other West Bank communities impacted by settler violence and military aggression.
Uhm-Hafeth recounts a story in which her body, land and property are violated. Her spirit though, remains fiery and unscathed. This motif of resilience and *sumud* (steadfastness) is one that appears in virtually all aspects of Palestinian culture and identity, reminding us that experiences of extreme adversity do not necessarily result in trauma.

*Choice in Listening and Enactment*

An effective response to stories of trauma and oppression requires certain aesthetic, emotional and ethical sensibilities on the part of the artist - a “moral imagination” (Lederach, 2005) that enables the actor to be “in touch with, and grounded in, the limitations and suffering of the real world, and simultaneously to imagine and work toward a more just and more life enhancing imagined order” (Cohen, Varea and Walker, 2011, p. 162). This does not mean that the artist imposes a foreign remedy. Rather, the artist must learn to listen for the “double-storied” (Denborough, 2008) dimensions of an account - to recognize and reflect not only the oppressive and traumatic incident, but also the varied ways in which the protagonist responded: how they tried to protect themselves; how they helped others; what skills and values they drew upon; what resources were mobilized, etc. Through this process, the legacy of resilience is inscribed in narrative form and the audience comes closer to their own source of healing, strength and empowerment. At the same time, the Playback performer must avoid formulaic interpretations of survivor stories. By narrowly focusing on certain “therapeutic” or “empowering” aspects of an account, the actor might fail to perceive and enact other important dimensions of the story, including the teller’s own ascriptions of meaning.
Relationship Building

Extensive outreach and preparatory work usually takes place prior to any Freedom Bus intervention. This includes background research, community visits, consultative meetings and substantial planning efforts. In many cases, an initial event develops into an ongoing partnership between the community and the Freedom Bus. Such partnerships often lead to tailored projects that meet particular community needs. For example, in the village of Faquaa, the Freedom Bus has engaged in a long-term water justice advocacy initiative that has included drama, storytelling and photography workshops, a Video Conference event with Gaza, Playback Theatre performances and organized community visits from Palestinians and Internationals.

By establishing trust through continuity, follow-up and the respectful honoring of personal stories, community members develop confidence in the troupe’s intentions.

People are very suspicious. They wonder who these people are. “Why do they come here?” “Will they just come for a few months and then leave?” It takes time to build a relationship. You need to visit many times so that people can get to know you [...] You’ve lived with us and seen what situation we live under. This helped the people to trust you (Tamimi, 2012).

Do No Harm

If you had actors who did not capture the essence of that wound, it would have been an insult [...] If the wound is not recognized, it’s as if they are wounding you again. (Abu-Hijleh, 2012)
The crucible of the stage holds the promise for healing and for harm. When trauma stories are shared and enacted, the performers must take care to ensure that the experience is constructive rather than re-traumatizing for the teller and audience. As Jo Salas (2011, p.119) states

Stories that are evidently or potentially traumatic for the teller should not be enacted literally. The teller needs to “see” his or her story, but in a way that maintains a safe distance from it. Horrific events like a bombing or a rape can be depicted with minimal gestures, narration, or suggested offstage. The conductor might instruct the actors to use a short form rather than enact a story more fully.

In Freedom Bus rehearsals, we have developed a repertoire of stylized, dramatic actions to represent acts of violence. For example, in scenes of beatings or torture, the actors rarely make physical contact. Instead they position themselves on different points of the stage, and play out to the audience using a version of the double image convention e.g. The prison guard on stage left strikes out in the direction of the audience. The prisoner on stage right (also facing the audience) reacts a split second later. This non-literal framing of the event allows for a balance of emotional connection and critical distance. At other times, slow motion or metaphor can be employed for the same purpose.

In some cases, the actors’ own reluctance to touch traumatic material can result in an enactment that is not complete or satisfying for the teller. For example, after the enactment of Karim’s story in Nabi Saleh, he commented that the actor’s had failed to show the moment where the interrogator had pointed a gun to his head.
After this performance (which included other stories of military violence) many of the performers spoke about their feeling of emotional exhaustion. Weeks later, one of our actors described having repeated nightmares about the stories he had heard.

As these experiences have taught us, it is not only the audience that must be attended to. In the case of the Freedom Bus troupe, many of our performers share a background that is similar to that of the communities they serve. Although this commonality can help to generate rapport, there are also times where the performers can become overwhelmed by the content of stories, or situational factors that reverberate strongly with their own history of trauma. For example, in April 2012, we held a performance for Syrian refugees in Tahrir Square, Cairo. At that time, the mood in the square was unpredictable and tensions were high. Faced by this atmosphere, and an audience that she did not know, one of our actors experienced a panic attack that left her shaken for a considerable amount of time afterwards. Later, she explained that the situation had triggered her memory of Juliano’s murder. His assassination had taken place during the same month, just one year earlier...

At other times, the actors have developed resistance to hearing multiple stories of turmoil, adversity, violence and oppression. We are thus learning the special importance of actor care through adequate preparation, warm-up, cool-down and debriefing. We are also learning how to balance the intensity of our work with times of playfulness, rest and sociability.

**Preparation**

In order to prepare performers for this work, it is crucial that the actors tell and enact their own stories (Salas, 2012). Through this process, the actors gain the opportunity to address their own trauma histories and develop greater awareness about related
personal material that might surface during a performance. The actors also learn to embody a role without becoming lost in it – an ability that is especially important in cases where the story contains material that resonates strongly with content from the actor’s own life (Fox, 2008).

The Freedom Bus troupe also receives basic education in neurobiological, psychological and socio-political theories of trauma and trauma response. In addition, our own observations and group discussions, together with feedback gained from tellers and audience members, helps us to better understand the psychological, social and political dimensions of the work we do.

Warm-up and De-briefing
In warm-ups prior to performance, the actors gain an opportunity to share and enact any thoughts or feelings that might block their energy or presence during the event. Meditation, yoga, massage and actor movement and voice exercises are also used as ways to release tension, focus, ground and connect.

In the first meeting that follows a performance, the performers gain an opportunity to debrief and reflect on their overall experience of the event. They also discuss what went well and what could be improved in terms of artistry, ensemble work and other aspects of the performance.

Artists at Risk
Historically, artists have been a prime target of oppressive governments and military regimes. The renowned writer, Ghassan Kanafani, and the political cartoonist Naji al-Ali, are examples of Palestinian artists who were allegedly assassinated for the political nature of their art.
As mentioned above, The Freedom Theatre has also been an object of military/police brutality. The theatre premises have been attacked and staff have been harassed, imprisoned and tortured on multiple occasions. In December 2011, Faisal Abu Alheja, an actor from the Freedom Bus troupe, was arrested, detained and interrogated following a Playback performance about military raids in Jenin Refugee Camp. On another occasion, the Freedom Bus troupe held an outdoor performance in the village of Al Walajah. The Israeli army sealed off the village and a unit of heavily armed soldiers was stationed to monitor the event (Rivers, 2012). Although no attacks or arrests were made on this day, the military presence generated a mood of fear and apprehension amongst some troupe members.

In fact, in regions of endemic political violence, theatre activists and other artists at risk, must build an adequate system of emergency response. Alliances with local and international theatre associations, human rights organizations, activist groups, journalists and media outlets are vital. The ability to organize local and international campaigns is also necessary. For example, when Nabil Al-Raee, Artistic Director of The Freedom Theatre, was arrested (for no valid reason) and imprisoned by Israeli authorities, The Freedom Theatre and affiliate groups worldwide were able to mobilize a huge campaign for his release. 50 Members of the European Parliament issued a letter calling for the EU to intervene on Nabil’s behalf, and in the USA, nearly 200 artists, writers and intellectuals, including Maya Angelou, Noam Chomsky, Tony Kushner, Danny Glover, Jonathan Fox, Judith Butler, Eve Ensler and Ken Loach also issued a letter calling for Nabil’s release (Khalidi and Marlowe, 2012). On July 12th 2012, after 5 weeks of imprisonment, Nabil was finally released.

Truth and Justice

Most of our partnering communities express the hope that the Freedom Bus might
enable their story to be heard and transmitted to an international audience. Indeed, advocacy and consciousness-raising are primary objectives of the Freedom Bus initiative. We therefore work with photographers, filmmakers, journalists and others who can help to broadcast the stories that are shared during Playback events. The Freedom Bus also uses its own social media platforms to share photographs, film footage and testimonies that are gathered during performances.

One might wonder though, how the highly public nature of most Freedom Bus events can align with more conventional notions of trauma response, where therapy occurs in closed, private and confidential settings. Where trauma has been incurred through political violence though, it is not necessarily privacy that oppressed communities require in order for psychological suffering to be ameliorated. In fact, the assertion of truth and the experience of having one’s story transmitted and received, can become a remedial counterpoint to the ignorance, amnesia and misrepresentation of the broader national and/or international community.

Others need to know the truth [...] You’re telling a wider audience that unjust situations do not happen to nameless people. They actually happen to human beings with names and lives and emotions and people with flesh and blood. They’re not just a number, or a story in a newscast or on a website [...] So I think Playback Theatre is a very, very interesting platform, or interesting medium to project past events onto an audience that has not lived these events, but in a very - I don’t want to say artistic, because you know it is artistic, it is art but it’s art that is close to the heart [...] It’s more direct you know [...] The audience that comes [...] can see the reality of the situation before, and of course, this will contribute towards understanding the injustice [...] and this is also contributing to lifting the injustice. How can you end injustice if you don’t
understand what injustice does? Or how can you end injustice if you don’t feel what injustice does? (Abu-Hijleh, 2012.)

In this statement, Sa’ed Abu-Hijleh presents art and testimony as vehicles through which the oppressed can assert their own humanity in the face of violent and subjugating forces. His statement also urges the witness to consider their own moral responsibility when confronted by injustice.

Later in the interview, Sa’ed quoted a friend, “all the injured person wants is a realized dream ... a dream come true. Cause if the dream is realized then all the wounds become justified. A sacrifice for something.” In other words, recognition and attendance to the wound is vital. But the passage to wholeness cannot be completed until the violent and oppressive order itself has been dismantled and transformed.

Conclusion

Within the dramatic space and communal dimension of the Playback event, audience members are able to name, revisit and attend to stories of suffering, loss and oppression. In societies that are impacted by political violence, it might well be that communal and aesthetic acts of meaning-making such as this, offer a powerful and appropriate addition to conventional modes of trauma response.

To state the obvious though, traumatized communities in Palestine cannot be healed through psychosocial initiatives and therapeutic activity. As recognized by virtually all trauma specialists (See for example: Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 1996; Levine, 1997; Hudgins, 2000), a fundamental pre-condition for effective recovery, includes the establishment of an environment that is relatively safe and free from the perpetrating influence – a requirement that is far from current reality in Palestine.
In addition to the cessation of organized violence, the experience of justice is also crucial to the healing journey. When “justice needs” are met, the oppressed population can finally sever the psychological stranglehold of shame and helplessness, and move more readily towards feelings of personal power and collective dignity (Yoder, 2005). One might say then, that until the bare demands for freedom, justice and equality have been met, the therapeutic endeavor will always be partial and incomplete. Nonetheless, in these times of hardship, struggle and uncertainty, it should be remembered that the transmutation of daily life into art, is essential for survival. Through art, ritual and communal storytelling we shape meaning out of unfathomable suffering and loss; we resist alienation through acts of empathy, love and solidarity; we replenish our spirit through expressions of anger, sorrow, joy and humor; we remember our roots so that future generations can stand firm in their identity; and we restore our imaginations so that hope and creativity will prevail.

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The Freedom Bus and Playback Theatre: Beyond Neo-colonial Approaches to Trauma Response in Occupied Palestine.


I woke up one morning – 2 months after arriving in Jenin Refugee Camp - to learn that several of my colleagues from The Freedom Theatre had been arrested and detained by the Israeli army. It was 20th December 2011. Juliano Mer Khamis, co-founder and Artistic Director of The Freedom Theatre, had been murdered 9 months earlier by an as-yet-unidentified gunman. In a so-called attempt to locate the assassin, the Israeli army was conducting a “murder investigation” involving regular night-time incursions, unsubstantiated arrests and systematic ill-treatment of
detainees. Typically, those arrested would spend a night in the nearby military jail – having first been severely beaten and forcefully interrogated. The detainee would then be released the following day without charge. In particular, the army was targeting Palestinian workers from The Freedom Theatre – a cultural venue in Jenin Refugee Camp that seeks “to join the Palestinian people in their struggle for liberation” using “poetry, music, theatre [and] cameras” (The Freedom Theatre, 2010).

I myself had arrived at The Freedom Theatre in September that year in order to teach Playback Theatre and Psychodrama. Prior to arriving in Palestine I had attempted to educate myself by watching various films and documentaries, and by reading articles, reports, books and other literature about “the conflict”. As a psychotherapist, and knowing that I would be working alongside Palestinian mental health workers, I also did my best to learn about the psychosocial impact of political violence upon various sections of the population.

Despite these efforts, I remember feeling rather unready in my personal response to the detainment of my recently acquired colleagues and acquaintances. Or perhaps, it might be more accurate to say that I felt “disoriented” by the dissonance between my personal assumptions and impulses, and those that seemed to prevail around me. For example, after learning about the arrests, I felt a progressive sense of shock, indignation and a subsequent urge to immediately “do something”. On the other hand, many of my Palestinian peers seemed rather cool and were somewhat bemused by my reaction to the recent unfolding of events. Although I do not wish to normalize responses that might appear adaptive, some context to their response is necessary.
For Palestinians, arrest and imprisonment is nothing new. Since 1967 more than 750,000 Palestinians have been politically imprisoned at some point in their life (White, 2009). And whilst Israel may claim that such procedures are necessary for security reasons, Palestinians are well aware that political imprisonment and administrative detention have long been practiced as favoured strategies for the suppression of all forms of popular struggle including unarmed civil resistance (Qumsiyeh, 2011). Various Israeli and international human rights groups concur. B’tselem (2013, para: 3) for example, states that “Israel administratively detains Palestinians for their political opinions and non-violent political activity” and during the second intifada, Amnesty International (2002) expressed their concern “that the aim of the large-scale arrests may have been to collectively punish and to degrade and humiliate Palestinians not involved in armed opposition.” [Italics added.]

Although my awareness of this historical and political context was beginning to grow, my ability to comprehend the lived experience of my colleagues was vastly limited - mediated as it was (and is) by my own social and cultural background as a white man raised in middleclass Australia. Nonetheless, possessed by a particular zeal, I suggested that we stage a “cultural action” in response to the military incursions and associated arrests. In particular, I proposed that we hold a Playback Theatre event in the streets of Jenin Refugee Camp. We would invite anyone who had been detained and released to come forward and share their story. Actors from The Freedom Theatre would listen and subsequently perform an improvised enactment of each account to the assembled audience. It was hoped that the event would attract media coverage of the incursions, whilst simultaneously providing camp residents and theatre staff with an opportunity to process the experience of having been detained and tortured.
The assumptions driving certain aspects of my proposal included a belief that experiences of torture and other forms of political violence would automatically produce trauma. I was also motivated by the notion that public disclosure of traumatic testimony – paired with an empathic response provided by trained actors, could result in psychological relief.

As I will explore in this paper, my conceptualization was informed largely by views of “trauma recovery” that originated within Western biomedical models of psychological diagnosis and intervention. The first part of the paper will examine the relevance of such perspectives within the Palestinian context, and more specifically within the field of Playback Theatre as a form of trauma response. The second part of the paper will present the Freedom Bus initiative as an alternative, community-based model of psychosocial intervention. I will base this exploration on participant observation, as well as thematic content analysis of 16 in-depth interviews conducted with Palestinian participants of Playback Theatre events held within the West Bank of Occupied Palestine.

PLAYBACK AND POPULAR TRUTH
Playback Theatre was originated by Jonathan Fox, Jo Salas and the original company in the mid-1970’s. It has since become a major form of community-based theatre, practiced in a wide range of contexts in over 60 countries. During a typical Playback Theatre event, a member of the audience is invited to share a true story from their own life. A troupe of actors and musicians listen, and subsequently turn this account into a piece of improvised theatre. An event usually lasts 90 minutes, during which time 3 or 4 stories are typically shared and enacted. Shorter enactments based on the
feelings and responses of individual audience members are also performed before or between full-length stories.

Within the Playback tradition, value is placed upon the spontaneous surfacing of stories. “Tellers” should never be pre-selected. Instead, audience members are invited to come forth with stories that arise during the event itself (Salas, 1993; Fox, 1994). It is believed that this process allows for an implicit form of communication to occur between one story and another. In other words, it is held that the themes of one account will inevitably elicit and “dialogue” with themes that occur in subsequent accounts. It is proposed that this phenomenon, referred to as the “red thread” (Hoesch, 1999) can stimulate a collective, yet multifaceted exploration of certain issues. As Fox suggests, even though each teller tells “her own personal tale”, Playback theatre “offers a kind of community conversation through stories, and this conversation, even though it contains not one, but many themes, and is often indirect in making its points, gives scope for the expression of a popular truth” (Fox, 1999, p.4).

The red thread concept takes as its starting point the assumption that diverse viewpoints can be shared within a communal context. However, in politically repressive environments, or in socially and religiously conservative communities, the extent to which people can express divergent narratives may be limited. In some settings, certain sections of the community might even be forbidden from participating as tellers. This is certainly the case for example, in some conservative West Bank communities that prohibit mixed-gender events.

Nonetheless, as will be discussed later, certain conditions can enable the emergence of stories that offer alternatives to prevailing norms and ideologies. Indeed generally speaking, I believe that Playback Theatre can offer a useful
epistemological framework through which to elicit varied, “non-hegemonic narratives” pertaining to the way individuals and communities are impacted by, respond to, and make sense of political violence.

For participants, Playback Theatre also offers an ontological experience. The context within which a testimony is shared and performed, bears great influence over the choices people make when shaping and delivering their narratives. In Palestine for example, community members speaking to an audience consisting of international journalists and governmental officials, will often present their testimony in terms that emphasize Israel’s human rights violations and various structural inequities. On the other hand, if the audience contains a majority of Palestinians, tellers will tend to share stories that promote concepts of national pride, steadfastness and resistance. These “ways of being and participating” within the public sphere, may in turn shape and reinforce certain definitions of self and identity.

TRAUMA DISCOURSE

As applied theatre practitioners it is our ethical responsibility to critically examine the discourse we subscribe to in the broader conceptualization of our relationship to partnering communities and the society as a whole. For example, as a Non-Government Organization engaged in “trauma response programming” (amongst other things), I might question whether we - The Freedom Theatre - contribute to a narrative that presents the Palestinian predicament as a “humanitarian crisis” – a discourse that often favours political neutrality - thus displacing indigenous representations of occupation, colonization, apartheid and associated liberatory struggle. Indeed, as an organization dependent upon international aid, we frequently

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In contrast to the epistemic “which is concerned with seeing, studying, and observing, the ontic is concerned with being and participating.” (Thompson, 2004, p.11).
find ourselves navigating a terrain of donor-requirements that include the prohibition of language and actions deemed “too political”. Where Palestinian perspectives link the promotion of wellbeing to one’s active engagement in resistance and other forms of political involvement (Veronese, Castiglioni, Barola, and Said, 2012), it becomes inevitable that discrepancy will occur between this view and imposed, external agendas that negate the structural and political roots of psychosocial distress.

Western humanitarian aid programs also tend to favour a trauma paradigm that emphasizes illness, dysfunction and diagnostic categories such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Wessells, 2008). This is problematic, for as Wessells (2008, p.1) proposes, the traditional trauma approach “decontextualizes human suffering by reducing it to individual terms, when many ... sources of suffering are collective and are grounded in a socio-historic context of human rights violations ... structural violence and systems of state oppression.” Conventional diagnostic labels also bear little relevance in the Palestinian context where “conflict is protracted, making it questionable to refer to psychosocial afflictions as acute reactions or pathologies, or to talk of a ‘post-traumatic’ environment” (Wessells, 2008, p.7). Indeed, trauma approaches typically adopt a “disease model” that focuses excessively on deficits or psychological problems (Veronese, et al, 2011) with the consequence of ignoring the strengths and assets of affected people. The trauma lens also tends to suggest that all experiences of adversity automatically result in traumatic sequelae. This mindset ignores the fact that experiences of political violence and other forms of adversity can result in a variety of responses. For example, some people are able to emerge unscathed and intact after experiencing adversity. For others, the experience of adversity might lead to the development of new, positive qualities – a phenomenon that Papadopoulos (2012) refers to as “adversity-activated development”. Without a
nuanced understanding about the various responses to adversity, we run the risk of making blanket assessments that declare all “at-risk” populations as traumatized. In addition to broadening our framework of diagnosis and analysis, we must also learn to identify pre-existing protective factors that promote resilience and adversity-activated development within the populations that we work with. 

In summary, as Playback Theatre practitioners, we must question how our “reading” and subsequent response to a teller’s story is shaped by inherited discourses of trauma. To relate to someone as wounded, vulnerable and distressed (when they are not), may in fact lead to iatrogenesis – an effect that occurs when our attempts to “heal” inadvertently cause harm.

IDEOLOGY AND COHERENCE

In the Playback event referred to at the beginning of this paper, several young men came forward to narrate stories about the escalation of military raids in Jenin Refugee Camp. I was struck by the audacity of their accounts. They often spoke with humor and seemed to present their experience in heroic terms, such as the tale of one man that included a dramatic chase scene in which he averted his arrest by escaping through the narrow alleyways of the camp. Another man seemed quite proud as he revealed the bruises he had received after being beaten for insulting one of the soldiers.

I had come prepared to hear testimonies of trauma. However, when the stories told did not contain an “adequate” degree of painful affect, I wondered if we – the event organizers – and the troupe, had somehow failed to create a safe-enough environment for the disclosure of “authentic” emotion. Influenced as I was by Western psychotherapeutic theory, I therefore interpreted the tellers’ presentation as
inhibited by psychological defences that must surely conceal a significant degree of unexpressed suffering. In my hunt for an “appropriate” (i.e. traumatic) response to adversity, I failed to see that experiences of confrontation with the Israeli army are often perceived as an opportunity to demonstrate one’s active engagement in civil resistance. Indeed, such “performances of agency” might in fact contribute to the resilience of a community and thus insulate it from potential traumatization. As Harris (2009, p.3) points out, “In contexts of organized violence and war ... [the] ability to assume a degree of autonomy, either imaginally or in actuality, has been further identified as a vital protective factor.”

The ability to construct coherent narratives in response to experiences of adversity can also operate as a protective factor against the development of trauma (Papadopoulos, 2012; Veronese, Fiore, Castiglioni, el Kawaja, and Said, 2013). Indeed, the importance of integrating, or making meaning out of what we have endured, is central to almost all forms of psychotherapy and trauma healing. In this sense, the function of ideology as a framework for structuring narrative, holds special significance for communities impacted by politically-motivated violence (Harris, 2009).

Playback practitioners concerned with the promotion of psychosocial wellbeing should therefore develop sensitivity to the culturally constructed and socially embedded meanings that surround the representation of political violence and its impacts. For although we might wish to present Playback Theatre as a vehicle for the transmission of an unadulterated, “popular truth”, we must acknowledge that the practitioner’s values and subjectivity determine the way a community’s story is interpreted and re-presented (Rowe, 2007).
In situations where a Playback troupe and their audience share similar demographics, there is a greater likelihood that cultural approximation will be established between the actors’ reading of participant stories and the way the community itself interprets their experiences. It should be noted however, that shared demographics do not guarantee a privileging of local ideology. As a relatively new form of theatre in Palestine, Playback troupes rely mainly upon non-Palestinian practitioners for their training and development. We must therefore assess whether imported theories and attitudes towards trauma, adversity and political resistance are in alignment with indigenous perspectives. For whilst I do not wish to treat local cultures “as a monolithic ‘thing’ having unassailable value” (Wessells, 2008, p.56), I am suggesting that without critical reflection, international practitioners might unintentionally contribute towards the ongoing colonization and displacement of Palestinian narratives relating to the presence and impact of structural oppression and political violence in Palestine.

TOWARDS A COMMUNITY-BASED MODEL

As noted above, trauma arises from a combination of interlocking political, social, historic and economic issues. A trauma approach that ignores these determinants can result in band-aid measures that further reinforce decontextualized presentations of psychosocial issues in Palestine. The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus initiative has signalled our attempt to develop a model of psychosocial intervention that reflects a more “holistic, community-based and culturally grounded approach” highlighting the importance of “community mobilization, culture, social ecologies, and social justice” (Wessells, 2008, p.23).
In February 2012, The Freedom Theatre’s initial Playback Theatre project evolved into the Freedom Bus, an initiative that co-produces cultural, educational and political events in partnership with communities across the West Bank. Since its inception, the Freedom Bus initiative has utilized participatory action research to inform its design and delivery. The active involvement of community members, village cooperatives, popular struggle committees and grassroots organizations has allowed us to maintain a high degree of responsiveness to on-the-ground feedback and suggestions.

“Solidarity stays” and “freedom rides” are two concrete outcomes that reflect community participation in the evolution of our model. These multi-day events typically involve home-stays, protective presence activity, building construction, interactive seminars, political actions, traditional storytelling, Zajaal poetry, live music and drama-in-education workshops for children. Playback Theatre remains a central feature of these events.

Solidarity stays replaced a more conventional formula of “come-and-go” singular performances. Partnering communities felt that Playback Theatre, when integrated into a larger framework of interactive projects and other activities, would allow for the development of relationships, understandings and joint endeavours that could not be fully realized within the limited parameters of one-off performances. As the remainder of this paper will illustrate, this model has enabled us to participate in a social ecology that nourishes *samud* (steadfastness) and other factors that protect against trauma.
RELATIONAL CONTEXT

The establishment of meaningful and enduring relationships with partnering communities has helped to cultivate a process of mutually reinforcing creativity. For example, after 10 months of work in Nabi Saleh, local residents proposed that we devise a scripted play based on stories from the village. In April 2013, this idea was actualized in the form of Our Sign is the Stone, a production that celebrates the popular struggle movement in Nabi Saleh. In other communities, jointly organized events have included multi-day building projects, educational seminars and protest actions involving interactive theatre, live music and giant puppets.

Freedom Bus events typically attract a range of participants including local residents, non-local Palestinians, Israeli activists, and people from abroad. In a context where Israel has attempted to systematically isolate the West Bank, this meeting of diverse groups bears special significance.

Through tactics of military occupation, settler colonization and structural apartheid, Israel has succeeded in creating patterns of deep isolation between Palestinian communities. Travel between Gaza and the West Bank is forbidden and movement from the occupied territories into Israel is controlled by a highly restrictive permit system. Within the West Bank itself, roadblocks, checkpoints, military zones, settlements and settler-only roads separate one community from another. These various barriers have resulted in a highly fragmented geopolitical landscape characterized by disruption of trade, commerce, services, social interaction, family relationships, cultural exchange and organized political activity (White, 2008). In a society where valued protective factors include support from extended family, participation in civil society structures, and meaning gained from the fulfilment of
various social roles (Veronese, Castiglioni, Barola and Said, 2012) the psychosocial impact of Israel’s divisive policies requires significant emphasis.

Taking this fragmented body politic into consideration, our interventions seek to respond in both symbolic and practical terms. As the following reflections indicate, high value is placed upon the subversion of geopolitical divisions:

Israel controls us – our water and electricity - and every other aspect of our life. However, they don’t control our mind. Even though our lives are very hard, we continue to live - we continue to resist. And even though they build walls between us, we find ways to go under the wall and over the wall. This was the message of my story - that we must continue to connect and work together (Sawsan).

I mainly wanted to connect with the Palestinians who came from ’48¹¹. It’s the first time they came to visit us here [in the Jordan Valley] ... The Europeans come from far away to be with us and for this I am thankful. But they come and then they go. With the Palestinian’s though ... I will see them again (Mahyoub).

I wanted to tell the Palestinians who are living in Area C¹² and other parts of the West Bank, that we need to be in solidarity with ourselves. We need this more than international support (Abu Saqer).

¹¹ “Palestine ’48” is a term referring to territory that lies within the pre-1967 borders of current day Israel. Between 1947-1948, 80% of the Palestinian population fled or were expelled from historic homelands that were handed over to Jewish sovereignty under the UN partition plan. Those Palestinians who remained were granted citizenship of the newly founded State of Israel. However structural inequality has been held in place through the ongoing passage of legislation that actively privileges Jewish citizens over their Palestinian counterparts (White, 2009).

¹² Under the Oslo II Accord of 1995, the West Bank was divided into 3 administrative regions know as
My story was not my story alone. It was a story about all the people in At-tuwani ... That night [during the performance] there were many people, not only from At-Tuwani but also from Yatta and other places in Palestine like Ramallah, the North and elsewhere. I felt like, here is a chance to spread the word to Palestinians who live in different places and don't really know what’s happening here (Jamila).

Israel’s strict border control policies also aim to deter contact between Internationals and Palestinians living in the West Bank. International activists engaging in human rights advocacy are under constant threat of arrest and deportation. In fact one participant in the 2013 March Freedom Ride was arrested and subsequently issued with 10-year travel ban – even though he had not engaged in any illegal activity.

Despite these deterrents, a variety of sociopolitical tours have attempted to ensure that Israel’s military and apartheid regime remains open to international scrutiny. These educational travel programs fulfil an essential function. However, they are also limited by the often fleeting nature of their contact with Palestinian communities. I include here several reflections that establish the importance of a meaningful relational context to community interactions:

We have a lot of groups that come here. We tell them our story and then they go. But you [Freedom Bus participants] lived our life with us. You had a firsthand experience ... This participation in our lives is very important (Intesar).

Area A, B and C. Area C includes 61% of the West Bank and falls under complete Israeli civil and military control.
Journalists come to write about our situation. Their objective is to record and deliver news. The Freedom Bus is different because you come here and live with us. You join us in our daily work. You share in our experience (Mahyoub).

Many groups come through At-Tuwani to learn about what’s happening. They usually come for one day and then leave. When you came though, you worked with us and stayed with us for 5 days. This was very special for me ... When people join us and stay for a longer period, we feel more supported. Our sense of steadfastness is strengthened (Hussein).

These quotes suggest that the conditions framing the sharing of stories have a decisive impact on how interaction is experienced. People are generally eager to transmit their stories, but within a social context that honors the importance of relationship between teller and audience, community and visitor.

As the following reflection proposes, participants also value the formation of an expansive structure that allows for a 2-way flow of interactions outside of the performance itself:

During the Freedom Ride it was not just about telling and witnessing. It was also about the human and social interaction - where we were sharing stories not only about the political situation, but also about life and customs in other places ... This social exchange was very important ... We became like one community and that was very important for us ... It gave us a sense of emotional relief and support (Kefah, 2013).

As this participant suggests, the establishment of an encompassing milieu allows for the development of relationships that offer some degree of meaningful sustenance. In fact it is not uncommon for visiting participants of Freedom Bus events to maintain
ongoing contact with host communities.

MOBILIZATION

In this paper I have supported the proposition that psychosocial wellbeing in Palestine is integrally connected to collective processes of meaning making and community mobilization. Tellers often claim that they choose to tell their story as a way of promoting *samud* (steadfastness) in fellow community members. Others consciously choose to share their story as a way of raising awareness and inciting various sections of the audience to engage in resistance to Israel’s occupation and apartheid regime:

In one event, my grandmother told a story about the time when she was grazing her sheep near the settlement. Some settlers came and attacked her … She still bears the scars even though this happened 6 years ago … Although the settlers came as a group, my grandmother tried to defend herself with her stick and by calling out for support – trying to attract the attention of other people from the village … I believe she shared this story because she wanted people to know that even if you are old and even if the settlers attack, you can still defend your land. It's our land and we will defend it (Hussein).

When you hear these stories it gives you motivation to take action. When you feel the injustice and when you feel the determination of the people, then you get inspired to go out and participate (Intesar).
I wanted people to learn about two things: Firstly about the realities of life under occupation, and secondly, about our resistance - how we, the people of At-Tuwani, have managed to resist and to stay here on our land (Jamila).

The thing about this struggle is that we have a just-cause. The knowledge of this keeps us strong and unified (Saheed).

As these interview excerpts suggest – and as discussed above - the need to generate, maintain and transmit coherent narrative structures, is central to the impulse that motivates many tellers. It can also be proposed that tellers are seeking to establish authority over the representation of their very selves. In a context where this representation has been strongly contested by multiple external forces, the battle for self-representation bears particular significance. Enabling authorship can also be viewed as part of a larger attempt to reverse or avert the sense of powerlessness that is central to experiences of trauma. For this reason, the Playback Theatre practitioner’s sensitivity to culturally-constructed categories of meaning is essential. To neglect this responsibility increases the chance that we too, may participate in the further disempowerment of our constituencies. In addition to utilizing the performance site for the purposes of meaning making and the assertion of identity, we can also see that tellers are urging their audience towards real life action. Within a context where people are struggling for their very survival, this call is imperative:

Sometimes we talk and talk until we get to a point where we can’t hear anymore. But with theater we actually see the story that is being told. There is sound, there is image and there is action. When people see the story they end up feeling more. They feel the tragedy inside the story and feel more connected
to it. Later on this might motivate them to take action against the oppression we face (Zati).

I know how the enactments can affect others. This kind of theatre makes our story stick to their hearts and minds. This is one reason why I wanted to share my story and see it acted (Abu Saqer).

When I speak, maybe some people will not understand me or maybe I cannot express well. However, when others see my story being acted in front of them, it helps to reinforce my story and people will therefore understand it better .... In sharing my story with these people, I felt that they, in turn, might represent the truth in a more accurate way to others (Hafez).

To build upon the call for action, our events have also included talks, seminars and interactive workshops that raise awareness about popular struggle initiatives and broader political campaigns (such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement) that exert pressure upon Israel to comply with international law.

Freedom Bus events also provide a chance to engage in immediate, on-the-ground involvement in the form of rebuilding of demolished structures, protective presence activity, monitoring and reporting, and political actions.

RITUAL AND RESPONSIBILITY
The ritual container of a Playback performance helps to generate a sense of safety and structure that simultaneously permits tellers to venture beyond the realms of socially sanctioned narratives (Fox, 1999; Salas, 1999). In Palestine for example, it is commonly expected that a family will express pride in the death of a relative who was
“martyred” in defense of national struggle. Or for ex-political prisoners, it is generally considered taboo to speak openly about experiences of torture and associated feelings of shame and vulnerability. Within Playback performances however, many tellers choose to share stories that do transgress these cultural codes. This chance to speak openly can enable a process of individual and collective emotional release (Rivers, 2013). Nonetheless, there is a significant difference between a Playback Theatre event and other structures that elicit public testimony. As noted throughout this paper, the relational context is central to the therapeutic and empowering dimensions of a teller’s experience. In addition to the presence of a supportive milieu, it is of key significance to many tellers that an actor “joins” and “accompanies” them through an embodied representation of their account. As participants in the Playback Theatre process, the audience too, plays a central role in the generation of communal intimacy (Hutt and Hosking, 2004).

The most important thing for me was the reaction of the audience – especially people from my community. I hadn’t shared this story before and so they were surprised. I noticed the expressions on their faces during the performance. Also afterwards, people came up to me and asked “Did this really happen to you?” and “Why didn’t you tell us before?” ... Before this I felt like I was holding the burden alone. After telling my story though I felt like people really understood. I felt their support. It gave me a sense of comfort. (Mohammed)

I was watching how the audience interacted with my story ... This helped me to feel more connected to them. Seeing how they reacted to the parts that were funny, and the parts that were sad - this was somehow reassuring (Hussein).
ACCOMPANIMENT AND EMOTIONAL RELIEF

At the start of this paper, I shared my prior-held assumption that “public disclosure of traumatic testimony – paired with an empathic response provided by trained actors, could result in psychological relief.” In fact, participant reflections consistently suggest that the Playback process can provide immediate therapeutic benefit:

Sometimes you feel so much pressure on you, and you want to scream ...
Telling my story was like a scream. It released some of the pressure ... I had felt alone with my suffering, but then after sharing it I felt like I wasn’t carrying it on my own (Hussein).

I was feeling a kind of strain, like a balloon filled with air and about to explode. I needed to feel relief from the inside. I needed to feel like I was a human being - like I could be heard and I could share with others ... I felt like I was holding a huge burden and then someone came to hold and share this burden with me ...
It was very relieving – to see my experience repeated again by others (Mahyoub).

There’s a big difference between telling your story to someone who writes a report about it, and telling your story to someone who feels it and then enacts it. When your story gets performed, so many people see it, and there’s a much greater release of emotion ... There’s a difference between simply hearing a story, and between hearing and seeing. There’s a big difference (Kefah).
The part of the enactment that remains most strongly with me is when the actors showed the scene of the soldiers hitting me. This was the most painful part of my story. It is a memory I often recall. I felt like the actors were right there with me at that moment. Their feelings were so real. They understood exactly what had happened to me (Mohammed).

Playback Theatre, with its particular ability to address psychological distress, is clearly a method that can be integrated into broader initiatives that promote psychosocial resilience and trauma response. It is imperative to reiterate however, that all such interventions must be embedded within a framework that acknowledges and addresses the social, cultural and political determinants of mental health.

INCLUSION

People from outside [At-tuwani] probably assume that it’s men who are in control and that they are the ones who resist. I wanted to share my story because it challenges this view. In my story, women were in the front line. They were the ones most angry and most motivated to take action. It is the women who were the main driving force (Jamila).

Through Jamila’s statement we learn about the ability of Playback Theatre to elicit and transmit narratives that challenge normative notions of gender. I have also learned that whilst some Palestinian communities do prohibit mixed-gender events, others of course, proclaim the value of inclusion. The following reflections were shared by male residents of various villages in the Jordan Valley and South Hebron Hills:
In Sawsan’s story she described how she fought back and tried to stop the soldiers from destroying her home. This story was very powerful for me because it was a woman who was speaking. Through her story we were reminded that Palestinian resistance is not only for men, it’s for women, for all the people. The resistance is for everybody. Everybody should resist the occupation no matter what (Hussein).

We are a conservative community but still, I feel like the women have to participate and be a part of our struggle (Zati).

We need to engage the women more ... Once the women are engaged the whole community will participate (Abu Saqer).

If strong social ecologies can minimize the risk of traumatisation, it can be argued that the integration of women into diverse areas of community life holds positive protective functions. As the participant statements above suggest, Playback Theatre might offer one avenue for the development of a more gender-inclusive society.

CONCLUSION
In this paper I have suggested that traditional models of trauma response hold limited currency in the Palestinian context where an entire indigenous population continues to endure state-sponsored violence and other forms of structural oppression. For international theatre practitioners and psychosocial workers interested in using Playback Theatre for trauma response, it is essential that we critically examine our own theoretical orientations and performance practices lest we inadvertently engage in neocolonial impositions that reduce a local peoples’ sense of dignity, empowerment, and positive cultural identity.
In the second part of this paper I presented the Freedom Bus model as an example of a multi-faceted, community-based intervention that promotes various protective factors whilst acknowledging the political, economic, and socio-historical roots of psychosocial distress in Palestine. Throughout the paper I have argued that the effectiveness of our work depends largely upon attendance to the immediate and contextual factors that shape our relationship with partnering communities and audience members.

REFERENCES


Chapter 3

Playback Theatre, Cultural Resistance and the Limits of Trauma Discourse


Others need to know the truth. You’re telling a wider audience that unjust situations do not happen to nameless people. They actually happen to human beings with names and lives and emotions - people with flesh and blood. They’re not just a number, or a story in a newscast or on a website ... Through Playback Theatre the audience can see the reality. This helps them to understand the injustice, which in turn contributes towards lifting the injustice. For how can you end injustice if you don’t understand what injustice does? Or how can you end injustice if you don’t feel what injustice does? – *Sa’ed Abu-Hijleh, Nablus, Occupied Palestine.*
On 12th January 2012 The Freedom Theatre held a Playback Theatre performance for ex-political prisoners in Jenin Refugee Camp. Loai who had been imprisoned for his involvement in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) came forward to share the following testimony:

Psychological torture was the worst aspect of those 3 years in jail. One time they put me in solitary confinement for 10 days. While I was there, they tried tricking me into thinking my mother and sister had been killed, that my father had been seriously injured and that our home had been demolished. They showed me fabricated images of the funeral – photographs of coffins draped with the Palestinian flag. I remember going completely numb. I couldn’t feel anything. This was their way of trying to break my spirit ...

On the conductor’s cue, two young male actors, Ahmed Roch and Faisal Abu Alheja, stepped onto the small black-box stage. Using sparse language together with movement, gesture and songs of resistance, they improvised a simple yet highly charged enactment of their friend’s account. The audience watched, spellbound...

That night, over a cup of tea, Loai spoke to me about his experience of the performance:

It was difficult to share my story ... I wondered how people would react. Perhaps they would not believe me. They might think that I had exaggerated certain parts. Nonetheless, I wanted people to hear. I hoped that sharing my experience would lift some of its weight ... Later, after telling my story, I felt a sense of distance between the prison experience and myself. This was something new that I had not felt before. Also, after the performance many people came up to me, wanting to connect. This meant a lot to me ...
Loai’s decision to tell was fraught with tensions. Not only was he navigating difficult personal terrain. He was also choosing to affront an implicit social contract that requires Palestinian political prisoners to remain stoic and silent about experiences of torture and humiliation. Interestingly though, when revealing his primary motivation for speaking, Loai stated that he shared his story in order to prepare others in the audience who might later encounter a similar fate. In other words, his main impetus was characterized by a social and political objective rather than a singular desire for personal relief.

Sensitivity to these “dynamics of intention” is of central importance if we are to fully comprehend the meaning a teller attributes to their story. In a context where people are experiencing ongoing political violence, there is certainly a desire to release the tensions that accumulate under these conditions. At the same time, the Palestinian predicament cannot be described as “post-traumatic”. The suffering and oppression that Palestinians experience is current, ongoing and rooted in over 65 years of state-sponsored attempts to dispossess and degrade the Palestinian body politic. Against this backdrop, the teller speaks not only for personal salvation – they speak with political intent – with the knowledge that “trauma” can never be healed until the systemic roots of political violence (manifested as settler colonialism, military occupation and structural apartheid) have been fully dismantled.

The remainder of this article will explore the overlapping psychosocial and political imperatives that characterize Playback Theatre events in Palestine. In particular, The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus initiative will be presented as a form of cultural resistance that simultaneously enhances certain factors that minimize the risk of traumatic impact arising from political violence.
TRAUMA DISCOURSE

The therapeutically oriented practitioner who works with violated communities is often quick to impose a “trauma discourse” - a particular view that tends towards a parochial, apolitical and bio-medical model of assessment and intervention. Through this discourse, the sociopolitical factors that frame psychosocial distress are ignored or dismissed in favor of a highly psychologized and deficit-oriented depiction of oppressed people. For example, one non-Palestinian colleague – a clinical psychologist and Playback practitioner - had this to say about our use of Playback Theatre in Palestine:

In your articles there are examples of the stories people told during the performances. When I read them I evaluated them as traumatic stories and the states of tellers as traumatic states. I think that Playback Theatre performances are not enough for them to find a good way for living. To my mind they need psychotherapy and medical treatment. I think that playback performances as they are done in the classical way can provide new trauma for those who were not traumatized before and can support re-traumatization for those who were traumatized. If they tell stories about "good" aspects of life (not about the traumatic events) it can be [a sign] of avoidance behavior.

The sentiments expressed here are not indicative of fringe elements within the Playback Theatre or broader psychotherapeutic community. Indeed, this commentator presents a view that pervades the agenda of a global trauma industry that uncritically beds itself in areas of conflict, upheaval and disaster. According to the discourse of this industry, anyone who has experienced political violence is
probably traumatized and in need of professional psychotherapeutic and/or psychiatric support.

Over the past decade however, researchers have challenged this line of thinking with a far more nuanced perspective (Papadopoulos, 2012; Veronese, Castiglioni, Barola, Said, 2012; Wessells, 2008). Studies show that some people do of course develop symptoms that correspond to the diagnostic criteria of PTSD. However, many others respond with forms of “normal human suffering” (i.e. non-pathological states) or without being adversely affected at all. Still others are found to actually develop certain positive qualities in response to adversity – a phenomenon known as “adversity activated development” (Papadopoulos, 2012). The difference in response is largely attributed to the presence or absence of certain protective factors. For example, it has been shown that survivors of political violence who interpret their experience through a strong ideological framework are far less likely to develop symptoms of trauma (Harris, 2009; Gilligan, 2006). In the Palestinian context it has been found that people who are actively engaged in some form of popular struggle are less at risk of developing psychopathology than those who are politically disengaged (Veronese, Castiglioni, el Kawaja, Said, 2013). The presence of enduring community bonds, family networks and internal resources are also recognized as protective factors that can ameliorate the risk of psychological harm resulting from political violence.

ENHANCING PROTECTIVE FACTORS
Playback Theatre with its inbuilt potential for consciousness raising, meaning-making and community mobilization, holds promising possibilities for the reinforcement of certain protective factors. When a teller shares their account and sees it enacted within a communal setting, the teller is able to establish a sense of coherence around
their experience – especially where their story is framed within the broader context of civil resistance. Indeed, far from being (re)traumatized by hearing stories of violence and oppression, many Palestinians relate to these accounts as a reminder to remain samud (steadfast) in their struggle for basic survival and eventual justice. The following statements reflect the political imperative of personal stories shared during Playback events in Palestine:

In one event, my grandmother told a story about the time when she was grazing her sheep near the settlement. Some settlers came and attacked her ... She still bears the scars even though this happened 6 years ago ... Although the settlers came as a group, my grandmother tried to defend herself with her stick and by calling out for support – trying to attract the attention of other people from the village ... I believe she shared this story because she wanted people to know that even if you are old and even if the settlers attack, we can still defend our land. It's our land and we will defend it. – Hussein, South Hebron Hills.

When I heard these stories it gave me motivation to take action. When you feel the injustice and when you feel the determination of the people, then you get inspired to go out and participate. – Intesar, South Hebron Hills.

Israel controls us – our water and electricity - and every other aspect of our life. However, they don't control our mind. Even though our lives are very hard, we continue to live - we continue to resist. And even though they build walls between us, we find ways to go under the wall and over the wall. This was the message of my story - that we must continue to connect and work together. – Sawsan, South Hebron Hills.
THE FREEDOM BUS

The stories referred to in this article were all shared during Playback Theatre events that occurred as part of The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus initiative. The Freedom Bus represents one attempt to embed Playback within a community-based approach to psychosocial health promotion that acknowledges and embraces the fundamental necessity of concurrent political engagement (Rivers, 2013b). Since December 2011, the Freedom Bus has engaged thousands of Palestinians and people from abroad in cultural actions that address Israel’s various violations of international humanitarian law. Freedom Bus events occur in villages, towns, refugee camps and Bedouin communities throughout Occupied Palestine. We partner with village cooperatives, popular struggle committees and grassroots organizations to hold “solidarity stays” and “freedom rides”. These multi-day events involve home-stays, voluntary work, protective presence activity, educational talks, interactive seminars, political actions, Hakawati (traditional storytelling), live music and Playback Theatre. Central to our approach is the establishment of ongoing, long-term partnerships. Partnering communities contribute to the planning and delivery of events, thus enabling the initiative to remain responsive to local need and cultural considerations.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

The Freedom Bus initiative acknowledges and utilizes the psychotherapeutic capacity of Playback Theatre. Indeed, event participants commonly report the following forms of psychological benefit (Rivers, 2013a; 2013b):

5. *Strengthening fortitude*: As noted above, the Playback event can become a vehicle for the transmission of certain values, attitudes, strategies and narratives that counter the oppressor’s attempts to systematically humiliate and degrade the oppressed community. Playback Theatre as a form of
cultural resistance thus operates as a simultaneous inoculation against the risk of traumatisation.

6. Empathic joining: The supportive and empathic response of actors and audience members provides the teller with a sense of being joined in their predicament and struggle. This experience of “solidarity” helps to relieve feelings of isolation.

7. Emotional release: The act of sharing one’s story and seeing it performed can help to relieve the psychological pressure that accumulates in response to various sociopolitical stressors. In particular, many tellers comment upon the significance of the actor’s ability to give full expression to the emotional dimension of their story.

8. Distance and perspective: The experience of witnessing the enactment of one’s story can produce an empowering sense of distance. The resultant shift in perspective allows for the occurrence of personal, social and political insights that were previously undeveloped or inaccessible.

The psychotherapeutic outcomes of Playback as mentioned here, are not unique to the Palestinian context. However, these features do assume a distinct nature when contextual dynamics are taken into account. For example, as the following quote suggests, a teller’s experience of being “empathically joined” can be directly linked to certain political objectives:

I wanted the audience and actors to feel my pain, to join in my experience, to stand in my shoes. I hoped this would make me feel less alone … I hoped this sense of being joined would give me power to continue in our struggle against the occupation. – Hamudi, Nabi Saleh.
INTERACTIVE SOCIAL DOMAIN

The actual form of the Freedom Bus initiative also holds relevance to our investigation of Playback Theatre as a type of psychosocial intervention. The following 2 features merit special consideration:

1. **Immersion:** Freedom Bus events typically occur over several days. Participants are invited to stay in the “host community” and join in various social, cultural and work-related activities. This immersive experience provides actors and non-local participants with a first-hand and visceral understanding of the events and contextual factors that appear in many Playback stories. Community members also report that the multi-day nature of events generates a quality of interaction and support that cannot be established in more fleeting encounters.

2. **Cohesion:** Israel has successfully instituted a multitude of tactics to isolate and divide Palestinian communities from one another. The physical infrastructure of roadblocks, checkpoints, settler-only roads, surveillance systems and military zones – not to mention the Apartheid Wall, is reinforced by a highly restrictive permit system that inhibits contact between various sections of the Palestinian population. As stated by Rivers (2013b), “in a society where valued protective factors include support from extended family, participation in civil society structures, and meaning gained from the fulfillment of various social roles (Veronese, Castiglioni, Barola and Said, 2012) the psychosocial impact of Israel’s divisive policies requires significant emphasis”. Initiatives such as the Freedom Bus challenge geopolitical fragmentation by facilitating events that foster ongoing contact and cooperation between various geographic regions. As one participant suggests, Playback Theatre can also enhance intra-
community cohesion: “You open a space for people to share their stories and to communicate with each other. In this way theatre is helping to break down the barriers between people.”

In the above section I have emphasized the importance of relational factors, or what Salas (1999) refers to as the “interactive social domain” of Playback Theatre. The Freedom Bus model extends our traditional understanding of this domain through the inclusion of multi-day residential stays and jointly organized activities such as voluntary work, interactive seminars and direct action.

CONCLUSION

The bio-medical model of trauma response proclaims political neutrality and frames psychopathology as a condition that can be overcome through adequate medical and psychotherapeutic treatment. Playback practitioners who subscribe to this model may find themselves participating in an industry that obfuscates the economic and political determinants of psychosocial distress. The Freedom Bus initiative provides an example for applied theatre practitioners and community workers who are interested in developing holistic interventions that pursue emancipatory objectives on a multitude of levels.

REFERENCES


Chapter 4

Narrative Power: Playback Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Occupied Palestine


November 2012: Israel is dropping bombs on Gaza – again. Riots are breaking out across the West Bank. Checkpoints are closed. Army jeeps are parked at every major intersection. Half of our theatre troupe are stopped from reaching the performance site. Those that can make it are gathered in Al Hadidiya, a small community located in the Jordan Valley, Occupied Palestine.

The event has attracted local and international activists, Palestinian university students, a theatre director from London, a young Israeli activist, and the former Vice President of the European Union, Luisa Morgantini. The majority of participants however, are subsistence farmers and traditional herders from Al Hadidiya and neighboring communities.
The audience gains shade under a makeshift shelter of curved iron poles covered by sackcloth. The actors have leveled a space on the red, dusty ground. A small ‘stage’ is instantly prepared. Today, only two women are performing. Normally four actors would be present. A ‘Conductor’ facilitates the event and two musicians sit to the side.

The performance, 90 minutes in length, begins with a song but after that there is no script. All enactments will be improvised and based on real-life stories that are voluntarily shared by audience members. Nobody knows who will tell, or what stories will be shared.

Uhm Zati, gets up to tell her story:

My son, Quais was with the sheep - over there, having his breakfast - when suddenly a military jeep drove up from the settlement. A group of soldiers got out and handcuffed and blindfolded him. I was far away at that point but could see that they’d removed his clothes and thrown him on the ground, totally naked. It was winter and very cold. When I saw what was happening I came running and tried to reach my son. The soldiers pushed me back though. They loaded their guns and pointed them at me. I shouted at them: “Why are you doing this to my son? He did nothing wrong! Why are you doing this?” But they didn’t answer. Instead, they threatened to shoot, and so I moved back. They still had Quais on the ground. Then they started commanding him to turn left, and then right, and then North, and then South, and he was screaming, “Mom, go away!” He didn’t want me to see him in that situation...
After narrating her story, Uhm Zati chooses one of the actors to play herself. The musicians begin to play, the actors enter the stage, and the first scene of her story comes to life through an enactment that incorporates improvised movement, gesture and dialogue. The aesthetic style is sparse and non-naturalistic. The content however, remains loyal to her account.

After the enactment concludes, the Conductor checks in with Uhm Zati. “Did you see your story?” He asks. “Yes.” She says. “It was exactly like that.” Her story moves others in the audience, reminding them of similar experiences. A moment later another person raises their hand and is invited to the stage. The next story begins.

The process described is known as Playback Theatre – an approach where audience members share personal stories that are subsequently transformed into improvised enactments by a team of trained actors and musicians. The process is audience inclusive, but unlike Boal’s Forum Theatre (1979), ‘spect-actor’ interventions do not occur. In Playback Theatre, the dialectic process occurs through the relationship between one story and another. Indeed, over the course of an event, a network of inter-related stories inevitably emerges – a multi-faceted narrative that describes and dialogues about the struggles, resources and predicaments of a community.

Although Playback Theatre was developed in the mid-1970’s and is currently used in over 60 countries, The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus initiative – commencing in 2011 - was the first Middle Eastern initiative to involve an ensemble of all-Arab Playback Theatre practitioners\(^{13}\).

\(^{13}\) Since the establishment of the Freedom Bus troupe, several other Arab Playback troupes have come into existence, including groups in Amman, Beirut and Cairo.
THE FREEDOM THEATRE’S FREEDOM BUS

Since its establishment in 2006, The Freedom Theatre has provided cultural programming to children, youth and young adults living in Jenin Refugee Camp. The theatre has also devised a number of productions that critique the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority’s role in repressing their own subjects. These plays are typically performed to residents of Jenin District or to audiences in Europe and the USA.

In October 2011, The Freedom Theatre began a Playback Theatre programme that later evolved into the Freedom Bus initiative. Freedom Bus performances occur in towns, villages, refugee camps and Bedouin communities throughout the West Bank. These events are typically organized in partnership with popular struggle committees, village councils, women’s cooperatives and local activists. The development of these partnerships has allowed The Freedom Theatre to integrate Playback Theatre within a broader framework of political activities, thus magnifying the strategic impact of its work.

At the time of writing, the Freedom Bus ensemble consists of three Palestinian men and three Palestinian women. All troupe members are freelance performers with varying levels of prior experience in theatre arts. I am an Australian Playback Theatre practitioner and co-founder of the Freedom Bus initiative. Since its inception in December 2011, I have remained involved as a researcher, facilitator and theatre trainer.

This article documents the scope and guiding principals of the Freedom Bus initiative and its use of community-based, cultural activism. In particular, I will utilise theory
from the field of conflict transformation and peace building to investigate the limits and potentials of Playback Theatre as a strategic intervention within an asymmetrical conflict. My arguments will be informed by data gathered from over thirty in-depth interviews conducted with Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank who participated in one or more Playback Theatre process.

THE LIMITS OF EMPATHY

In October 2013 I was asked to speak about the Freedom Bus to an audience of theatre practitioners in Oslo, Norway. In Oslo, as in many other places, audience members asked if I were bringing Palestinians and Israelis together in the same events. This question often assumes that such encounters would be the goal of any initiative that addresses the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This line of thinking arises from a belief that ‘conflict’ between Israelis and Palestinians is caused by a crisis of opposing narratives fuelled by decades of mutual aggressions and propaganda carried out by both sides.

Playback Theatre, with its emphasis upon the creation of a communal, empathic and non-judgemental space, is therefore viewed as a potentially positive vehicle for the transformation of intergroup hostilities. Indeed, some Playback practitioners propose that the voluntary exchange of stories within a respectful environment can encourage audience members to suspend reified definitions of self and other, in favour of a more accommodating stance (Salas, 2011; Hosking & Hutt, 2004; Volkas, 2009). Jo Salas comments on her experience of this phenomenon:

I’ve noted, as a teller myself, that when my experience is reflected accurately in the spontaneous, artistic, and physical expression of others, I have the kinesthetic conviction that I have been understood. Others speak of a similar
experience. That sense of certainty creates a kind of softening and relaxation, and an increased openness to another point of view. Listeners, hearing the human voice of the teller and seeing her story brought to life, find a little more space within themselves to accommodate the humanity of that person and her perspective (2011: 98). Full reference needed

Such experiences are considered central within reconciliation approaches that emphasise the importance of tasks such as “appreciating each other’s humanity”, “empathizing with each others suffering” and “telling and listening to each other’s stories and developing more complex narratives” (Cohen, 2004: 6). Proponents of these approaches often subscribe to some version of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) i.e. the belief that interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to dismantle prejudice and discrimination between rival groups.

There is no doubt that Playback Theatre contains unique mechanisms for the facilitation of humanising encounters between current or former adversaries. Hosking and Hutt (2004), Volkas (2009) and Salas (2011) for example, describe various initiatives where Playback Theatre has been applied for such purposes. However, in the Palestinian-Israeli context, where vast asymmetries of power persist, the endorsement of Playback Theatre as a ‘contact-remedy’ would place it amongst a plethora of other ‘peace’ projects that tend to psychologise the current dynamic whilst ignoring its political and structural roots.

NORMALIZATION

Encounter-based initiatives that seek to ameliorate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are widely criticized for their role in ‘normalizing’ existing relations.
The term ‘normalization’ refers to the activity of making something ‘abnormal’ appear ‘normal’. In the case of Palestine and Israel, this refers to endeavours that project the notion that both sides are on an equal footing. As Rahman states:

Joint sports teams and theatre groups, hosting an Israeli orchestra in Ramallah or Nablus, all these things create a false sense of normality, like the issue is only a problem of recognizing each other as human beings. This, however, ignores the ongoing oppression, colonization, and denial of rights, committed by one side against the other (2012: para 6).

White (2009) argues that Israel’s position as a dominant, occupying power is exhibited through large-scale military assaults on civilian populations, together with systematic practices of land confiscation, settlement construction, house and infrastructure demolitions, forced displacement, administrative detention, political imprisonment, targeted assassinations and a comprehensive military closure regime inhibiting access to social networks, health services, education and employment opportunities. In addition, Israel protects the privileged status of its Jewish citizens through the violation of various international laws including the denial of Palestinian refugee rights and its implementation of discriminatory practices that have been equated to apartheid14.

The objection to ‘normalization’ initiatives is therefore based on the premise that such programmes ignore the structural realities of military occupation, settler colonialism, and institutional racism in favor of a ‘kissing cousins cure’ – an approach defined by the belief that peace will ensue when both sides simply recognize each other’s mutual

14 According to the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (UN General Assembly, 1973), Apartheid can be defined as “Inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination of one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them ...” [Emphasis added].
suffering and common interests.

**ISRAELI PARTICIPATION**

It is important to distinguish the difference between normalization processes and Israeli participation in activities that propose a political response to the current status quo. As Rahman states:

> As long as an Israeli is working for Palestinian rights and the end to occupation, the cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians is perfectly legitimate and justified. This is the concept of “co-resistance” as opposed to “co-existence” …” (2012: 11).

Within the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement for example, it can be noted that several Israeli partners support the BDS campaign including the *Coalition of Women for Peace* and *Boycott! Supporting the Palestinian BDS Call from Within* (PACBI, 2012). The BDS movement makes an “explicit call on conscientious Israelis to join the movement for freedom, justice and equal rights for all” and proposes that we seek to define “normalization” not merely as “collaboration with Israelis” but rather, according to “the substance and premise of this collaboration” (ibid: para 2).

In this regard, Israeli activists have been welcome guests at Playback Theatre events in the occupied West Bank. These participants are invariably connected to Israeli activist or human rights groups such as Anarchists Against the Wall, B’tselem, Rabbis for Human Rights, Taayush, or Machsom Watch. Israeli activists have also participated in other Freedom Bus events such as solidarity walks, protective presence activity and informational seminars.
NO PEACE WITHOUT JUSTICE

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will.

~ Frederick Douglass (1857: vi)

“No peace without justice!” is a common slogan one hears in Palestine. It suggests a view, that the recognition of Palestinian rights according to international law is a necessary precondition for any reasonable conflict settlement. As Dudouet (2006) suggests, this view also implies that a liberation, or equal rights, struggle must take precedence over ‘negative peace’ solutions that de-escalate conflict whilst maintaining an oppressive status quo.

Indeed, as with normalization initiatives, ‘conflict resolution’ approaches have been criticised for their tendency to ignore or minimize the structural dimensions of unbalanced power relations. In contrast, a ‘conflict transformation’ paradigm recognize that sustainable, dynamic peace can only be built on a foundation of equality and justice\(^\text{15}\)

CURLE’S PROGRESSION

Adam Curle (1971), a Quaker peace activist and pioneer of peace studies, presented an

\(^{15}\) For greater analysis regarding differences between a conflict resolution and conflict transformation perspective, see Dudouet, 2006; Dugan, 2003; Galtung, 2004; Lederach, 1995, 1997 2003.
analysis of conflict dynamics in situations where unbalanced power relations exist. He illustrated this state of unbalance/balance in a matrix comparing levels of power with levels of awareness.

![Curle's Progression of Conflict](Image)

Curle’s Progression of Conflict (Source: Lederach, 1997)

In Curle’s diagram, four stages are identified in the progression of conflict towards peace.

1. **Latent conflict:** Structural imbalance exists but the parties are largely unaware of the injustice or inequality.

2. **Overt conflict:** Asymmetry persists but the hidden conflict has become visible. Both parties now hold a high awareness regarding their conflicting interests and needs. During this stage, the oppressed party also seeks to raise their level of power by waging a liberation or equal rights struggle.

3. **Settlement:** Increasing conflict intensification results in a shift of power towards greater balance. When the costs of maintaining the status quo become too high, the situation reaches a state of ‘ripeness’ where structural change can be negotiated and where adversarial relations can be transformed.
4. **Sustainable peace:** Both parties establish and maintain healthy power relations that are both peaceful and dynamic.

According to Curle, conflict is transformed as parties move towards high awareness and power symmetry.

Formulations that address issues of symmetry hold significant implications for the type of arts-based interventions that might be applied in conflict zones. Schirch and Shank (2008) propose that an understanding of conflict progression and associated tasks is particularly relevant for community theatre practitioners who wish to embrace a more strategic approach to peacebuilding.

From a conflict transformation perspective therefore, The Freedom Theatre’s exercise of ‘cultural resistance’ can be viewed as an attempt to alter the root structural conditions that perpetuate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE**

Since its inception, the State of Israel has engaged in systematic efforts to extinguish Palestinian history and culture. This campaign has featured the destruction of Palestinian schools, libraries, archives and personal collections. As Masalha (2011) has documented, tens of thousands of books, documents and manuscripts have been lost in the process. More recently, Israel has passed legislation that prohibits the transfer of state funds to any public institution, including schools and libraries, that refer to the *Nakba*\(^\text{16}\) (Shalan, 2011). Israel’s Education Ministry has also been

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\(^{16}\) The term ‘Nakba’ (meaning “Catastrophe” or “Disaster” in English) refers to the mass expulsion of Palestinians that preceded and followed the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. During this period, it is estimated that 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homeland, and over 500 Palestinian villages were depopulated and destroyed.
criticised for its attempts to remove Palestinian history from school curricula in favor of a nationalistic agenda that presents Israel as the exclusive homeland of the Jewish people (Cook, 2013).

The Freedom Theatre, with its allegiance to cultural resistance, is one of several Palestinian cultural organizations that recognize the significance of art in the unarmed struggle for civil rights and equality. The late Juliano Mer Khamis, a co-founder of The Freedom Theatre, is renowned for his endorsement of a ‘third intifada’ – an intifada that he believed would achieve emancipation through primarily cultural means.

Mer Khamis asserted that, “art, in our case, can combine and generate and mobilize other aspects of resistance” (Gharavi, 2011, para 27). He also felt that cultural activity could play a pivotal role in establishing the foundations for a “healthy, equal society” (Explore, 2013, para 13) based on a respect for fundamental human rights.

The impulses and convictions that inspired Mer Khamis are in fact emblematic of the desires that propel artists living in other places impacted by political violence. For example, arts practitioners interviewed for the “In Place of War” project (Thompson, Hughes and Balfour, 2009) felt that artistic activities “reinforce a sense of being ‘human’ at a time of dehumanization” (2009: 37), and that theatre and the arts are “essential life-preserving activities that express a profound resistance to the wider context of threat, destruction, senselessness, chaos and loss within which people exist” (2009: 28).

17 Mer Khamis was assassinated outside The Freedom Theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp, by an as-yet, unidentified gunman on 4th April 2011.
At-tuwani is one of many West Bank villages that The Freedom Theatre works with. The village is situated in the South Hebron Hills, a region where most people still lead a traditional lifestyle based on subsistence agriculture and shepherding. Like other Palestinian communities situated in Area C, At-tuwani exists under full Israeli civil and military control.

The Freedom Bus troupe has visited and performed in At-tuwani and other South Hebron Hills communities many times since early 2012. We have also partnered with the local popular struggle committee in the coordination of various protests and direct actions.

During the 13-day Freedom Ride of March 2013, Sawsan, a young woman from the South Hebron Hills shared a story about the demolition of her home:

> It was November 24th, 2011, at 10:00 a.m. That's when it happened. The army demolished the mosque and then they came to demolish my house also. I objected and said “How can you just tear down a house over our heads?” I asked if they had a demolition order. But the soldiers didn’t answer. Instead they started trying to push me out of their way. I pushed back and shouted at them saying that there should be some kind of warning before they come and demolish. The soldiers appeared surprised by my strong opposition. But what

18 Under the Oslo II Accord of 1995, the West Bank was divided into 3 administrative regions know as Area A, B and C. Area C includes 61% of the West Bank and falls under complete Israeli civil and military control.

19 Under international law, Israel, as an occupying power, bears legal responsibility for the wellbeing of the occupied population. However, Palestinian residents of the South Hebron Hills are routinely denied access to land, water, electricity, building permits, health care and educational opportunities. By contrast, equivalent services and amenities are automatically granted to Jewish-settlers in the same region.
do they think? That they’re going to come and demolish my house and I will give them a cup of coffee too?

In the remainder of her story, Sawsan described how she was subsequently pepper sprayed, detained, handcuffed, blindfolded and then transferred to a detention facility where she was interrogated for many hours. After being held for 5 days she was put before a military court that issued her with a 5,000 NIS fine.

Sawsan’s story spoke not only about the violations to which her community is subjected. Her account also emphasises agency and defiance, effectively dismissing any notion of victimhood. As one audience member – a fellow resident of the South Hebron Hills - commented:

Sawsan’s story was about the brutality of occupation and Israel’s policy to expel us from our land. At the same time, her story was about our steadfastness - that no matter what is being done to us we will struggle and resist. We will stay here and nothing will shake us!

In fact, as Sawsan’s story illustrates, tellers rarely share for the sole purpose of ‘informing’ an audience. The teller, whose story describes or questions an unjust situation, is also urging those present to engage in collective action against the injustice. The motivation driving the teller can therefore be described as a wish to arouse ‘conscientization’ – a term coined by Paulo Freire (1970) to describe the development of critical consciousness leading towards action against oppressive structures.
The urge to promote conscientization is evident in the following reflection, shared by Zati, a young man residing in the Jordan Valley, another Area C region located within the occupied West Bank.

It was important for me to share my story with other Palestinians, for we too need to know what's happening in other parts of Palestine. We are not all facing the same reality at the same time\textsuperscript{20} ... I hoped that those listening would feel inspired to put pressure on the Palestinian Authority Government to end their useless negotiations with Israel. Or maybe they would join in efforts to remove the PA Government so that we can decide our own destiny.

After attending a Freedom Bus event in the Jordan Valley, another participant from the South Hebron Hills made the following remark:

When we went to the Jordan Valley I realized that the people there are like us and that they have similar stories. At the same time, I learned that the problems facing people there are different to ours. For example, here in the South Hebron Hills, we are threatened more by settlers than by the army, whereas there, it is the soldiers that cause more suffering ... It was important to be with the people in the Jordan Valley and to learn about their lives. It gave me a push - more of a push towards resistance.

\textsuperscript{20} Like other Palestinian residents of the Jordan Valley, Zati’s applications to build a home have been routinely denied by the Israeli Civil Administration. His family are therefore forced to live in makeshift dwellings that have been demolished on numerous occasions. Meanwhile, as the Palestinian Authority continues its decades-long ‘peace negotiations’ with Israel, residents of the Jordan Valley have witnessed the construction of thousands of illegal settler homes. In fact, 50% of the Jordan Valley’s Area C territory has disappeared into the hands of Israeli settlers. A further 45% of land has been seized and converted into Israeli military bases, firing zones and State-controlled ‘nature reserves’ – all of which remain off-limits for Palestinians (Ma’an Development Centre, 2013).
As these statements suggest, Playback Theatre offers one avenue for an amplified form of grassroots ‘truth telling’, alliance building and community mobilization – especially in regions that feel alienated by top-down political processes.

ALLIANCE BUILDING

A desire to build alliances between Palestinian communities is reflected in efforts that seek to mend the geopolitical fragmentation imposed by Israel upon Palestinians. In the West Bank, this fragmentation is most apparent in a vast array of mechanisms that control and restrict movement between various regions. The Separation Wall, roadblocks, checkpoints, military zones, settlements and settler-only roads all operate to separate one community from another. In addition to these architectural features, Israel utilizes a complex permit system and various legal mechanisms to prohibit or restrict contact between members of the dispersed Palestinian population.

In this context, jointly organized political actions and cultural activities can play a role in countering the divisions that characterize the Palestinian landscape (Rivers, 2014). Where possible, Playback Theatre performances and other Freedom Bus events therefore aim to engage representatives from multiple Palestinian communities. For example, on World Water Day, 2013, the Freedom Bus co-organized a daylong solidarity walk including talks, performances and community visits in the Jordan Valley. The event was organized in partnership with Palestinian activist groups from across the West Bank and was attended by hundreds of people. One Jordan Valley resident who shared his story, referred explicitly to the significance of an event that brought together Palestinians from various parts of historic Palestine: “Through my story, I wanted to tell Palestinians who are living in Area C and other parts of the West Bank, that we need to be in solidarity with ourselves. We need this more than
international support.” On other occasions, participants have commented explicitly on the ability of inter-communal storytelling to bridge social distance. For example, in one interview with me, one Palestinian resident of Tubas stated that “Playback Theatre opens a space for people to share their stories and to communicate with each other. In this way theatre is helping to break down the barriers between us” (Khudiri, 2013).

Although the Playback process is used to inform and mobilise local and regional audiences, many tellers are also eager to transmit their stories to the outside world.

I was motivated to tell my story when I saw that the audience contained people from many different countries. I thought this would be a good chance for them to learn about the reality of our life under occupation. I hoped they would in turn pressure Israel to change its policy toward Palestinians (Omar, 2013).

As Thompson, Hughes and Balfour propose, ‘representations of ‘reality’, claims on the ‘real’ and valid explanation of cases are what is contested and attacked in places of war; sometimes as much as bodies and buildings” (2009: 62). The opportunity to have one’s story heard is therefore viewed as one way to counter external and hostile representations of the Palestinian reality.

The hopes of these tellers do raise certain questions though. As Thompson asks, “By asking to hear, must we retell?” He goes on to suggest that, “our presence as witnesses ensures that we have an ethical relationship with the material” (2004, 151-: 152). In some communities, this same question has arisen as a criticism towards the Playback Theatre process. Participants have voiced their consternation about a testimonial process that contains no guarantee of subsequent action.
In the case of the Freedom Bus team, organizers attempted to address this issue by working with local, regional and international writers, journalists, photographers, filmmakers and activists to ensure that event content is documented and distributed. Organizers also facilitated post-performance meetings where event participants are able to discuss concrete actions that can be taken in response to the predicaments of the community and the broader Palestinian body politic.

INFLAMATORY NARRATIVES?
This paper suggests that Playback Theatre – as a story-based strategy - can be integrated within the broader popular struggle movement for justice and equality in Palestine/Israel. One might ask though, whether Playback Theatre can also be used to reinforce certain harmful or non-constructive narratives. For example, in his discussion about the role of story-based projects in Sri Lanka, Thompson proposes that stories can be used to end conflict, as well as to sustain them:

Because many war situations are maintained by a complex pattern of narrative creation, mythmaking, and assertions of the truth, the act of telling a story in these contexts—whether for therapeutic, social, or cultural purposes—exists within these networks of competing and often war-sustaining accounts [Emphasis added] (2004: 151).

Whilst this concern may hold validity in some situations, I would argue that it holds limited currency in the Palestinian context. Thompson implies that acts of “narrative creation” help to sustain the dogmatic pursuits of adversarial parties. I propose however, that Palestinians are not engaged in an ideological battle. Although opposing narratives certainly predominate, the core of the struggle is not one of conflicting mythologies. Like other historical struggles against colonialism and
structural racism, significant sections of the Palestinian liberation movement are characterized by a call for civil rights and the recognition of self-determination. In this context, a story-based strategy aims to raise awareness and further claims for justice in accordance with international law, rather than to inflame ethno-religious divisions.

NARRATIVE POWER

Nonetheless, Thompson’s observation that stories can sustain conflict does bear relevance. As Canning and Reinsborough (2009: 13) state, “Narratives can often function as a glue to hold the legitimacy of power structures in place and maintain the status quo” (2009: 13). For example, Israel’s ubiquitous ‘security narrative’ justifies the illegal practice of land confiscation, home demolitions, administrative detention and construction of the Separation Wall. As mentioned above, Israel has also conducted a campaign of ‘memoricide’ with the objective of repressing and appropriating Palestinian history, culture and identity.

Storytelling practices that operate in opposition to these efforts can therefore be defined as a form of ‘antagonistic’ activity – one that ensures memory and the desire for emancipation are not extinguished.

Indeed, as Canning and Reinsborough remind us, “narrative power” has always played an essential role within movements for justice and equality:

Historically, the power of stories and storytelling has been at the centre of social change efforts ... Movements have won public support with powerful stories like Rosa Parks’ refusal to change seats” (2009, 10).
WHY THEATRE?

There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt.
~ Audre Lorde (1984: 39)

Sharing stories about life and struggle under occupation is not a novel experience for most Palestinians. Those living in areas impacted by high levels of political violence become accustomed to the act of narrating their accounts to journalists, writers, researchers and human rights advocates. One might ask therefore whether Playback Theatre holds any advantage over more conventional modes of story-collection and circulation.

I propose that Playback Theatre does contain a combination of features that add value to traditional forms of story-based advocacy, campaigning and community building. These features are described by Jo Salas (1999) as the ‘artistic’ and ‘social interactive’ domains, and by Jonathan Fox (1999) as the ‘ritual’ dimension of Playback Theatre.

THE ARTISTIC DOMAIN

Salas notes that, “we need art in order to integrate and comprehend our experience” (1999: 3). The Playback Theatre enactment with its use of staging, dynamics, metaphor and improvisation helps to fulfil this artistic task by providing form to the teller’s story and its central meanings. The Playback performer who is able to transform real life stories into enactments that are rich in artistry, is particularly effective at generating “resonance for the audience as well as for the teller” (ibid: 6).

In contrast to more cerebral approaches, Playback Theatre, with its artistic dimension, invites a direct and visceral relationship to the teller and their story. As
Fox suggests, “since playback theatre engages many aspects of our intelligence, it penetrates our consciousness in a particularly profound manner” (1999: 6). An understanding of Playback’s unique mechanisms is reflected in the intentions of many Palestinians who choose to share their story:

When I speak, maybe some people will not understand me or maybe I cannot express well. However, when others see my experience being acted out in front of them, it helps to reinforce my story and people will therefore understand it better. – Zati, Jordan Valley, 2012.

Sometimes we talk and talk until we get to a point where we can’t hear anymore. But with theater we actually see the story that is being told. There is sound, there is image and there is action. When people see the story they end up feeling more. They are more connected to it. This might give them motivation to take action at a later date. – Jamila, South Hebron Hills, 2013.

I’m used to reading reports and reading newspapers and reading, reading, reading! In Playback Theatre there aren’t a lot of words. Instead you get to see the story and this can affect the state of the spectator much more ... It touched me strongly when I saw the actors and their faces filled with anger, fear and other emotions. I could feel those emotions for real - much more than when I read. I felt the emotions. I felt them in my body. – Intisar, South Hebron Hills, 2013.

These quotations suggest that theatre engages the totality of our senses, thus enabling a greater receptivity to the material at hand. This might hold particular relevance for activists and campaign organizers who wish to enhance the accessibility of their
communication efforts. Indeed, there is nothing new about the understanding that art can be used to serve educational or political objectives. This is the realm of didactic theatre or agitprop. And although the benefits of these forms should not be dismissed, we should also remember that “art by becoming propaganda loses its aesthetic and human dimensions and fails to move the audience.” (Ganguly, 2010: 21).

On the one hand, I suggest that the Playback process, with its prioritisation of the unplanned emergence of stories, contains certain safeguards that protect it against becoming a tool for the narrow interests of political groups or NGOs. On the other hand, if the Playback performers are opportunistic or insensitive to the particularities of a teller’s account, it is possible that the story will be interpreted and enacted solely within the framework of the actor’s motivations or ideology. In this sense, the actor ‘colonizes’ the story and uses it to serve their own desires. Of course, the actor can never escape from their own subjective association to the teller’s account. Nor is this necessarily desirable. As Rowe (2007) has pointed out, the implicit negotiation of a story’s meaning can help to open up new perspectives. The telling and its enactment thus becomes a dialogue rather than a monologue. Nonetheless, it is important that the Playback practitioner strives to serve the teller rather than their own political or artistic agenda.

THE SOCIAL INTERACTIVE DOMAIN

Playback Theatre is social and interactive in nature. Without the participation of an audience who share their thoughts, feelings and real life stories, there would be no event. The establishment of an environment that enables maximal participation is
therefore crucial to the success of a Playback Theatre process. Salas proposes several factors that help to foster this “social interactive” domain. These include:

Planning and organization according to the purpose of the gathering; a congenial and appropriate physical environment; an opportunity early in the proceedings for each person to be seen and heard; an atmosphere of respect; some form of participation or engagement from all present; the acknowledgment and inclusion of diverse concerns, points of view, and feelings; time management; a sense of achievement in relation to the meeting's intent; and an adequate closure at the end (1999: 5).

The Freedom Bus troupe also prioritizes the establishment of long-term relationships with partnering communities. In-depth consultations, joint planning, multiple performances and post-event evaluations all help to build trust and deepen rapport. Long-term contact and a participatory approach to event planning also allows for a more organic interface with other activities associated with the popular struggle movement. For example, once a relationship of trust has been established, it is not uncommon for us to receive invitations and requests to perform at village protests, solidarity marches or other actions. (On one occasion, the village of Nabi Saleh invited the troupe to perform at a memorial event for Mustafa Tamimi and Rushdi Tamimi, two community activists who were shot dead by the Israeli army during a non-violent demonstration. Nabi Saleh subsequently requested that we create a scripted play based on stories from their community. This proposal manifested as *Our Sign is the Stone*, a highly successful production that toured to villages, refugee camps and remote farmer communities throughout the West Bank.)
Freedom Bus events are uniquely characterized by multi-day, immersion experiences that provide community members and non-local participants with an extended opportunity for interaction and relationship building. These events typically include olive harvesting, construction work, or the facilitation of educational and arts-based activities for children and youth. Participants in these multi-day events are also invited to engage in protective presence activity and other forms of human rights monitoring and reporting. Evening times usually include Playback Theatre performances and various forms of locally organized cultural programming.

Sharing and receiving stories within the framework of an extended, immersive experience, takes on special relevance. Community members are no longer delivering stories within the context of a short-lived meeting. Non-local audience members are now able to receive a story and associate its contents to people, places and situations they have been able to encounter firsthand. Performers are also able to hear and enact a story with greater awareness regarding the social, cultural, historical and political “back story” of the host community. In particular, the opportunity to reside within a community and receive their hospitality, allows for a reconstitution of the typical roles that define relations between performers and community members. Actors lose their role as benevolent artists engaged in charitable solidarity work. Instead, they develop humility as ‘guest’, and ‘student’ – learning firsthand from veterans of the popular struggle movement. Likewise, community members are no longer positioned as a ‘voiceless victims’. Instead, as Maurya Wickstrom argues, their integrity as political subjects is recognised and maintained (Wickstrom, 2012). In this way, a form of comradeship and reciprocity emerges – one where learning, growth and transformation can occur on all sides.
As I have proposed, an expanded conception of the ‘interactive social’ domain can lead to the formulation of multi-dimensional events that hold rich potential for all who participate. I do acknowledge that the ability of Playback Theatre troupes to plan and facilitate extended gatherings might be limited in many cases. Nonetheless, a commitment to building long-term, genuine partnerships should be central to any Playback endeavor that prioritizes social and political change.

THE RITUAL DOMAIN

A Playback Theatre performance is characterized by a certain sequence of events or ‘ritual markers’:

The teller must come to the chair; the teller must stay in the chair during the enactment; the teller must tell a personal story. The actors stand when picked for a role; the actors do not talk during the interview. The conductor does not interrupt the enactment; the conductor checks in with the teller after the enactment; the conductor dismisses the teller from the chair (Fox, 1999: 14).

The Playback ritual, as it has evolved in our case, is also characterized by performance opening and closing choreographies that include well-known popular songs. These sections of the event inevitably rouse spontaneous participation from the entire audience. It is also not uncommon for the closure of a Playback event to be followed by unprompted dubke (a form of traditional Palestinian dance).

In addition to the structure of an event, the Playback ritual is defined by pattern, time, tempo and emotional safety (Salas, 2011). These factors in combination help to generate a distinctive container – a space where participants can transition from their everyday reality into a liminal zone where the usual customs and conventions of
society are suspended (Davidheiser, 2006; Fox, 1999). Within this space, experiences that are difficult to face or comprehend “are condensed, given dimension, and framed so that they can be recognized and re-viewed” (Cohen, Varea and Walker, 2011: 162). As Schirch (2001) notes, the ritual container can also hold “ambiguities, complexities, and paradoxes in a way rational, logical thought cannot” (cited in Hutt and Hosking, 2004, p. 9).

In societies subjected to external threat, Volkan (2006) proposes that a need for cohesive, large-group identity can exclude the expression of divergent narratives. On the other hand, as suggested above, the ritual container of performance can provide a community with valuable opportunities for the identification and exploration of themes and emotions that might normally be suppressed.

In Playback performances for example, tellers and audience will sometimes share stories of grief and vulnerability thus challenging prevailing norms that emphasize a need to remain ‘strong’ and ‘steadfast’.

For example, after hearing a story about the death of Mustafa Tamimi, one member of the audience shared the following reflection (Rivers, 2013a):

> At most events – where we remember the death of a Martyr - we experience anger, or we turn the person into a hero. Alternatively, we watch from a distance and then we try to forget. But seeing this enactment helped us to connect with other feelings ... People made Mustafa into a hero – but they didn’t hear his family.

A member of Mustafa’s family also commented:
When Bahaa told the story about Mustafa Tamimi, he reminded us that Mustafa died fighting for our freedom. But his story also gave us an opportunity to mourn. Everyone in the audience cried. Sometimes it is important to release the pressure otherwise we would burst.

As these quotations suggest, participants place value on the provision of an “aesthetic space that welcomes diverse emotions and complex narratives - an opportunity so often denied in the prevailing quest for order, sense and survival” (Rivers, 2013a: 167). As should be clear from this paper though, Playback Theatre, with its ability to facilitate emotional release, cannot be conflated with forms of theatre that promote catharsis at the expense of conscientization and political mobilization (Boal, 1979).

Nor in my experience, are Playback performances solemn affairs, even in cases where stories of hardship and sorrow are shared. Inevitably an implicit dialogue between stories occurs (Hoesch, 1999) reminding the audience of their capacity for grief and resilience (Rivers, 2013b; 2014). As I have argued elsewhere, the expression of these diverse emotions can ignite “a creative moment where the participant regains power and spontaneity, and is freed to view and respond to their situation with clarity and renewed energy” (Rivers, 2013a: 167).

The ritual container provided by Playback, therefore connects participants to a communal source of sustenance and rejuvenation – a resource whose importance cannot be overlooked in the context of a daily routine characterized by immense hardship and oppression.
LIMITATIONS

Playback Theatre with its dependence upon unscripted stories and improvised enactments can lack the finesse, or aesthetic impact, of devised theatre. Furthermore, Playback Theatre is generally unsuitable for large crowds or outdoor venues. It is by nature a minimalistic form that functions best in more intimate settings. For those using Playback in the context of popular struggle, this places significant constraints upon its application during public protests or other political gatherings.

Playback also fails to engage the audience in an explicit process of discussion, debate or creative exploration regarding issues of concern. Unlike Forum Theatre, Playback is therefore unsuited for situations where a community may need to find concrete solutions to the predicaments that face them.

Financial issues also pose a considerable challenge to the sustainability of initiatives such as the Freedom Bus. Our performers make a living from their art and must therefore receive a professional fee. Transport, accommodation, administration and a range of other production costs also necessitate that a good amount of funds be found to keep the initiative running. The Freedom Bus has received funding from a range of international donors (including the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, Medico International, the Swiss Consulate, the British Council and UNESCO). However, the amounts received have been relatively minimal and at the best of times, we have not been able to plan more than one year in advance.

On the other hand, this dependence upon international donors does raise questions, especially for an initiative that engages in Palestinian ‘cultural resistance’. One might ask whether a ‘citizen actor’ model (Fox, 1994; Salas, 1993/2013) might be more congruent with the values and intentions of a theatre initiative dedicated to political
action. As in many other parts of the world, this model would involve a company of unpaid community members who would meet frequently to plan, train and perform.

Of course, this model too would face certain obstacles. In many cases, even amateur actors and musicians are hesitant to ‘work for free’ – especially in this neoliberal, post-Oslo era where the spirit of volunteerism within Palestinian society has been significantly diminished, and where the traditional functions of civil society have been professionalized and usurped by internationally funded, non-government organizations.

 Nonetheless, the pursuit of a truly radical, sustainable and ‘people-based’ theatre movement must continue if the proponents of ‘cultural resistance’ wish to remain faithful to their ethics and ideals.

CONCLUSION

Playback Theatre privileges the stories of community members. Tellers are not preselected. Rather, stories emerge spontaneously during the event itself. This inclusive framework has provided Palestinian communities with an effective route through which to transmit relatively unmediated accounts of life under colonization, occupation and apartheid. Playback in this context has also helped to provoke critical consciousness and the will for action amongst audience members – be they internationals or other Palestinians. In contrast to didactic, information-driven campaigns however, Playback Theatre – as an art form – engages participants on a multi-sensorial level, thus enabling a more complete connection to the teller and their situation. In this sense, Playback holds certain utilitarian advantages. As a type of advocacy it provides a unique, community-centred forum for the identification and communication of important issues. At the same time, Playback allows participants
to view their stories from a place of distance and perspective. This in turn enables people to attribute new (or renewed) coherence and meaning to their experiences. Performers also gain the opportunity to discard their ‘charitable’ instincts in favour of a comradeship that recognizes the shared political imperatives of those present. Indeed, the network of stories and relationships that emerge over time can help to fortify a movement against de-politicization and despondency. Perhaps the heartbeat of our work could therefore be described as the formation and development of relationships that facilitate growth, reciprocity and action on our very human journey towards peace and equality.

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Chapter 5

Cherry Theft Under Apartheid: Playback Theatre in the South Hebron Hills of Occupied Palestine


In May 2012, an ensemble of Palestinian performers from The Freedom Theatre – a cultural organization based in Jenin Refugee Camp – arrived in At-tuwani[^21] for the first time. Although the distance between Jenin and At-tuwani is just 107 miles, it can take over 5 hours (on a good day) to travel from one place to the other. This is due largely to the separation wall, check points, and settler-only roads. Such infrastructure not only helps enforce and expand Israel’s settler colonial project, it also fragments, inhibits, and deters social, cultural, and trade relations among Palestinian communities (White, 2014). Despite these obstacles, May 15th 2012

[^21]: At-tuwani has a population of approximately 350 residents and is situated in the South Hebron Hills next to the illegal Israeli settlement of Ma’on and the illegal outpost of Havat Ma’on established on large tracts of land confiscated from Palestinians[^21] – a practice considered illegal under international law (White, 2014). As with other Israeli colonies, the lands connected to Ma’on and Havat Ma’on have been designated as a closed military zone. This means that the indigenous Palestinian population cannot enter their original lands without a permit (B’Tselem, 2014).
marked the beginning of an ongoing and dynamic association between the people of 
At-tuwani and members of The Freedom Theatre.

We gathered in the upstairs room of At-tuwani’s community centre - a small room 
flanked on two sides by windows that overlooked a terraced hillside, dust-covered 
olive trees, and a cluster of flat-roofed homes – some built from stone, though most 
built from unpainted concrete.

The audience consisted mostly of people from At-tuwani22, together with a few 
volunteers from Operation Dove - a locally based, Italian peace organization23. In 
total, the room contained about 30 people: adults, youth and children, some seated in 
rows of plastic chairs, while others stood against the back wall or watched from the 
doorway. All gave their attention to Samer Abu Hantash, an accomplished oud-
player, and a regular member of The Freedom Theatre’s Playback Theatre ensemble. 
Samer sat on the right-hand side of the stage, plucking the final notes of a traditional 
melody. Seated in a line to his right – and facing the audience - were four actors: 
Ahmed Roch, Riham Isaac, Hanin Tarebeh and Christin Hodali. Faisal Abu Alhejah, 
the Conductor24 of the event, stood opposite Samer, waiting for the melody to end, 
before commencing the welcome and introduction.

To the assembled audience, Faisal explained that most theatre involves an 
arrangement where the audience watches while the actors perform a rehearsed 
product. In contrast, he stated, Playback Theatre depends upon the contribution of

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22 In 2004, Operation Dove were invited by the South Hebron Hills Popular Struggle Committee to 
provide a monitoring and protective presence in the South Hebron Hills. For more information about 
Operation Dove, please visit http://www.operationdove.org . 
23 ‘Conductor’ is the term given to the facilitator of a Playback Theatre event.
personal stories told by audience members. These accounts are shared and subsequently transformed into improvised enactments performed by a group of actors and musicians. “Without your stories”, he said, “there is no theatre.” To illustrate, Faisal invited people to raise their hand if they wished to share something about their day. Following each of the short accounts that followed, Faisal asked the "Teller’s" name. Then, upon his injunction of “Let’s watch!”, the actors moved onto centre stage, together re-presenting the Teller’s experience by means of improvised sound, movement, and words.

When he sensed that the audience was sufficiently engaged, Faisal indicated that we were about to transition to a new phase of the performance. “I now invite one of you to tell a longer story - something that has happened to you - an experience you would like to share with us ...”

Uhm Saber was the first to raise her hand. She was one of four people who would share their stories that day. Faisal invited her to take the "Teller’s chair," next to his own seat on the front left side of the performing space. Age showed visibly in Uhm Saber's body. She moved slowly with the aid of a wooden staff, and her face was weathered.

“Where does your story begin?” asked Faisal. “In the valley, on land they stole from us,” she said. Uhm Saber began to recount how she would take her sheep to graze in the valley as an act of defiance against the Israeli settlers’ theft of village land.

One day, while I was looking after the sheep, a settler approached and started shouting at me, telling me that I should leave immediately and that I was trespassing on land that was not mine. When I ignored him, he started throwing stones at me, and advancing in my direction. I had been beaten up by
these settlers before and so I was afraid. I threw stones back and when he reached me, I began to ward him off with my stick. Other settlers, noticing the interaction, came to join him and very soon I was facing several young men. They grabbed my stick and began to beat me.

In the remainder of her account, Uhmm Saber described how she managed to retreat to a higher position within sight of At-tuwani. From there she called out for help and was soon joined by others from the village. The settlers left before they arrived. As Uhmm Saber’s story drew to a close, Faisal invited her to choose an actor who would play her. Uhmm Saber chose Hanin.

Upon Faisal’s cue, the actors stood and walked to the side of the stage. Samer began to play the oud, and after a moment, Hanin as Uhmm Saber entered the performance space taking the sheep to graze. Off-stage, actors added their voices to the scene. We heard the sound of sheep and the distant calls of other shepherds. Suddenly one actor stepped out into the space as a settler. He began to shout at the protagonist, demanding that she leave “his” land. The tension escalated, until the other settlers entered the scene. At that moment, the real Uhmm Saber sitting just off the stage spontaneously interjected. Standing up, and with a raised voice, she offered Hanin her stick and ordered her to start defending herself against the settlers.

After a momentary pause, the audience – along with Uhmm Saber - erupted in laughter. Perhaps we were all aware that a transgression of the formal Playback ritual had occurred: usually the Teller does not intervene during the performance. On the other hand, laughter is not an infrequent response to the enactment of scenes that include representations of violence. Indeed, one might wonder if such laughter is a remedial reflex – a way of releasing or deflecting the painful emotions that inevitably
arise. Or perhaps the laughter is indicative of the black humor that functions to reclaim autonomy – as if the Teller and her/his community are refusing to be viewed as victims. In Uhm Saber’s story however, the audience may also have found humor in the recognition of their own frustrated desires – reflected in Uhm Saber’s spontaneous assertion of authority within the dramatic space.

At the end of the enactment Faisal invited Uhm Saber to comment on whether the important elements of her experience were represented accurately. Uhm Saber replied “yes.” She then thanked the actors and returned to her seat in the audience.

The Conductor’s post-enactment question to the Teller, “Did you see your story?” or “Was it something like that?”, reflects Playback’s insistence that the performer accurately mirror the Teller’s experience (Salas, 1993/2013). This question of accuracy in representation underscores the fundamental role of subjectivity in personal experience and its interpretation by others. In Playback Theatre this phenomenon requires the listener/performer to examine the relationship between their reading of the story, and the meaning that the Teller ascribes to it (Rowe, 2007).

A helpful way to identify these requirements of narrative thinking and interpretation, is found in Jerome Bruner’s (1986) notions of the "landscape of action" and "landscape of consciousness". The landscape of action refers to the objectively perceived events that occur within the story, whereas the landscape of consciousness indicates the subjective experience of the protagonist.

The Playback practitioner strives to preserve these dual landscapes of narration as they appear within the Teller’s account. This practice becomes particularly pertinent

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If a significant aspect of the story is missing or misrepresented, the teller can request the actors to (re)enact the scene in question.
where the landscape of action is characterized by events that are violent or oppressive. As Salverson (1999) suggests:

[the use of] naturalism, when taken up by community groups [...] for use with people who have experienced violence, may evoke performances of testimony caught in an aesthetic of injury and an overly simplistic "standing in" for another. Such performances reinscribe a victim discourse that sustains the psychic residues of violent histories, codifying the very powerlessness they seek to address.

Without a clear articulation of the landscape of consciousness then, the performers may slip into representations of violence that presuppose a traumatic reaction – or a victim position, an assumption that may not correspond with the Teller’s actual experience.

For example, the events related by Uhm Saber could suggest various subjective responses and identity positions. On the one hand, her account may appear to present notions of psychic injury and victimhood. Alternatively, her testimony could invoke ideas of samud (steadfastness) and civil resistance – themes that position her primarily as a fighter and activist rather than a casualty of settler violence.

Inevitably, the performer (and spectators) will engage their own personal, cultural, and sociopolitical frames of reference as they interact with a testimony (Rowe, 2007). This is not a negative phenomenon, for the ensuing negotiation of meaning and content can give rise to new and constructive perspectives (Dennis, 2008). Clearly though, the interpretive task should not rest solely with the Conductor, the actors, or the audience. It is an ethical imperative to ensure that the Teller is given ample opportunity to fully articulate the dual landscapes of their story.
At the same time it is important to note that an unwavering allegiance to literal narrative might reduce the story’s latent potential (Dennis, 2008). Taking Uhm Saber’s account as an example: If we were to rely only upon her given words, we might fall into a narrow and personalized engagement with the event. The performers may thus fail to identify and represent the broader sociopolitical features of her experience.

In Uhm Saber’s story, we learned that her experience of assault had also occurred on several occasions previous to the time she was telling about. In her rendering of these events, she framed her resolution to repeatedly return to the valley as an act of resistance. Her story though was not idiosyncratic. Many other Palestinian shepherds have experienced similar attacks from Israeli settlers (See: Operative Dove, 2014) and, like Uhm Saber, they continue to exercise their defiance by grazing livestock on confiscated land. However, these localized violations and examples of resistance, also point to the broader context of ethnic cleansing, settler colonialism, and the need for an ongoing anticolonial liberation struggle (Jawad, 2011) – national concerns that continue to preoccupy and characterize the collective consciousness of the Palestinian body politic.

The dynamic then, between individual testimony and collective narrative provides certain opportunities – and risks - for the Playback actor in their interpretation and representation of the Teller’s account.

For example, The Freedom Theatre’s actors frequently utilize popular songs and poetry as aesthetic devices that enable them to relate personal stories to broader historical, social and political realities. However, used with indiscretion, such devices
can subsume distinctive features of personal experience within predetermined and simplistic templates of national identity.

To honor the personal and universal concerns that arise from a canon of stories, the actors must therefore endeavor to develop an artistic and intellectual integrity that pays tribute to both the individual narrator and the greater context that frames their story.

STRATEGY

The Freedom Theatre’s first performance in At-tuwani resulted in the establishment of an ongoing partnership between the Theatre and local bodies including the South Hebron Hills Popular Struggle Committee, the women’s cooperative and At-tuwani’s school. Jointly organized events included Playback Theatre performances, drama workshops, and community visits. At-tuwani has also been integrated into The Freedom Theatre’s annual Freedom Ride – a multi-day event featuring home stays, political seminars, direct actions, live music and Playback performances. These larger events typically attract students, artists, activists and journalists from the USA, Europe, Australia, and from other parts of Palestine. Between the freedom rides however, Playback events are mostly held in a small courtyard attached to the women’s cooperative. Other events have occurred at the local school.

During the early stages of The Freedom Theatre’s relationship with At-tuwani, community-based activists and organizers shared their sense that the Playback Theatre methodology appeared congruent with local media strategies that aimed to

\[26\] For more information about The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus (including details about the annual Freedom Ride), please visit [www.freedombus.ps](http://www.freedombus.ps)
raise awareness and mobilize action around specific violations that targeted Palestinian residents of the South Hebron Hills.

As Sawsan Makhamra, a resident of Mufgarah, shared:

> I told my story because I wanted others to learn the truth about what’s happening here. When people hear our stories and see them enacted – the events become more vivid in their mind. This greater intimacy with our experience awakens a wish to learn more, which in turn, stimulates a desire to take action on our behalf (Makhamra, 2013).

Another resident shared a similar sentiment, stating simply that, “when you feel the story it gives you motivation to take action.”

Kefah Adraa, founder of the At-tuwani Women’s Co-operative, suggested that Playback Theatre reinforces a ‘real media’ strategy.

> I am pleased that so many people from inside and outside Palestine come to hear our stories. These people become bearers of a truth that is concealed and manipulated by the mainstream, Zionist media [...] I hope those who hear our stories will return to their own people and put pressure on their governments to withdraw support from Israel. This is extremely important for us (Adraa, 2013).

As these statements indicate, Tellers are not seeking a response that is demarcated solely by empathy. Instead, the witness is called upon to transform awareness and identification into future action.

Rania Jawad proposes in her essay on performance-based activism in Bil’in that the inclusion of international spectators makes implicit reference to “the fact that Israeli
oppression against the Palestinians has only been made possible by international and institutional backing” (2011: 140). Jawad states:

The role of the international[…] is therefore not ultimately based on a spectatorship defined by the witnessing and documentation of violations of international law, but rather on sustained and specific direct actions in the fields of law, governmental and economic politics, media, institutional, and grassroots activism. The performance of the Palestinian villagers resistance actions thus depends on a spectatorship that transforms itself into action (2011: 140).

As noted above however, Playback events in At-tuwani attract a diversity of participants including internationals, non-local Palestinians, people from At-tuwani, and other residents of the South Hebron Hills. Israeli activists connected with the Palestinian popular struggle movement are also an occasional presence at these events.

There is no doubt therefore, that this diversity of audience structure compels the Teller to mobilize spectatorship in different ways. For example, some Tellers state that their story was aimed predominantly at people from their own community with the aim of reinforcing values of steadfastness. Others seek to mobilize non-local Palestinians. As one Teller stated, “Through my story, I wanted to tell Palestinians who are living in Area C\textsuperscript{27} and other parts of the West Bank, that we need to be in solidarity with ourselves. We need this more than international support”. Another Teller shared a similar view:

\textsuperscript{27} Under the Oslo II Accord of 1995, the West Bank was divided into 3 administrative regions know as Area A, B and C. Area C includes 61% of the West Bank and falls under complete Israeli civil and military control.
It was important for me to share my story with other Palestinians, for we too need to know what’s happening in other parts of Palestine. We are not all facing the same reality at the same time [...] I hoped that those listening would feel inspired to put pressure on the Palestinian Authority Government to end their useless negotiations with Israel. Or maybe they would join in efforts to remove the PA Government so that we can decide our own destiny (Rivers, in press).

As the above discussion illustrates, the process of communal storytelling is seen to contain certain pragmatic functions that relate to the varied political imperatives of Palestinian civil society. Occasionally however, some audience members come forward with the predominant goal of attaining psychological relief. In such instances, the Playback process appears to contain various ameliorative and restorative functions28.

Stories then, are told for the purpose of transmission: that is, to pass on certain values, or to inform and educate those gathered. Testimony can also be given as a way to incite intention and related action from the spectator. The desire for expression, validation and empathic joining are additional factors that may motivate some people to share their experiences.

In other cases, the act of telling and witnessing the subsequent enactment, can stimulate a position of reflexivity within the Teller and the audience. As Intisar Al Adraa (2014) shared:

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28 See Rivers (2013a; 2013b; and 2014) for analysis relating to the use of Playback Theatre as a response to the adverse psychological impacts of political violence in occupied Palestine.
Unfortunately, adaptation is a common response to the perverse conditions under which we live. It is easy to become accustomed to the daily realities of land confiscation, home demolitions, settler violence and military occupation. However, when we see these realities represented through theatre, it causes us to look again and see our situation from another perspective – one that reveals its abnormality.

Playback’s potential for stimulating reflexivity is further illustrated in the account of Sami Hureini, an 18-year old activist from At-tuwani. During a 3-day Playback workshop held in March 2014, Sami shared the following story involving himself and two friends. The event described occurred three years earlier when Sami was aged 15:

We went to our land close to the valley – a piece of land the settlers had taken. Around it they had built a wire fence to keep us out. We decided to break the fence and re-enter our land – as a kind of statement. However, we didn’t know that while we were cutting the wire, the settlement guard was taking pictures of us [...] A few minutes later, a police car and four army jeeps arrived. The police took us and forced us into their car - threatening to shoot us with a taser gun if we didn’t cooperate. I remember feeling very scared. Mainly, I was afraid of being arrested and imprisoned [...] They took us to the police station in the settlement of Ma’on. There we were accused of invading settler property and of threatening their security. After holding us for eight hours the police called our families and asked them to pay a fee of 1,500 shekels for each one of us in order to gain our release. Our families were willing to pay. However, we told them not to. We thought it was wrong that they should pay [...] The police then tried to negotiate a lower fine. They called our parents again, and asked for an amount of 1,000 shekels for each of us. Again we told our parents not to pay.
In response they put us in jail for three days. It was a very difficult experience being there. They wouldn’t let us sleep properly [...] each time they found us sleeping they’d wake us up with loud noises [...] After these three days were up, we were sent to the court where the judge declared that our families should now pay 3,000 shekels for each of us! However, my father, and his lawyer argued with the judge, and in the end we were set free without having to pay anything!

The workshop setting within which this story was told, consisted of ten Palestinians and eight internationals. In an interview that I conducted with Sami six months later he stated that the story was told in order to “show how the Israeli’s treat us – how they maltreat Palestinian children” (Hureini, 2014).

When I then asked Sami what it was like to have his story played back, he stated that he was happy to “relive” his experience.

Sharing, and then witnessing my story as an enactment, helped me to name and recognize the importance of this event in my life [...] In many ways, the experience of arrest and imprisonment was a turning point. Before, I used to be afraid of these things. Now, however, I know what to expect and how to respond. My fear is gone. In this sense, the experience changed me in a positive way. It was a kind of inoculation that has given me strength to continue [...] Watching myself through the enactment allowed me to observe how I reacted to what happened. I was able to see how much I have changed since then. I feel pride about that...

Sami’s reflections reveal that the Teller may interact with the Playback process in a way that transcends the original intention. His initial desire was to inform
internationals about the harsh realities of Israeli occupation. (His story may also have served to transmit certain values, and even strategies, to the Palestinian members of the group.) However, Sami also described subsequent insights that arose through the act of telling and witnessing the performance of his story. Through this process he was able to generate and reinforce a coherent narrative that held constructive implications for his definition of self and identity.

TRANSGRESSION

In addition to the functions described above, Playback Theatre provides a space for mediated social transgression. This transgression, or subversion, can occur at the level of both process and content. For example, although women have played an increasingly central role in the South Hebron Hills popular struggle, At-tuwani remains a highly patriarchal society where women are generally barred from assuming positions that challenge traditional, male-dominated power structures.

In most other villages where The Freedom Theatre performs, patriarchal power relations are evident in audience dynamics, where it is usually the men who come forward first to share their stories. Only through the active encouragement of the Conductor, do women also venture into the Teller’s chair. In this sense, the Playback process can – in the absence of conscious intervention – replicate existing power structures that privilege certain groups over others.

In At-tuwani however, women are often the first to share their stories. This phenomenon may reflect the growing integration of women into the public life of At-tuwani. Nevertheless, the prevailing social order does continue to favor the voice of men as official representatives of the community. One could argue then, that women
are actively engaging with the process of a Playback event - to claim public space - and thus disrupt established patterns of representation and authority. This is further reinforced by the actual content of the stories shared. Many women choose to narrate accounts that emphasize their agency in communal actions that have occurred in response to land confiscation, military incursions and demolition threats. For example, in September 2012, Jamila, a young woman from At-tuwani, told a story about a women-led protest that took place in response to the attempts of Israeli authorities to destroy newly installed utility poles that would provide electricity for the village. In a later interview with me, Jamila made the following reflection:

People from outside At-tuwani probably assume it’s men who are in control and that they are the ones who resist. I wanted to share my story because it challenges this view. In my story, women were in the front line. They were the ones most angry and most motivated to take action. It is the women who were the main driving force (Rivers, 2013b).

It is not uncommon for men to also share stories that deviate from socially prescribed representations of gender. On many occasions I have heard accounts that implicitly disrupt cultural norms that prohibit the expression of male vulnerability. For example, it is not unusual to hear men describe the physical and psychological distress they felt in response to the violence of Israeli authorities – even though such sharing is typically discouraged in everyday life (Rivers, 2013a; 2013b; 2014).

Other stories challenge traditional notions of male heroism. For example, during a recent 5-day Playback workshop and subsequent performance, a set of stories were told by male youths, relating their attempts to steal cherries from a settler orchard located on village land. In these accounts, the youths were invariably intercepted by
settler guards and Israeli soldiers. During their ensuing attempts to escape, the young men were forced to abandon most of their "illegal" harvest as they fled across the hills towards At-tuwani.

These stories were told with a great deal of self-depreciatory humor. The youths emphasized their shrewdness in evading capture and retaining a portion of their harvest. At the same time, they spoke openly about the fright and exposure they felt while facing the Israeli authorities. It is unlikely that these accounts were narrated with the explicit intent of disputing conventional notions of masculinity. Nonetheless, the sharing of such stories does challenge social taboos that prohibit the expression of susceptibility by men.

Above I have focused upon social transgression within the process and content of Playback Theatre. However, the Playback Theatre process does not intrinsically contravene established power structures or dominant discourses. Indeed, as noted earlier, the Playback process can actually reinforce the prevailing social order. To avoid the replication of oppressive dynamics, the performing team must endeavor to create a space where marginalized voices can be heard.²⁹

IMMERSION

Initial activities between The Freedom Theater and At-tuwani consisted mostly of Playback Theatre performances spanning approximately 90 minutes in length.

²⁹ What happens when the Teller comes forward with an oppressive worldview - for example, a man telling a story that demeans and objectifies women? In this instance, do the performers unquestionably accept and enact this story as they might any other? While a full exploration of this question is beyond the scope of this article, it must be noted that loyalty to the Teller’s worldview should not be pursued at the expense of ethical considerations. Where such issues arise, the Playback team may recast the oppressed party in a manner that questions the objectifying or stereotyped portrayals provided by the Teller (Freeman, 2014). Another option is to introduce a narrator who presents an alternative worldview within the enactment. The Conductor can also invite members of the audience to become subsequent Tellers who share accounts that offer a counterpoint to the views expressed by the prior Teller.
However, local organizers suggested that this format was too limiting. They proposed instead that visiting activist-participants (both internationals and non-local Palestinians) should remain in At-tuwani for several days. This would enable visitors to gain a better grasp of the context and conditions that frame the stories shared by residents of the community. An immersive experience would also serve the overall objectives of alliance building and grassroots mobilization that underscore the efforts of the South Hebron Hills Popular Struggle Committee.

Based on this recommendation, "solidarity stays", lasting 4-5 days, came into existence as a new model of interaction. During these extended stays, participants are able to take part in community-selected activities that endeavor to reinforce Palestinian presence on traditional lands. These activities include tree planting (where olive groves suffer from settler attacks) and the (re-)construction of home dwellings and other buildings under threat of demolition by Israeli authorities. Visiting activists are also invited to join volunteers from Operation Dove in their monitoring of settler violence towards Palestinian residents of the area. During the evenings, visitors and locals gather for Playback Theatre performances and other events such as live music, films, and discussions.

Participants in these solidarity stays inevitably encounter the raw face of occupation and apartheid as it manifests in the South Hebron Hills. Visiting activists witness (or experience) settler violence, police and army brutality, and/or the demolition of Palestinian infrastructure. In addition, the vast disparity between the living standards of Palestinians and their Israeli neighbors, becomes abundantly clear. Visitors also learn about the history and strategies of the South Hebron Hills popular struggle movement. It should be noted however that local residents clearly request that
visiting groups not engage from a stance of voyeuristic political tourism. The call to action remains preeminent.

IDENTIFICATION
Through immersion, the Playback actors have also experienced the particulars of Israeli apartheid and Palestinian popular struggle as they manifest in the South Hebron Hills. This, along with deepening personal relations with community members, contributes towards enactments that are more nuanced and contextually detailed. As one actor, Hamudi Dabdoub, stated:

Returning repeatedly to At-tuwani has helped us to build a relationship of trust [...] people now feel confident about sharing deeper stories with us. As an actor, it also helps to spend time in one place. We now know from firsthand experience about the history and geography of the South Hebron Hills. When someone tells a story about a particular location – I can visualize exactly where it is. I also know from hearing prior stories, more about the specific event they are describing (Dabdoub, 2014).

Hassan Taha, another actor from The Freedom Theatre’s Playback troupe, felt similarly:

As a Palestinian who lives on the other side of Palestine, it was good for me to stay for extended periods of time in At-tuwani. By spending many days and nights together - talking, eating, playing, working, and struggling side by side - I got a much better understanding for how my people live and resist in this part of the occupied West Bank [...] In fact, in At-tuwani I didn’t feel like an actor coming to do his job. Instead, I felt like a family member and a part of the community [...] We [members of the performing troupe] worked the land,
demonstrated, shepherded and confronted the Israeli army. Having these experiences - which At-tuwani people must face every day – allowed me to identify with them. During a performance, this helped me as an actor. When a teller was sharing his story, I felt like it was my own, as if his experience had happened to me too. I connected deeply and this, I hope, was reflected in the enactment (Taha, 2014).

PERFORMING THE STRUGGLE

By establishing a regular presence in At-tuwani, the actors are able to respond to immediate demands. For example, during one stay, the actors were requested to perform at a demonstration that was organized in protest against the Israeli army’s failure to fulfill its protective obligations towards Palestinian children in the area.

During the school year, children from the villages of Tuba and Maghaer al-Abeed, attend the region’s only Palestinian primary school, located in At-tuwani. The children walk to school, usually on a road that passes between Ma’on and Havot Ma’on. This road is used because it is the most direct, enabling the children to reach school in 20 - 30 minutes. (Alternative routes can take up to 75 minutes.) For years, armed settlers have harassed and attacked children as they walk to school using these routes (CPT & Operation Dove, 2008).

In September 2004, a joint team consisting of international volunteers from Christian Peacemaker Teams and Operation Dove began accompanying the children on the shorter route to school. On the third day of this first patrol, the children and international volunteers were attacked by masked settlers armed with sticks and chains (CPT & Operation Dove, 2008).
In response to subsequent pressure from foreign governments, the Israeli Knesset Committee for Children’s Rights declared that a military escort should accompany the children on their way to and from school. The Committee also instructed the Israeli police to prosecute settlers who used violence against the children. In reality however, the Israeli authorities have failed to completely fulfill these obligations (CPT & Operation Dove, 2008).

Even with the daily military escort, the children are frequently victims of violence by settlers [...] Israeli authorities have not apprehended any settlers who used violence against the children, nor have they evacuated or demolished any buildings in the outpost. The children from Tuba and Maghaer al-Abeed, however, still depend on a twice-daily military escort to reach school and return safely (CPT & Operation Dove, 2008: 5).

In September 2013, following weeks of neglect by the Israeli authorities, children and youth from the South Hebron Hills decided to organize a demonstration against the ongoing settler violence. These children and youth also demanded the immediate reinstatement of the military escort. Adult activists from the popular struggle committee participated and helped to organize the event.

The demonstration began with a march from the village school to the hilltop location above At-tuwani, where children must wait for the military escort that is supposed to accompany them twice daily.

At this site, the children began to sing songs of resistance led by actors from The Freedom Theatre. This was followed by a Playback performance where children shared their thoughts and feelings about the daily violence they must navigate. After about twenty minutes however, the Israeli police and army interrupted the event by
entering the performing space and ordering the actors and the crowd to disperse. Later, local activists would claim that the subsequent reinstatement of the military patrol was evidence that the demonstration was successful. Nonetheless, settlers from Ma’on and Havat Ma’on continue to enjoy impunity.

MEANS OF PRODUCTION

I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it (Boal, 1985: 122).

Playback is essentially a collaborative endeavor. The audience and the performing team hold shared (though different) forms of responsibility for the process and content of an event. The audience provides the stories, and the actors generate the aesthetic representation of these accounts. In this sense, although the Teller provides content, and can comment upon the enactment, the artistic "means of production" are clearly controlled by the performing team. In the case of The Freedom Theatre’s application of Playback in At-tuwani, this has advantages and disadvantages noted by community members.

On the one hand, there is a symbolic and strategic significance to an alliance that fosters connections between the people of At-tuwani and artist-activists from various parts of Palestine. The Freedom Theatre’s actors also possess years of intensive theatre training that enable them to offer aesthetically powerful renditions of the stories told. On the other hand, no amount of immersive exposure or identification
can equip the actors with the same insider-knowledge that local residents have (Adraa, 2013; Hureini, 2014).

Based on this rationale, several community members suggested that training should be delivered with the objective of developing the ability of local residents to perform as Playback actors. In response, The Freedom Theatre offered two introductory workshops (more are planned), in March and September, 2014. The second workshop culminated in a small performance for friends and family of the participants. Male and female members of the popular struggle committee helped with the planning and coordination of these events. The workshops were attended by youth and young adults of both genders. However, when it came to performing in public, last-minute social pressure obliged the female participants to withdraw from their desired role as actors. Organizers from At-tuwani, and some other community members, expressed their opposition to this turn of events. Nonetheless, the occurrence indicated that compelling forces at the local level continue to identify acting as an undesirable pursuit for the women of At-tuwani. Restrictive social values such as these, are certainly cause for The Freedom Theatre to examine and reconsider its activities in the South Hebron Hills and other regions where women want to gain jurisdiction over the artistic means of production.

CONCLUSION

Playback Theatre privileges the stories of community members. Tellers are not preselected. Rather, stories emerge spontaneously during the event itself. This inclusive framework has provided residents of At-tuwani with an effective means to transmit relatively unmediated accounts of their lives under colonization, occupation, and apartheid. Playback in this context has also helped to provoke critical
consciousness and the will for action among audience members – be they internationals or Palestinians. The network of stories and relationships that emerge over time can help to fortify people against de-politicization and despondency. Perhaps the heartbeat of this work could therefore be described as the formation and development of relationships that facilitate reciprocity and action on the journey towards a just peace. Nonetheless, as this article has noted, cultural activism will suffer certain limitations where the artistic means of production remain within the control of “expert” practitioners.

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Chapter 6

Educate, Agitate and Organize! Playback Theatre and its Role in Social Movements.


In 1999, as Playback Theatre approached its 25th anniversary, Jonathan Fox noted that the form was reaching a range of sectors around the world. In line with early objectives, it was being used at a local level to improve community relations. Playback was also being applied within the fields of education, mental health and organizational development. Most commonly though, practitioners were applying Playback Theatre within the social service sector, particularly in communities whose voices were viewed as marginal to mainstream society (Fox, 1999).

From the outset, Playback was conceived as an effective tool for enabling “diverse voices to be heard in a context of empathy”. In particular, it was viewed as a practice that “honors the people’s voice, be it joyful or ashamed, triumphant or

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30 Jonathan Fox founded Playback Theatre in 1975. He developed the form along with Jo Salas and the original Playback Theatre company based in Hudson Valley, USA.
oppressed.” (Fox 1999:119) Jo Salas, commenting on the “idealism” of Playback, noted that, “this theatre was conceived as a theatre of gift. It was to be offered to the world as a means of healing interaction [...] We were committed to bringing this forum to the “unstoried” as well as to those who already knew the satisfaction of sharing stories.” (Salas 1999:134-135)

As Jonathan looked towards the future, he shared his hope that Playback Theatre could also “play a part in healing some of the injustices and upheavals of the past that fester not only in individuals, but in whole societies”31. (Fox 1999:15)

In line with the ideas expressed above, the Playback community has historically suggested that redemptive dialogue is a central feature in our contribution to social change. Towards this end, the Playback performer has been encouraged to function as an empathic mirror, or impartial conduit in service to each and every story. It is my sense however, that the emphasis on neutrality, therapeutic metaphor and charitable endeavour has helped to obscure the need for principled struggle against the structural roots of social injustice.

As we near the 40th year anniversary of Playback Theatre, we can see that an interest in its more overt political application is gathering momentum. This can be evidenced through the growing demand for workshops and courses that explore the intersection between Playback Theatre and social action. We can also point to many instances over the past decade where Playback has been used to address various social inequities, historical grievances and political demands. Most recently for example, Playback was used in the streets of Hong Kong to augment the 2014 Umbrella

31 See Volkas (2009) for examples of Playback Theatre being used to address legacies of violent conflict and historical trauma. For a broader discussion about Playback Theatre and its role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, see Hutt, J. and Hosking, B. (2004).
Movement and its call for the retention of locally based, democratic governance. Also in 2014, Playback was used in the Taiwanese Sunflower Student Movement to generate dialogue relating to the proposed, and highly controversial, Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement with China. In the same year, Palestinian activists were utilizing Playback Theatre to combat Israel’s continued practice of settler colonialism, military occupation and apartheid. In 2011 and 2012, Playbackers in the Occupy Movement were using the form to amplify widespread public consternation regarding wealth inequality, political corruption and corporate influence over the USA government. Today, numerous other initiatives around the world are using Playback Theatre within the context of social movements that address issues of poverty, racial discrimination, violence against women, homophobia, militarism, environmental degradation and climate change.

One might wonder therefore whether the Playback Theatre community has moved into a new era – one that contains elements that are more politicized and more direct in their allegiance to particular causes. Could it be that we are beginning to incorporate a more radical language of activism – one that moves beyond the lexicon of nonpartisanship in our journey towards a better world?

In this article, I will suggest that we must expand our praxis to include notions of critical thinking, political agitation, alliance building and joint struggle. Where asymmetrical power relations exist, we must be especially prepared to engage in efforts that incite constructive conflict and disrupt (versus soothe) the oppressive status quo. In the words of Frederick Douglass, the former slave and abolitionist leader, “the struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be

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32 For a discussion about the role of Playback Theatre in asymmetrical conflict, see Rivers, B. (2015).
both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will.” (Douglass 1857: vi)

As cultural activists seeking to renovate the guiding assumptions and associated methods that constitute our Playback praxis, we must begin to ask: What theories of change seem most appropriate to our endeavours? How can we be more strategic in our interventions? How can artistry and ritual best serve our objectives? And what limitations of form might require us to adopt other modes of social, cultural and political action?

EDUCATE, AGITATE!

In 1942, B.R. Ambedkar, iconic leader of the emerging Dalit movement, exhorted his followers with the following statement:

My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate, and organize. Have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual [...] For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality. (Ambedkar in Keer, 1971:351)

Throughout his life, Ambedkar fought to dismantle the caste system along with its oppressive social and economic features that relegated ‘untouchables’ to a despised position within Indian society. As the above statement suggests however, Ambedkar believed that true emancipation would arise only after internalized compliance with the caste system had been firmly uprooted.

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33 Dalit is a term designated for a section of society traditionally regarded as “impure” and hence “untouchable” within the Hindu caste system. While caste-based discrimination was officially prohibited under the Constitution of India, Dalit communities continue to suffer harassment, assault and inequity.
Paulo Freire also spoke of the oppressed and their struggle against “domestication” in favour of a full humanity (Freire 1970). His pedagogical approach featured the concept of “conscientization” - a route to liberation through which the learner sharpens their innate capacity for critical thinking and takes related action against the oppressive elements of reality (ibid:17).

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, also noted that hegemonic values and beliefs must be effectively countered before any revolutionary project can fully succeed (Gramsci 1971). He proposed that the capitalist state is divided into two spheres: A “political society” that rules through force, and a “civil society” that governs through the “manufacture of consent”. Gramsci defined civil society as a domain where ideas, values and beliefs are shaped, and where consent to bourgeois “hegemony” is achieved through the cultural legitimatization provided by media, universities and religious institutes. Gramsci warned that direct revolutionary struggle – a “war of attack” - would therefore be limited without a prior “war of position”, which he defined as the long battle over those perceptions, myths and ideologies that induce collaboration, submission and obedience to repressive structures.

If we accept the central importance of counter-hegemonic struggle, we must then ask whether Playback Theatre can contribute to this endeavour. Unlike Theatre of the Oppressed, the Playback methodology does not contain robust mechanisms for the explicit identification and analysis of oppressive norms and conditions. Rather, Playback offers “a kind of community conversation through stories, and this conversation, even though it contains not one, but many themes, and is often indirect in making its points, gives scope for the expression of a popular truth.” (Fox 1999: 120) Where the theme of a Playback event invites stories relating to a particular
injustice, we might therefore hope that the “community conversation” will include expressions of dissent and resistance to the oppressive status quo. Through these expressions, a counter-hegemonic position is established – one that calls for the awakening and action of those gathered.

In February 2015, I facilitated a 5-day workshop with Adavu Kalai Kuzu, a group of Dalit cultural activists who use street theatre, Parai^34 drumming and Playback Theatre to address caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu, India. In one of our conversations about the relevance of storytelling within the broader Dalit movement, a young man named Kumar noted the impact of hearing and witnessing the enactment of an account shared by his friend and comrade, Madhan.

In Madhan’s story he narrated an event that occurred during his childhood. One day the local landlord – a member of a dominant caste – approached Madhan and his friends as they were sitting together on the edge of a rice field. According to established custom, it was required that the children – as “untouchables” - stand and withdraw in order to allow the landlord’s free (and hence “unpolluted”) passage. Whilst his friends complied with this expectation, Madhan refused to move. Instead he remained, sitting defiantly at the edge of the path. In response, the dominant caste man, furious at this act of audacity, kicked him as he passed by.

Madhan’s story was not the most dramatic account of noncompliance that was shared during our 5 days together. However, it moved Kumar and others precisely because it illustrated the everyday actions that undermine the caste system and its dehumanizing structures.

^34 The Parai is an ancient drum traditionally played by members of the Dalit community during funeral processions. The instrument acquired negative connotations within caste society, however Dalit activists now celebrate the Parai as an important symbol of their identity and struggle.
In another story told during the same workshop, a man named Mari recounted an event that occurred in his home village.

Every year there is a religious festival held in celebration of the rain goddess Maariamman. During the festival, worshippers are surrounded by large crowds who drum and chant together as they move through the streets and into the temple grounds to celebrate. The event is always filled with high spirits and intense emotion. In accordance with caste divisions though, the temples are not open to Dalits. From the days of my early youth, my friends and I would complain about these rules and plan that some day we would defy them. It never happened though. The elders would warn us, saying that our [Dalit] community would suffer violent retribution if we angered the dominant caste. One year however, my friends and I disobeyed their order and joined the festival procession. As we approached the temple, we were gripped by the emotion that surrounded us, and then suddenly, as we entered the temple grounds, we found ourselves chanting *Jai Bhim*! *Jai Bhim!* After a few moments, the temple authorities came rushing forwards, eventually managing to push us out. This experience however, remains with me as a significant victory.

Like Madhan’s story, Mari’s account highlights and opposes the self-disciplining modes of thought and behaviour that compel oppressed subjects to comply with oppressive norms. Together, their stories give rise to a form of local knowledge or “popular wisdom” (Fox 1999:11) that challenges hegemonic values, and establishes instead a counter-narrative of dignity and resistance.

35 *Jai Bhim* literally means “Victory to Bhim” i.e. to Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The term is often used as an expression of greeting or solidarity between members of the Dalit movement.
Elsewhere I have noted that Playback Theatre can enable the transmission of attitudes, ideals, histories and concrete strategies that undergird a popular struggle movement (Rivers, 2013a; 2013b; 2014). In Palestine for example, stories will often advocate for the adoption of samud (steadfastness) in the face of military violence and harassment. Other stories communicate advice about specific tactics one can employ if threatened with land confiscation, home demolition, arrest and/or imprisonment. Other Tellers pay tribute to the history of Palestinian freedom struggle by narrating their own participation in various actions, protests and uprisings (intifadas).

In short, conscientization and political agitation occur through the exchange of fortifying and subversive stories. At times, stories also help to “inoculate” younger members of the popular struggle movement by preparing them for violations they are likely to endure at the hands of the Israeli authorities36.

In some cases though, the Teller’s impulse towards dissent is strengthened not by the validation of their current stance, nor by the inspiration gained from hearing of someone else’s resistance. Instead, an awakening occurs through the recognition of one’s own normalized response to the status quo. As an activist from At-tuwani37 shared:

Unfortunately, adaptation is a common response to the perverse conditions under which we live. It is easy to become accustomed to the daily realities of land confiscation, home demolitions, settler violence and military occupation. However, when we see these realities represented through theatre, it causes us

36 See for example Loai’s story in Rivers, B. (2014).
37 The village of At-tuwani is located in the South Hebron Hills of Occupied Palestine. The Freedom Theatre has been working in partnership with activists there since early 2012. For more information about this relationship, see Rivers, B. (In press).
to look again and see our situation from another perspective – one that reveals its abnormality\textsuperscript{38}.

The community of Khan Al Ahmar is located approximately 4.5 miles east of Jerusalem in the West Bank of Occupied Palestine. The people of this community are members of the Jahalin, a Bedouin tribe that once enjoyed relative prosperity in the land of historic Palestine. With the establishment of the State of Israel however, the Jahalin were evicted from traditional tribal territory and forced to reside as refugees in the West Bank and Jordan. Today the Jahalin live in impoverished, slum-like conditions alongside desert highways that cut through the occupied West Bank. They are under almost constant threat of further eviction as the Israeli authorities seek to seize their current areas of residence for the construction of illegal Israeli settlements.

In February 2012, a Playback performance occurred in Khan Al Ahmar’s community gathering space – a roughly built structure made from wooden planks, strips of plastic, worn carpet and corrugated iron. The troupe consisted of Palestinian members of The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus troupe together with myself as Conductor\textsuperscript{39}. In this event, a Jahalin leader named Eid came forward to the Teller’s seat. Eid is a university-educated member of his community. He is also a prominent activist, representing the Jahalin case both locally and abroad. In Eid’s story, he described a situation from his home life, where each morning his children would beg him for one shekel (about 25 cents). He then spoke about the shame he felt at his inability to fulfil this simple request.

\textsuperscript{38} This interview excerpt appears in my forthcoming article, Cherry Theft Under Apartheid. \textit{The Drama Review}.

\textsuperscript{39} The Freedom Bus initiative uses Playback Theatre and other forms of cultural activism to bear witness, raise awareness and build alliances throughout Occupied Palestine (see www.freedombus.ps). I am a Co-founder of the Freedom Bus. In the first few months of its establishment, I also conducted several Playback Theatre events. From March 2012 onwards however, Playback events have been performed and conducted in Arabic by Palestinian members of the troupe.
After hearing Eid’s story, the actors shaped his experience into a sparse, essentialized enactment. Eid appeared riveted. Later he shared with me, that in witnessing the performance of his story, he fully realized – for the first time – that he was submerged in poverty.

Eid’s story was not merely retold and repeated by the actors. It was translated into a language that attempted, through aesthetic means, to illuminate the core elements of his experience. This task of course, is a primary objective of the Playback performer. In response to the enactment, a Teller must confirm, contradict or expand upon the meanings and events that appeared in the performers’ interpretation of his story. In Eid’s case, he experienced something akin to Brecht’s concept of the “alienation effect” (verfremdungseffekt) (Brecht [1936] 1964:91) - a kind of critical distancing where the familiar is rendered as strange. The enactment had shaken and aroused him to the painful and unjust reality of his economic situation - one that he had previously adapted to on an unconscious level. From this position, he was thus called upon to make a choice. As John Suresh, founder of Adavu Kalai Kuzu noted, ‘When we awaken to the reality of our oppressed condition, an inner conflict is stirred. We must either accept, or resist, our oppression.’ (Suresh, 2015)

So far I have suggested that Playback can support movement efforts that focus on conscientization and community mobilization within oppressed communities. In some cases though, the sharing and enactment of personal stories can also help to raise the awareness of those who possess more power and privilege. However, the task of sensitizing the dominant group should not rest alone with those who struggle under their discriminatory rule. Allies can also play a role by engaging members of their own group in the examination of ingrained biases, taken-for-granted privileges and histories of perpetration. An example of this can be seen in the race-relations
project led by the Philadelphia-based group, Playback for Change. The initiative involved a 3-part series of events: one that occurred in April 2003, for White People only, a second for People of Colour only in November 2003, and the third, a mixed event for People of Colour and White People in January of 2004 (Centre for Playback Theatre 2015).

In the White People only performance, participants were asked some of the following questions:

1. Do you have a story about a time where you were aware of being White?
2. Can you remember a time when you were clueless and did something you later realized was racist?
3. Can you remember a time when you stood up against racism?
4. Can you remember a time when you did not stand up against racism? (And maybe wished you had.)
5. What stops you from interrupting racism or taking action against it?
6. What are the costs of racism for you as a White person?
7. How has being White been an asset to you?

In the People of Colour event, people were asked some of these questions:

1. How has internalized oppression affected you?
2. What stories of racism have you not told?
3. What are some of the burdens of being a Person of Colour?
4. Share a time where you stood up for a Person of Colour.
5. Share a time where you did not stand up for a Person of Colour but wish you had.
6. Share a time where you were told to “just get over racism”.

Centre for Playback Theatre 2015
In the final mixed-race performance, people where invited to share whatever story they needed to tell. In this event, the Conductor ensured that Tellers included People of Colour, White People, men and women (Freeman, 2014).

Through this project White People were able to investigate their own racialized attitudes and behaviours without burdening People of Colour with the task of “educating” them. The series also provided a space for People of Colour to address ways in which they themselves have internalized the normalizing discourses of a racist society.

Naturally, the emancipatory potential of Playback will be severely curtailed if the practitioners themselves are limited by poor knowledge, misconceptions, prejudices, paternalistic attitudes, or stereotypical readings of a story and its presenting issues. Our actions will also be compromised without recognition of our own position within the dynamic we wish to address. As Playback practitioners then, we must engage in processes that contribute towards our own education, self-awareness and capacity for critical thinking. Without this prior work, it is possible that we will unwittingly comply with hegemonic discourse by enacting problematic typecasts (stereotypes) or by falling into psychologised renderings that negate the broader political dimensions of a story and its potential as a catalyst for social change.

Indeed, the performance space itself can become a microcosm of the broader society – along with its patterns of blindness, discrimination and inequity. As suggested above, this might occur where iniquitous worldviews are indulged and

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40 Pamela Freeman is a Playback Theatre practitioner located in Philadelphia, USA.
41 Jiwon Chung (2015 n.p.), a Playback Theatre practitioners located in California, USA, notes that, “Just as an actor has to prepare for a role by doing research, a PT actor with integrity is obligated to do the same. By reference, PT is very close to simultaneous interpretation. A good interpreter has to have an enormous amount of topic specific knowledge in order to do the translation justice. They have to be as close to an expert on the topic as the person speaking.”
reproduced by the performing team. We might also find that the Teller’s seat remains occupied by people who enjoy greater status in the world outside. As proposed throughout this article, the Playback practitioner cannot remain impartial in the face of such phenomena. If for example, a certain demographic group dominates the event, it is the responsibility of the Conductor to ensure that other voices are also heard. Additionally, the Conductor must communicate their non-complicity in cases where the Teller’s story condones a worldview that is racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise oppressive in some way. Actors can respond to such stories by recasting the oppressed party in a manner that questions the objectifying or stereotyped portrayals provided by the Teller. The actors might also introduce a Narrator role who provides important contextual details (e.g. back-stories or historical information) within the enactment. In addition, the performers may use certain aesthetic devices that encourage a reflective stance to the events on stage. Using the alienation effect for example, the actors might break the fourth wall and communicate directly with the audience, sharing their thoughts and feelings about a particular scenario. They may also employ a deliberate use of tempo, repetition, space, gesture, movement, voice and linguistic register\textsuperscript{42} to provoke critical distance and a feeling of estrangement from the oppressive worldview endorsed by the Teller in their original narrative.

In this last section I have touched briefly on the subject of acting technique in anti-oppressive practice. While a longer discussion is beyond the scope of this article, the topic is one that would benefit from further research and exploration.

\textsuperscript{42} In linguistics, the term “register” refers to a type of language used for a specific purpose or in a particular social setting. For example, the register someone uses during a job interview will be different to the register they use during a conversation with a close friend.
ORGANIZE!

In any movement, the task of organizing consumes the lion’s share of time and energy. For our work to be maximally effective though, we must be intentional and strategic in our planning of interventions. At the same time, our organizing efforts must be grounded in a framework that is participatory and democratic. Rather than situating ourselves as *weekend dilettantes* going in to do good deeds, we must instead acknowledge the value of sustained, cooperative endeavour. From a benevolent attitude, we must move instead towards an appreciation of reciprocal interests and shared struggle. As Lilla Watson, the Indigenous Australian artist and activist stated, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”43 (Watson, n.d.) From this paradigm, we find ourselves developing mutually fulfilling alliances with individuals and groups whose work we can learn from, augment and amplify.

Hasan Taha, a performer-activist with the Freedom Bus troupe, reflects on the two-way benefits that can flow from a deepened connection with partnering communities:

As a Palestinian who lives on the other side of Palestine, it was good for me to stay for extended periods of time in At-tuwani. By spending many days and nights together - talking, eating, playing, working, and struggling side by side - I got a much better understanding for how my people live and resist in this part of the occupied West Bank [...] In fact, in At-tuwani I didn’t feel like an actor

43 Although this quote is attributed to Lilla Watson, she has explained that the phrase was actually developed by an Aboriginal activist group that she was part of during the 1970’s. She has therefore expressed her discomfort with being solely credited for something that was born of a collective process. Read more here: http://unnecessaryevils.blogspot.in/2008/11/attributing-words.html
coming to do his job. Instead, I felt like a family member and a part of the community [...] We [members of the performing troupe] worked the land, demonstrated, shepherded and confronted the Israeli army. Having these experiences - which At-tuwani people must face every day – allowed me to identify with them. During a performance, this helped me as an actor. When a Teller was sharing his story, I felt like it was my own, as if his experience had happened to me too. I connected deeply and this, I hope, was reflected in the enactment.  

I propose that elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) can be especially helpful in our attempts to adopt an organizational approach that emphasizes collective enquiry and joint action. In particular, PAR enables the involvement of community members, activists, artists and other parties in a cycle of analysis, planning, implementation and reflection. Through such processes, organizers can ensure that knowledge and interventions remain connected to the core concerns of a movement.

The Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Bus is one example of an initiative that utilizes a PAR approach. From the outset The Freedom Theatre engaged with village councils, popular struggle committees and civil society organizations in the process of analysis and planning. Locally based groups such as the Jordan Valley Solidarity Campaign, the At-tuwani Women’s Cooperative, the Popular Struggle Committee in Bili’in, and the South Hebron Hills Popular Struggle Committee have become key partners in the design and implementation of diverse initiatives. Indeed, the shape

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44 This interview excerpt appears in my forthcoming article, Cherry Theft Under Apartheid. The Drama Review.
45 See appendix for questions and processes a Playback Theatre team might use within a PAR framework.
and scope of our activities have evolved significantly through the input of individual community members and partnering groups. For example, Playback Theatre performances now occur within multi-day events that include home stays, protests, solidarity walks, teach-ins, and civil disobedience.

Through participatory action research, it has also become clear that Playback Theatre is not always the most appropriate form of cultural intervention. In one case for example, the people of Nabi Saleh noted that Playback Theatre produces a transitory phenomenon that cannot be replicated. This conflicted with their hope for a form of storytelling that could export their model of unarmed, popular resistance to other Palestinian communities. On the suggestion of people from Nabi Saleh, we therefore collected their stories and devised a scripted play that subsequently toured to villages and refugee camps throughout the West Bank. Playback was used at the conclusion of each performance to elicit audience responses and invite sharing about other examples of resistance that were indigenous to each village.

Playback Theatre through its ability to facilitate communication and relationship building may also assist in the promotion of healthier organizations, and networking within a movement. The Bonded Labour Liberation Front Karnataka (Jeevika) is a grassroots, activist organization dedicated to the “eradication of bonded labour, caste-class-patriarchal structures and unequal globalisation processes in Karnataka, India”. Its 250 members consist of former bonded labourers and their relatives. Since 1993 Jeevika has engaged in “conscientization and training; organisation and unionisation; agitation and campaigning; lobbying and advocacy; networking and use of media; reflection, study, research and documentation.” (Jeevika 2015) Jeevika also includes 7 cultural groups each consisting of 12 – 15 activists. These groups use street theatre and Dalit movement songs as vehicles to further their social, cultural and political
objectives. Since the year 2000, Jeevika has also used Playback Theatre within villages and inside the organization itself. Kiran Prasad, overall Coordinator of Jeevika, noted that Playback has fulfilled a valuable function in helping to sustain meaningful and constructive relationships between members of the organization (2015). John Suresh from Adavu Kalai Kuzu made a similar point: “For a movement to be strong we must have strong relationships between us. Playback Theatre can help with this [...] When we come together to share and perform personal stories, we also challenge the fragmentation and divisions that a casteist society tries to impose upon us.” (Suresh, 2015)

In general, Playback Theatre deals only with the lived accounts of Tellers. The form is not designed to accommodate the overt analysis of injustice, nor the interventions that might lead us towards a preferred reality. How then can we imagine and portray that which has not yet appeared in the social realm? As cultural activists, are we restricted only to the domain of truth telling, or can we also point towards the world we are working for? These questions have led towards adaptations of the conventional Playback format. Some Playback groups for example, have developed practices that incorporate Forum Theatre and Playback Theatre processes within the same event46. Other Playbackers integrate more traditional methods of education and action planning. For example, Hudson River Playback Theatre recently partnered with Drone Alert in a performance that focused on the stories of activists who are facing prison time for peacefully protesting US drone killings. In addition to sharing information about US militarism and participation in drone warfare, the event also

included a post-performance networking and planning session where audience members discussed concrete actions they themselves could take. (Salas 2015)

Without doubt, Playback Theatre is not a universal remedy. There are times where other methods might better serve the needs at hand. Playback does however offer an opportunity for a radical form of pedagogy – one that does not depend on didactic instruction or consciousness raising imposed from the outside. Instead, the process of political awakening occurs through the sharing and embodiment of real life stories – stories that are replete with examples of confusion and certainty, hardship and struggle, steadfastness and hope. The Playback process itself also offers opportunity for the modelling of values and behaviours that counter systems of domination and discrimination. Through our expressions of respect, deep listening, empathy, solidarity, and creativity, we embody a reality that directly contradicts the dehumanizing forces that act upon us all.

APPENDIX

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH FOR PLAYBACK THEATRE AND SOCIAL ACTION

Participatory Action Research (PAR) emphasizes a spirit of collective enquiry and related action. Participants are engaged as co-researchers in the investigation of questions and issues that hold significance for their community. Through a jointly conducted process of analysis, planning, implementation and reflection, participants ensure that knowledge and intervention remain linked to commonly held values and objectives. The following questions and considerations offer Playback practitioners a
PAR framework through which to develop interventions with a social justice emphasis. Maximal input from relevant organizations, groups and individuals should be sought for each stage of the PAR process.

**OBSERVATION/ANALYSIS**

When designing a Playback intervention for social or political change, we must first analyse the issue/problem we wish to address. In addition to using conventional modes of investigation, we can also conduct mapping and analysis through various action methods including Image Theatre, Sociodrama and Playback Theatre. Here are some questions that can guide our process:

- What are the root causes of the issue/problem? (Consider various social, cultural, historical, economic and ideological factors.)
- What are the consequences/impacts of this problem on people’s lives?
- Who are the significant stakeholders in this issue? (Who has power? Who is adversely affected? Who are the enablers of oppression? Who are the allies of the oppressed party? Where do we stand?)
- How is the current status quo maintained? How does the privileged party “manufacture consent”? How is the status quo challenged/resisted?
- Where are the geographic and ideological sites of exploitation, production, consumption, destruction, indoctrination and resistance?

**PLANNING**

Once we better understand the history and dynamics of an issue, we can begin to consider our plan of action and the assumptions that underpin it.
• What are our objectives? What do we hope to shift/transform? What aspects of this problem are within/beyond our scope of influence?
• What is our “theory of change”? What values, beliefs and assumptions underpin our approach?
• Who do we wish to engage/join with in the coordination and implementation of this intervention? Who are our allies and strategic partners? (Consider partnerships with fellow artists, activists, advocates, journalists, and policy makers.)
• Are we intervening at the personal, relational, cultural and/or structural level? How can we link our efforts to others who are working with similar or different dimensions of the same issue?
• What core and affiliated strategies will enable us to reach our defined objectives? What methods/practices will we employ?
• How do we include and prepare our team, the community and other stakeholders?
• Who should we invite as audience to the Playback Theatre events? Who can help in the transmission of stories and their issues? Who holds influence at the structural level? Consider policy makers, politicians, journalists, filmmakers and other activists.
• What allied groups can help with networking, information sharing, and action planning within the event itself?
• Have we planned for the promotion, documentation, sharing and evaluation of our intervention?
• Is our intervention sustainable? What resources are needed/available for its implementation and continuation?
• What are the limitations of our plan? What obstacles might we encounter?
• Have we planned for the full range of logistical considerations? (e.g. translation, suitable venue, publicity, transport, technical needs, etc).

IMPLEMENTATION/ACTION

The Playback event itself should remain congruent with our core values and objectives. We must therefore strive to be fair and inclusive - modelling egalitarian principles within the planning and delivery of performances, workshops and other project activities. Relatedly, we must be prepared to question and address patterns of domination and discrimination that arise within ourselves and other participants.

While engaging with a Teller’s story, the Conductor and performers may wish to consider some of the following:

• What contextual details (cultural, sociopolitical and historical) are important to the story?
• If the story is one of oppression: How has the Teller been impacted by the inequity? (Listen for the psychological, interpersonal, social, spiritual, cultural, economic and structural levels of impact.)
• Have other members of the Teller’s community been impacted in similar or different ways?
• How has the Teller and their community responded to the injustice/crisis? What agency have they demonstrated?
• What values, principles, social movements, allies, or individual figures provide inspiration and/or support for the Teller?
• Has the Teller internalized, or upheld, an oppressive worldview?
• What does the Teller hope for and desire?
• As a member of the performing team: How might my own interpretation of the story be conditioned by hegemonic/oppressive discourse? How will I navigate these responses on stage?

REFLECTION/EVALUATION

The process of reflection and evaluation invites us to critically examine project activities and their impact. Feedback, ideas and suggestions that are generated through the reflective process can be used to inform subsequent cycles of planning and implementation. In designing reflective processes, we might consider the following:

• What criteria are used for the evaluation of our interventions?
• Who do we engage in the evaluation/reflective process?
• How can we facilitate in-depth, critical reflection? Consider for example the pros and cons of using focus groups, structured interviews, informal conversations, questionnaires and/or written evaluations. Action methods (including Playback and Image Theatre) and other arts-based practices can also be used for generating feedback, analysis and suggestions.
• Will the results of the evaluation process be shared with all partners? If so, how?

The stages of PAR have been presented here in a consecutive order. In reality however, the processes of analysis, planning, action and reflection will occur in a continuous, overlapping and nonlinear fashion throughout the life of an initiative.
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Chapter 7

Mobilizing Aesthetics in Psychodramatic Group Work


There are some psychodramatic moments I will never forget. They etch themselves in my memory, remaining somehow animate in my mind and body. These are moments where my sense of connection to others feels fortified through aesthetic dynamics that are rich in imagery, sound and movement. The artistry inherent in such scenes is not the exclusive outcome of creative directing, nor is it the inevitable expression of an inspired protagonist. These memorable experiences result from a constellation of factors including collaborative group processes that harness the poetic, sensory dimension of the therapeutic endeavour.
In this article I will explore several questions relating to the aesthetics\textsuperscript{47} of psychodrama. What, if any, advantages result from attending to the aesthetic domain? What basic, aesthetic options are available to the group and its leader? And how can we cultivate and mobilize aesthetic sensibilities in service of psychodramatic group work? What I set out to explore is not something entirely new. The practice of psychodrama and other forms of therapeutic drama is often distinguished from conventional talk therapy precisely because of its grounding in the sensorial and aesthetic domain (Jennings 1997; Kellerman 1992; Landy 1994; Leveton 2001; Emunah and Johnson 2009). I simply aim therefore, to look again, to reflect, and hopefully inspire a renewed appreciation for the power of aesthetics within psychodrama. I will present this investigation through a series of psychodramatic vignettes coupled with observations and interview data gathered from my practice and research in the Middle East.

Context: Psychodrama in the Middle East

The use of psychodrama by Arab mental health workers in the Middle East has been steadily growing over the past 15 years. For example, from 2002-2011, the Gaza Community Mental Health Program, in partnership with the Palestinian Medical Relief Society, pioneered a professional-level training project led by Ursula Hauser and Maja Hess. The program produced a number of trained clinicians that went on to create \textit{Psychodrama Without Borders: Gaza}. In 2012, the Ramallah-based, Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture commenced a 3-year psychodrama and group therapy training program in partnership with the International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes.

\textsuperscript{47} In this article, I refer to ‘aesthetics’ as the relationship between sensorial perceptions and our notions of taste and beauty.
Egypt too has witnessed a growing interest in psychodrama and other expressive art therapies. Over the past 5 years, the Egyptian Association for Group Therapies and Processes, and Cairo University, have offered a range of workshops and professional training programs led by prominent psychodrama practitioners from around the world. Studio Emad Eddin and Orient Productions have also invested in local capacity building through the development of a 3-year training program that commenced in 2014. In addition to these psychodrama training initiatives, it is worth noting that Zeina Daccache, a Lebanese drama therapist based in Beirut, has made a significant contribution through the introduction of the first alternative track training program for Arab practitioners who wish to become Registered Drama Therapists.

Students and graduates of these various programs are using psychodrama and drama therapy in a range of settings including schools, hospitals, refugee camps, community centres, psychiatric clinics and private practice.

In 2011, I moved to the West Bank to commence work as a drama therapist and Playback Theatre practitioner with The Freedom Theatre, a Palestinian cultural organization based in Jenin Refugee Camp. During my two years of employment there, I led a number of workshops and training programs that introduced therapeutic drama methods to Palestinian mental health workers. One of these programs took place over 18 months and provided graduates with certified hours through the Therapeutic Spiral Institute in Virginia where I myself am an accredited trainer and practitioner. Another 9-month program was organized in partnership with the Palestinian Medical Relief Society. Both programs evolved through local consultations identifying a demand for specialized training in therapeutic group work modalities. The pedagogical approach featured experiential immersion in psychodramatic processes, together with clinical reflection, peer-to-peer learning,
didactic instruction and written assignments. Participants gained experience in the roles of director, auxiliary ego and protagonist. Sessions invariably focused upon themes of steadfastness and the various impacts of imprisonment, torture, military violence, refugee status, and poverty. Although I was the main instructor, guest facilitators included Kate Hudgins, Mauricio Gasseau, Ursula Hauser, Maja Hess, and Jessika Litwak.

Since 2012, I have also worked extensively in Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan. The workshops and training programs I lead include participants from a range of backgrounds. Mental health workers often attend with the intention of furthering their professional development. Many however, participate with a primary desire to address the personal and collective impact of social upheaval and political repression. A significant number of women take part with the aim of tackling issues of gender discrimination.

The scenes and vignettes presented throughout this article took place during training programs and public workshops that I led in the various locations noted above. Each vignette occurred within a larger, protagonist-centred psychodrama, typically spanning 2 hours in length. Names and other identifying details have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Vignettes

Sensory Induction: Petra’s Drama

Petra is a 25-year-old social worker – a refugee from Syria, currently living in Amman, Jordan. Recently, her brother, Raed – a talented musician and composer – died suddenly from a rare heart condition whilst studying in Manchester, UK. Petra’s
family had hoped to attend Raed’s funeral. Her parents particularly longed to see him one last time. However, the British embassy had refused their visa application, claiming that the family were likely to seek illegal asylum in the UK. Although Petra was angered by this decision and its underlying assumptions, she had felt some ambivalence about viewing the body and funeral casket of her brother. For her, this would have been the final confirmation of an unbearable fact. Several weeks after Raed’s death however, Petra came forward as a protagonist in our group, stating that whilst suffering terribly, she was unable to grieve. The time had come she said, to say goodbye to Raed so that she could properly mourn his absence.

At the start of our session, Petra expressed her wish to meet once more with Raed. She indicated that this meeting should occur in the family home in Damascus, at a time before the commencement of the Syrian Uprising. Using bright fabrics, she began to reconstruct the interior of her bedroom. I encouraged her to pay special attention to the inclusion of treasured objects. Within this imaginal space, she took time holding a favourite pink cushion before placing it on her sofa. Later, she drew our attention to a cherished photograph on the wall – a picture of her as a young girl, with Jasmine flowers threaded through her hair. I asked if there were any other important elements to the room. “Yes” she said. Walking over to an imagined wall that lay between her and the other group members, she reached up and slid open a large window. I asked Petra what she could see, and she began to describe the scene outside. The sky. A schoolyard. Other buildings. Noticing however, that her language had slipped into past tense, I encouraged her to speak as if we were looking now upon this scene. Petra faltered. “I can’t.” she said. “All I can hear are the sounds of war.” It became clear that we would not succeed in building a
preferred environment for her encounter with Raed until we at least acknowledged the context of violent conflict that dominated her memories of Syria. With this intention, I invited Petra to choose one or more people from the group who could embody the sounds she spoke of. After choosing two men, Petra guided them from within the “sound role”. Her voice started softly but slowly grew into the chilling sound of sirens followed by the thud of artillery. Reversing back into her own role, she listened as the two men repeated the sounds – their voices rising to fill the space.

Petra was instructed to conduct the auxiliaries according to her needs in that moment. Throughout the scene, I also observed her physiological and emotional response, and prepared myself to intervene should the enactment become overwhelming and require containment.

After some time, Petra motioned for the men to stop. Her face, body and voice appeared free from the tension that had been there before. I asked her what she was experiencing and she described a summer breeze and the sound of her brother playing piano, the melody drifting up from his room below. Three women from the group came forward and sang:

Under the vine tree
We sat together and said
The vineyard of love has ripened
And hidden our homes\(^{48}\).

One by one, each member of the group joined, our voices combining in harmony. By then, Petra was fully transported into a time/place that existed

\(^{48}\) The title of this song is ‘Together Under the Wine Tree’. It was written by the Rahbani Brothers and sung by Fairouz.
before the war. She called upon her brother (played by a member of the group) who subsequently appeared at her door. Petra went to Raed and embraced him. Together they sat on her sofa and spoke at length. They discussed old times and all the things they had enjoyed together. Then she asked about his death and listened carefully as he described in detail the events of his demise. Petra wept and told Raed how much she wished she could have been there to comfort him in his final moments. In role as Raed, Petra offered reassurance to herself - saying that geographic distance had never intervened and that they would always be close. Before ending the drama, Petra returned to her own role and took Raed in her arms for one final embrace.

In the sharing that followed, many group members commented upon the sense of absorption they had experienced during Petra’s drama – due to the resonant content – but also, because of the rich, poetic frame within which her story had unfolded. Petra’s subjective reality had been translated into a powerful aesthetic language that reached out and touched us all.

As this drama indicated, successful mobilization of the aesthetic dimension often results in a form of engagement that transcends purely cognitive modes of being (Jennings 1997) Our sensory faculties are awakened, and we are inducted into a more holistic encounter with the emotions, themes and events of the protagonist’s story. The creative act itself bears central significance. For example, the process of constructing an environment (such as the time Petra took in establishing her room) can become an important part of the unfolding ritual – a procedure that enables us to effectively transition from everyday life into the trance-like state that frequently arises within the dramatic space (Jennings 1997).
Elements in role induction
Throughout this article I will refer to the utilization of natural elements (Earth, Air, Fire, Water) as aids to role induction.

A role is usually defined by a particular constellation of functions, ego states, physical sensations, thoughts, feelings and behaviours that arise in response to interpersonal relationships, social situations or intrapsychic phenomena (Kellerman 1992; Hudgins 2002).

When guiding someone into role, I find that authenticity and spontaneity can be amplified if we start from a place of physicality. By identifying and articulating the somatic and energetic dynamics of a role, the player is more likely to bypass narrow representations and clichéd modes of expression.

In situations therefore, where spontaneity appears inhibited, I may use elements to support the player to define and embody the somatic properties of a role. I find this is particularly helpful with intrapsychic roles, since these can be initially more abstract than external objects.

When choosing to approach role induction through a somatic entry point, I often invite the protagonist-in-role to identify the element that corresponds with their inner state. I then guide the role to inhabit the movement dynamic of this element as it manifests within their body - first from an internal place, then outwards towards the body's extremities. As the role begins to move, I instruct a pre-selected player, who will later occupy the same role, to mirror and inhabit its movement quality and the energetic world it presents. I myself will often join. As spontaneity increases, I may ask the role to verbally articulate specific aspects of their experience: “What type of water are you?” “Tell us about the environment you’re part of.” “Describe your
feelings and desires.” etc. When the player reaches a high degree of spontaneity, I then invite the role to relate to other roles, and of course, the therapeutic task at hand.

Although the spoken dialogue of a scene might fade and disappear with time, the bodily memory of a particular dynamic is likely to persist. As indicated throughout this article, the experiential imprint holds great value for the player – who at some future point – may wish to connect with specific states that arose during their therapeutic journey.

Sensory Imprint: Lulua’s Drama

Lulua is an unmarried, 28-year-old theatre practitioner, living between two worlds. One: An independent and Bohemian life in Beirut. The other: A repressive family environment in Southern Lebanon. Lulua described an overwhelming sense of suffocation whenever she went to stay with her parents. Her father’s alcoholism and her mother’s resigned status had left her feeling hopeless, trapped and depressed during her visits. She had tried many ways of reaching out to her parents but nothing had worked.

In the initial phase of Lulua’s session, I invited her to connect to “prescriptive roles” that would support a new relationship to her home environment. Prescriptive roles contain skills, resources and capacities that support the protagonist in their therapeutic goals. (Toscani and Hudgins 1993; Hudgins 2002) Lulua thus chose to call upon and embody her sense of inner freedom. Before stepping into this role, she chose a set of red, yellow and pink fabrics that corresponded with her sense of “Inner Freedom”. After she had dressed herself in these colours, I invited her to select one of four elements (earth, air, fire or water) that exemplified her state of being from within the role. “I am
the wind.” She said, with eyes closed. I then encouraged her to find the internal movement dynamic of this element – subsequently mirroring her as she began to gently sway. Once her whole body was engaged, I asked for more details: “What type of wind are you?” I asked. “I am a soft breeze that comes from the forest.” She said. “Tell us more.” I enquired. “What time is it, and where do you travel?” “It’s late afternoon on a summer day. I am travelling through the mountains, my favourite place...” She opened her eyes and met the gaze of the auxiliary who was playing Lulua. They began moving in unison, slowly and somewhat carefully at first, but then as the roles deepened, their movement took on a lighter, more unbounded quality. Before long, the two of them were running, yelling and tumbling across the stage, filled with abundant energy and joy.

This role became an important ally throughout the remainder of the drama – especially during Lulua’s later encounter with her parents. At the conclusion of the session, Lulua stated that she would remember most clearly the colours that represented her experience of freedom. The vivid image of this role, she said, would be something to store and connect with at a later date, when needed. Indeed, several days later, Lulua sent me an email stating ‘In my drama ... I visually witnessed and physically felt the situation I wished to have. I have kept that feeling with me till today. It has become a concrete reference point.’

As Lulua suggests, the protagonist is more likely to recall ideas and insights from a session, if they are embedded within the sensory field. In other words, aesthetic elements can help to generate an experiential imprint that holds lasting value.
Metaphor: Amal’s Drama

Amal was a young teacher based in Jenin, Occupied Palestine. In her drama we explored the sense of profound emptiness she had felt ever since being sexually abused as a child. For Amal, it felt as if the perpetrator (an uncle), had snatched away her life essence, robbing her forever of joy and vitality.

After surrounding herself with a cluster of intrapsychic protectors (embodied as the element of fire), Amal decided to confront the perpetrator. In the scene that followed, Amal fought for control over her life force – concretized earlier by a long piece of blue satin. Taking hold of one end of this cloth, she tugged steadily, and finally victoriously, against her uncle who gripped the other end. Later, in the post-drama sharing, Amal described the intense power of this scene. The physicalization of real struggle and her subsequent victory remained as an especially compelling image.

Through metaphor we bypass reductionist definitions of our predicament. Instead, we translate our internal and relational worlds into a language of imagery, allegory and symbolism. This reformulation of content opens up space for the emergence of new insights and perspectives within the therapeutic space (Lapsekili and Yelboğa 2014; Burns 2001; Malhotra 2013).

Metaphor serves to broaden our parameters of enquiry. It also helps to capture, synthesize and transmit large amounts of potentially complex data within a single polysemic image. In this manner, metaphor can vividly illuminate the multiple dynamics of a relationship or situation. It enables consciousness of the unconscious. It brings visibility to the invisible. The metaphor is thus a potent carrier of our hopes, fears, insights, and desires, for it succeeds in revealing and communicating these
truths in a way that remains lyrical and containing. Concretization of visual metaphors within the dramatic space can help to augment their therapeutic potential.

Like most of the metaphors described throughout this article, the one presented in Amal’s drama exists not simply as a symbolic representation of intrapsychic forces or interpersonal dynamics. Rather, the embodied metaphor becomes a living truth in its own right. Immersion in this dramatic reality enables the protagonist (and other group members) to address their needs and predicaments through the physical and aesthetic structure provided by the metaphor (Jennings 1987; 1997; Emunah 1994; Landy 1994)

In my experience, the aesthetic metaphor is never contrived. It arises and evolves as an organic response to the demands of a particular situation. To identify an effective metaphor, the clinician must simply attend to the images that spontaneously surface in the protagonist’s ordinary course of speech. Indeed, everyday language is usually laden with metaphor. However, to fully mobilize aesthetic potential, the clinician must facilitate a process that enables the protagonist and auxiliaries to effectively embody, explore and develop the latent visual, physical and auditory possibilities of each metaphor. When the metaphor is creatively inhabited, it often takes on a life of its own, leading the group and protagonist towards their desired therapeutic goals.

Constructing the Aesthetic Environment: Reem’s drama

Reem is a 27-year old architect based in Cairo, Egypt. The following scene occurred during a drama that sought to address her detrimental tendency towards self-sacrifice and uncompromising perfectionism – traits that she attributed to familial values and
social norms that condition women to neglect their own needs in favour of roles that emphasize service and subservience to others.

In Reem’s drama she called upon her inner, nurturing part. Stepping into role, she dressed herself in a double-layered cloak of transparent pink and white fabric. As she began to move, I asked her to describe her internal world. “I am water.” She said. “A glittering, steady river that flows through the valley.” She then preceded to carefully construct this mental image using silvery blue cloth and other colours. When the environment was completed, she lay down in the river and began to sing. Her voice was soon joined by that of others.

In this scene, the environment itself – along with the process of its construction – became a significant feature of Reem’s therapeutetic journey. In a post-session interview she shared the following reflection:

Engaging sounds, imagination, movement, etc. helped to create an atmosphere that arose from my own self ... Creating the river ... will have a lasting impact on me. Whenever I find myself immersed in a certain negative feeling, I will be able to invite again the image, the sounds and the feeling of strength that I experienced in that scene.

As Reem suggests, roles that are embedded within an associated environment are somehow amplified. Environments can include the replication of real-world locations, imagined spaces, atmospheres, or some combination of these. We can also consider the ecological dimension of a role. By this, I mean the environment that is attached to, and enables, the predominant aspects of any given role. In Reem’s drama, the Nurturing part was located within a particular ecology that helped to
support and contextualize its primary function. This in turn generated a scene that carried memorable impact and resonance. The use of atmosphere and environment helps to locate group members in a common imaginal space. It also serves to anchor experience as a visual image within the mind of the protagonist.

Environments can be built using tangible objects such as furniture, coloured fabrics and other props. However, the imagination of the protagonist is central to the process. In Petra’s drama for example, she described and pointed towards an imaginary photograph of herself as a young girl. Later she took us to an imaginary window that allowed us to look out on Damascus together. Indeed, it seems that the entire process of reconstructing her room in Damascus allowed her to connect more fully with important memories and experiences from her past.

When guiding the construction of an environment, I encourage the protagonist to intuitively consider the architecture and dramatic staging of the space they are creating. Where should objects and other aspects of the setting be in relation to one another? As a director, I am also asking myself: Where are the players in relation to the group? Is the scene visible for most? Can people hear what’s going on? Sometimes I will move or rotate the scene to ensure greater visibility and/or acoustic quality. However, I also instruct group members to take responsibility for their own experience by moving to a place where they can properly see and hear the unfolding action.

Voice, song and sound: Ibtehal’s Drama

Ibtehal, a 50-year-old woman with terminal cancer, was struggling with the fact of her approaching death. As the drama progressed, she began to clarify
her desire to live more fully in the time that remained. Towards the end of the session, she called upon the whole group to take drums and circle her. Suddenly the room was filled with the sound of forty people drumming, clapping and ululating in unison. Together we celebrated the life that each one of us inhabited in that moment.

The use of sound (including that made by objects, instruments and the human voice) introduces an important factor to the aesthetic experience of a scene. While colour and image engage vision, sound of course, activates auditory capacities and bodily sensations that arise from contact with audio resonance.

Music, and the joining of voices in song or sound formation, helps to unite the group in an act of common creation. Song can also transport an individual or group to a particular time, place, or state of consciousness that serves the established goals of a session.

Petra had this to say about the song that appeared during her drama which I presented earlier:

When we sang, it awakened the feelings I had always felt with my family – our private musical moments that helped me to feel so secure. The song we sang was one of my brother's favorites – I sang it for him on the phone before they closed his grave ... The sounds and the songs in my drama were important because I associate them so strongly with [Raed]. Most of my memories with him are about sounds and music.

The use of known lyrics and melodies can also reinforce shared social identities. In particular, I have noticed the importance of popular songs while working with communities impacted by political violence and structural oppression. In occupied
Palestine for example, it is common for a group to spontaneously integrate well-known songs of steadfastness and resistance into dramas that deal with themes of dispossession, humiliation and degradation at the hands of Israeli forces.

Discussion

If we accept the proposition that taste is culturally specific and socially conditioned, one could argue that the protagonist’s own sense of aesthetics should remain central to the therapeutic endeavor. This point becomes especially relevant if we consider Bourdieu’s assertion that judgments of taste infer an act of social positioning (Bourdieu 1984). In the protagonist-centered psychodrama therefore, the therapist might attempt to avoid imposition by withholding interventions that arise from their own aesthetic sensibilities. Emunah suggests that therapists should navigate this terrain by engaging their ‘own intuition, creativity, and contemplation’, while remaining ‘in close contact with the client’, and by making use of ‘the client’s particular imagery and language.’ (2009:51)

Indeed, the creative impulses of the therapist and other group members can play a pivotal role in protagonist-centred psychodramas. For example, in situations where the imagination of the protagonist appears blocked, other group members can propose images, scenes or metaphors that further the therapeutic goals of the session. In this way, the protagonist is invited into proximity and dialogue with the aesthetic representations of others - an experience that promises openness to fresh perspectives and new forms of interaction. By embracing their own sense of aesthetics then, the therapist and other group members contribute towards an environment that promotes imagination and multimodal expression. Furthermore, creative involvement in the dramatic world of the protagonist can enable the development of
group cohesiveness and a positive therapeutic alliance where exchange and intersubjectivity is emphasized.

The field of psychodrama places great importance upon the development of spontaneity as a way to connect practitioners and clients to their authentic selves, to one another, and to the innate capacity for self realization, healing and creativity that is thought to exist within each person (Moreno 1953; Kellerman 1992; Dayton 2005; Hudgins and Toscani 2013).

Traditional psychodrama, therefore focuses on a ‘warm-up’ phase, in which the group is encouraged to awaken their physical and vocal capacities, and to engage in games, exercises and other processes that develop imagination, spontaneity, creativity and expressiveness at an individual and group level (Blatner 2000; Leveton 2001; Dayton 2005).

I would like to suggest that the initial stage of a psychodramatic process can also be used to establish and integrate bodily memories and aesthetic possibilities that may be drawn upon (often unconsciously) at later phases of the work. I have noticed for example that mirroring, chorus, or voice and movement exercises during the early part of a process will often result in their spontaneous emergence during subsequent, protagonist-centred dramas.

With this view in mind, we can expand a groups’ dramatic and aesthetic options by borrowing from the training techniques of physical theatre (e.g. Lecoq 1997), expressive voice work (e.g. Pikes 2004), movement analysis (e.g. Laban 1975) and/or improvisational composition (e.g. Bogart and Landau 2004; Zaporah 1995). Through these approaches, we can work with group members to investigate rhythm, tempo, spatial distance, vocal range, shape, gesture, kinaesthetic response, etc.
can also explore the embodiment of various elements, animals, substances and textures. Once familiarity with these dramatic possibilities has been established, the protagonist/group can employ them later, and without concern for technical detail. Likewise, investment in the development of ‘aesthetic rituals’ provides a resource that can be subsequently called upon to connect, invigorate or contain the group as needed.

Perhaps this may sound as if I am advocating for the promotion of pre-ordained forms of expression – surely the antithesis of our allegiance to spontaneity. To be clear though: I believe that established form - including familiar motifs of sound, song, text, image, colour and movement - can be developed and stored as part of an aesthetic arsenal that may be selectively accessed as an appropriate response to the here-and-now needs of a group or protagonist.

The pursuit of sensory fulfillment is a universal feature of our human condition. In this article however, I have suggested that aesthetic appreciation can be harnessed for therapeutic benefit. In particular, I have suggested that aesthetic factors can augment multisensory engagement with therapeutic goals and psychodramatic process including role induction and the development of imaginal spaces and embodied metaphors. This in turn promises to leave a deeper, more enduring imprint upon the protagonist and other players.

Furthermore, the collaborative construction of aesthetic experience can help to energize, connect and contain a group while also supporting a process of expanded meaning making.

By validating and encouraging a range of aesthetic options, the therapist also helps to broaden communicative ability and foster a group culture that values diverse forms of expression.
Without doubt, beauty in its various forms contains remedial and restorative properties. At the same time, the pursuit of aesthetics in psychodramatic group work should not eclipse our attention to other therapeutic factors. Rather, the aesthetic domain should be recognized as a potent force that can amplify specific objectives within a group process.

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Conclusion

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. ~ Maya Angelou

For Palestinians, the sharing of personal testimony holds significance in a political arena dominated by mainstream Zionist narratives. The transmission of memory, emotion and experience functions as an avenue of truth telling, a process through which others can become sensitized to the impact of brutal and oppressive policies. At the same time, the establishment of a counter-discourse enables Palestinians to resist the internalization of Zionist rhetoric presenting them as inherently violent, barbaric and inhuman.

In We are the Children of the Camp, a play directed by Abdelfattah Abusrour, a young boy states

We are human beings. Despite the occupation, I’ve decided to express myself through theatre to show the beauty we have within against the ugliness of the Israeli occupation that dominates us.

In Playback Theatre events, the teller likewise takes the opportunity – not only to educate and mobilize those present – but also to assert and transmit certain values and attitudes that are central to sustaining an affirmative identity. The network of interrelated stories that emerge during a performance, therefore become a defiant fist
shake to those forces that attempt to erase, eclipse, dismiss or discredit the experience of oppressed subjects. In this sense, stories and the messages they contain can be viewed as part of a broader effort to resist “domestication” in favour of a full humanity (Freire 1970: 17).

Without doubt then, Playback Theatre may assist a just, political cause by giving a human face to a campaign or movement. It challenges the dominant narrative by enabling silenced voices and counter-testimonies to be heard and amplified. It also enables oppressed populations to define their own sense of self through stories that challenge stereotypes and other forms of misrepresentation while simultaneously celebrating the richness, complexity, dignity and detail of their lives.

Playback Theatre serves several other functions within a social or political movement. Personal stories, or the “narrative power” they represent, can play a role within campaigns that seek an ideological shift in advance of, or in tandem with, efforts towards political, institutional, and systemic change.

Playback (and psychodrama) can also assist in addressing the harmful psychosocial impacts of violence and oppression. Through the mobilization of various therapeutic factors, the sharing and performance of stories within a safe, communal setting, may allow individuals and communities to experience some relief from the debilitating effects of trauma.

Playback Theatre is not without its risks however. While Playback can be used to uplift and amplify the voice of the oppressed, practitioners should be mindful of the hazards and contradictions in “performing/telling” a story for another. The stage is a place of heightened attention and focus. Those who inhabit it (the conductor and actors) are thus elevated to a position of higher status. This power and status must be
harnessed and directed in service of the unheard, unseen, silenced teller or story. A profound humility and curiosity is therefore essential and should ground all preparation, performance and action.

Importantly then, the Playback practitioner must ensure that oppressive dynamics are not replicated within or outside of the performance space. This means modelling values and behaviours that are principled, inclusive, respectful and counter-oppressive. Indeed, Playback practitioners hold an obligation to express their clear rejection of oppressive worldviews. Anti-oppressive practice however requires an informed, critical worldview together with a critique of the ways in which we are entrained into accepting and normalizing oppressive ideologies. As practitioners, we must therefore assume responsibility for addressing our own internalized oppression and complicity with hegemonic discourse. Likewise, practitioners should train to identify and bracket their own personal biases, prejudices, and psychological projections especially where these reflect the privileged status of the practitioner.

Artistry is essential: The aesthetic and embodied dimensions of Playback (and other forms of participatory theatre) help to amplify impact and resonance, providing an advantage over storytelling approaches that are mainly verbal. At the same time, artistry should serve, not overpower the story: the story is what matters.

As I have emphasized throughout my writings, the broader context of a Playback intervention must be taken into account. This can be ensured through analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation that ensures input and participation from a range of local and strategic partners. Organizers should build meaningful alliances with activists, artists, academics, journalists, policy makers, elected officials, etc. In doing so, we should ask, ‘How can our skills be used to augment and complement other efforts towards social and political change?’
To capitalize on the awareness and momentum generated within a Playback event, organizers may consider the inclusion of post-performance discussion and action planning. In addition to one-off events, organizers might also consider workshop formats, multiple performances and long-term engagement as options for facilitating deeper impact within a particular group, community or campaign. Importantly, an awareness of opportune timing should inform all aspects of organizing.

Playback Theatre has played a profound role in my own political awakening. The process of hearing, witnessing and performing stories has brought me closer to the realities of life in places where people struggle against vast forces of political violence and structural oppression. At the same time, I am acutely aware that Playback Theatre is no panacea. Rather it can be viewed as one small part of a larger, coordinated approach to social change. It is my hope therefore, that Playbackers, and applied theatre practitioners in general, will continue to reach out and connect – socially, creatively and strategically - with friends, colleagues and fellow comrades in the struggle for a more just, peaceful and egalitarian world.

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