

ACT I

Prologue

Every temporal thing contains three elements. One in the spirit of the artist, who wants to create it, the second in the nature of things, by which it is tied to materia, and finally in the mind of the beholder.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing 1766

(cited in Martin and Sauter, 1995:9)

CHAPTER ONE

Playback Theatre and Lived Experience: Introducing the Thesis

Does the song of the sea end at the shore,
or in the hearts of those who listen to it?

Kahlil Gibran

Introduction

This thesis explores the potential of Playback Theatre (PBT) as a site for learning and healing. I do this through a consideration of the lived experience of those who attended the public performances of one PBT company, using these experiences to describe in detail for the first time essentially, the nature and processes of PBT through the eyes of those who experience it, and the benefits they report as an outcome of this encounter. To date, there has been no sustained empirical research on PBT from the point of view of the lived experience of its participants. This thesis seeks to fill this gap.

Playback Theatre is a new form of Non-Scripted Theatre based on the spontaneous enactment of a personal story, where the audience provides the material for what happens on stage. This story can be related to a person's experiences, memories, dreams or actions. In PBT, the Company usually consists of four-to-six actors, a musician and a conductor—the conductor acting as an MC and facilitator of the storytelling, while the actors and musician function to shape and craft the inner experiences of the storyteller. This combination of activities is then “played back” in an artistic way for the benefit of both the teller and the audience.

The exploration undertaken in this thesis is important for a number of reasons. First, although PBT has been suggested as a site for education (Dolmatch 1995; Faisander 1992; Fox 1992a; Weinstock-Wynters 1996), only one of these authors, Weinstock-Wynters (1996)

has conducted empirically based research, and the focus of this research was not on PBT itself, but rather on using the methods of PBT and Psychodrama as tools to investigate issues of oppression. What is not clear from Weinstock-Wynter's research is whether both elements of PBT and Psychodrama were used together, or separately, and hence it is not known to which form the benefits accruing as a result of her investigation may be attributed.

In addition, there are reports where PBT has been described as an adjunct to other teaching/learning encounters (King 2000; Zaporah 1995), or identified as having potential in these encounters (Benson 1996; Lawson 1995). These reports, however, are generally anecdotal and under-theorised.

PBT, then, remains under-researched and under-theorised, with scant relevant literature available. The literature located comprises: two books (one describing the development of the form, and the other the role of music in PBT); three refereed articles; two PhD theses that are obliquely related to PBT; one edited volume reporting on a symposium in Germany in 1997; and, finally, a newsletter of the PBT movement. The strength of this material lies in its groundedness in the PBT movement, while its weakness lies in its paucity and the limited degree of reflexivity that is generally apparent in many of these publications.

In this thesis my conceptual approach incorporates: notions of *learning* and *healing* through the Arts—among the most important of PBT's proposed outcomes; *modelling* by the actors, including spontaneity and improvisation; and active *witnessing* and *telling* by the participants—these describing the processes of PBT that underlie *meaning-making*—a thread that runs through the whole thesis. In addition, I consider the nature of PBT as subsuming dimensions of *narrative* and *performance*, amongst others. I further consider learning through the Arts, drama in particular, and healing through the Arts as way of illuminating the lived experience of PBT itself. A consideration of these concepts and the relationships between them will reveal for the first time the applied *and* conceptual nature of PBT, and the contribution the form can make to education.

While learning *through* the Arts is not new, indeed the earliest rituals had a teaching function (Esslin 1976; Turner 1982; Van Gennep 1960), the potential of the Arts as a site for education has only comparatively recently received scholarly attention (Best 1992; Greene 1995; O'Toole 1992; Witkin 1974). This thesis will explore PBT as a form where the boundaries between theatre and drama, performance and narrative, and healing and learning are blurred. This blurring of boundaries, with the associated possibility of multiple readings,

contains elements of post-modernism, and in this way helps contextualise PBT as a theatre of our times.

This exploration will particularly consider the *lived experience* of, and *meaning-making* in, PBT. In addition, this investigation will examine PBT as an arts- and narrative-based participatory form, and as a site:

[o]n which the arts, in particular, can release imagination to open new perspectives, to identify alternatives. The vistas that might open, the connections that might be made, are experiential phenomena; our encounters with the world become newly informed. When they do, they offer new lens through which to look out at and interpret the educative acts that keep human beings and their culture alive (Greene 1995:18).

Importantly, as Diamond and Mullen (1999:26) remind us, citing (Booth 1985:131): “striving to make meaning through metaphors and artistic shaping can be seen as not just a post-modern obsession but as ‘the fundamental drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with ... for one would thereby dispense with man himself’”.

The importance of the approach taken in the present research lies in the way that the audience of PBT became co-investigators with me as they reflected on their own lived experience. Therefore, it is the co-investigators’ voices that illuminate and reveal the nature, processes and outcomes of PBT, crossing the boundaries between engagement and reflection, quest and in-quest. Importantly, “lived experience” bounded by time, space and physical presence has also been described as “the first principle of theatre” (Neelands 1998:10); hence this approach resonates across a number of traditions, and can be seen to be broadly humanistic in nature.

The process of the inquiry is post-positivistic and uses mixed-methods. Three different approaches are employed as guides along the path towards understanding the possibilities of PBT as a means of enhancing openness to different interpretations, in other words *meaning-making*. First, I use the resources inherent in Phenomenology to privilege lived experience as a mode of inquiry (Crotty 1998; Moustakas 1994; Spinelli 1989; Van Manen 1997), and as a way to understand meaning-making. Second, I use some of the tools inherent in Phenomenography—a research specialisation that powerfully links learning and awareness (Hasselgren 2001; Marton 1988; Marton & Booth 1997)—as a means of understanding the qualitatively different ways that learning and healing occur in PBT. Finally, I use Grounded Theory methods as a resource in collecting and analysing the data where there are no existing frameworks and everything can be treated as data (Glaser 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss 1968; Strauss & Corbin 1998). The strength of this approach is the way that the resources of each

methodological “lens” can reveal hitherto unexplored dimensions of PBT. A potential weakness is the overlap between specific methodologies where such techniques as interviewing, integral to each approach, may lead to “method slurring” (Baker, Wuest & Stern 1992). A more recent position argued by Johnson et al. (2001:248) claims that there are “overwhelming ... epistemological, pragmatic and political” arguments for pluralism in qualitative research. This present research reflects that view.

Structure of the Thesis: A Play in Five Acts

This thesis is written in a number of sections, each of these conceptualised as an Act. The thesis, therefore, can be seen as a Play in five acts¹. The first section (Act One) is an introduction to the thesis. In these three chapters I describe my motivations, the background and context to the study (Chapter 1), and how the research questions flowed out of my own lived experience (Chapter 2), readings, and quest for understanding. Chapter 3 discusses the nature and scope of literature on PBT.

Act Two consists of three chapters where I present a conceptual view of PBT. In the first two of these chapters I use the fields of performance and narrative as a way of revealing PBT as an interactive theatre form based on story (Chapter 4). This process of contextualisation is continued through consideration of the more *applied* fields within which PBT sits—that is, health and education (Chapters 5 & 6). This section is more than a standard review of literature because of the way that I use these chapters to explore and explicate some of the conceptual dimensions of the thesis.

Act Three consists of two chapters describing first, the theoretical lens through which I looked as I conducted the research (Chapter 7), and next, the process of the inquiry, researching lived experience and PBT (Chapter 8). Act Four is the empirical heart of the project, and consists of three chapters. In these chapters I use the co-investigators’ voices as they describe PBT through a consideration of those propositions that relate to its *attributes*, *process*, and *outcomes* respectively (Chapters 9, 10 & 11).

¹ I offer this framing device for aesthetic and structural reasons. First, the five-act play is a classic structure of plays, with each act, here, or section doing different work and reflecting the overall shape of this thesis. I also readily acknowledge that this thesis is not a play as generally conceived. However, through offering the metaphor of a play I foreground that there are a number of characters who speak including myself, each progressing the “action” of the thesis.

The last section (Act Five), describes a first emergent theory of PBT, and considers the implications for learning and healing through this form. In conclusion, I reflect on the research suggesting some questions for future research (Chapter 12).

Director's Notes: My Position With Respect to Playback Theatre and this Thesis

The following section describes what I bring with me to this investigation. This is important, as my own beliefs, values and motivations cannot but significantly impact on the project overall, and I wish these to be explicit in the beginning, rather than revealed by degrees as the manuscript develops.

This is an important study for me. It sees the coming together of a number of my professional interests and principles. These include a passion for the Arts and particularly a lifetime interest in the theatre, an overwhelming interest in people, and a deep-seated commitment to education and my own professional development.

I also bring with me to this investigation a range of experiences, beliefs and values that will potentially impact on the nature and scope of the project. For example, in terms of experience, I have worked as a teacher in a range of settings including very young children and adults. In nearly all of these settings I used drama as a tool for personal and social development, as a technique for teaching other subject areas, and as an art form. In addition, I also trained and worked as a School Counsellor in primary and secondary schools, as well as doing sessional placements as a counsellor in two different universities. Furthermore, I have acted in the theatre since the age of eight, and worked in Theatre In Education companies, Musical Theatre, regional-based theatre, and amateur theatre, including musicals and improvisation based forms—more recently, writing, directing and producing theatre that is principally educational in its focus. These experiences form an interconnected web that seemed to lead me naturally to the PBT form.

There are also a number of important beliefs that I hold, an understanding of which is likely to further help to contextualise this study. First, I believe that people are more important than things. Secondly, I believe that there are certain things that we share in common that unite us as human beings— a common language of feelings, for example. And thirdly, I believe that story is pervasive, with the power to enrich our lives, shape the way that we perceive the world, and reveal the wonders of the human spirit (Burns 2001).

Furthermore, and of particular importance for this investigation, there are certain things that help reveal us as human; these are, our power to image and imagine, an ability to see patterns, as well as an ability to play. It seems to me that when we lose sight of these distinctly human abilities and attributes, we tend to lose our way in life and feel disconnected from both our fellow human beings and ourselves. PBT, with its emphasis on story, imagery, sound and song, offers the potential to connect and reconnect with others, and through others, ourselves.

Motivations for the Study

Life Themes and Playback Theatre

This study reflects two important themes in my life: first, Learning. This theme is important to me for a number of reasons. Learning has always been in my environment, with both my parents being educators. In addition, my father also provided a powerful role model to me as he returned to education a number of times during his life as his life-circumstances changed. He also used words well, often telling stories within the family circle and skilfully using story as a means of education through his occupation as a minister of religion. In this sense, he was an intuitive educator who derived great pleasure from both reading and telling stories. My mother was also an educator who taught science throughout most of her working life.

Consequently, education has long been in my milieu and is reflected in my own life-view, where I have been involved in formal education as a learner since leaving school, and my commitment to the education of others through my choice of profession. More than that, I constantly look for and am intrigued by learning. For example, when painful issues occur in my life, my first thought is “what is the learning in this for me?” and when I work with others I am strongly committed to make learning both implicit and explicit. In short, learning is important in my life and I identify myself as having a “learning desire”, a concept recently explored by Todd (1997).

Secondly, healing has also been a significant part of my environment. First, through my father’s work as a Minister of Religion, and second, through my mother’s concern with preventative health; a concern that she embodied and reflected in her commitment to her family eating, sleeping and living well. Third, as well working myself as a School Counsellor, I have a partner who has worked in the health profession for the last twenty years, with a

profound interest in preventative health. Many of our discussions centre around health and well-being.

My interest in healing, however, is not in the sense that it commonly relates to illness, but rather as it relates to wellness, a connected, but different part of the health spectrum. What I mean by this is that wellness and good health are closely linked, amongst other things, with issues of identity formation, self-actualisation and self-esteem. For example, in a holistic conception of self, the mind and the body are intrinsically linked and a lack of wellness can be manifested in a physical illness. This holistic integrated self includes social, emotional, spiritual, and physical domains and is about being a fully alive human being who is not in the past or future, but rather in the present. Therefore, social and emotional health are concerned with being “present, spontaneous and flexible”—interestingly, all features of the Arts.

Importantly, this notion of wellness has wider implications than merely the individual. If you believe, as I do, that we are all part of a system, something that includes families, friends, colleagues, and various forms of community, then it is not difficult to accept that a change in one part of a system will ultimately affect the system as a whole. Buscaglia (1978:135), describes this notion thus:

Each of us still has within us that which is necessary to remake the world. The principal motivational force necessary to accomplish this requires only our personal commitment to dedicate ourselves to the process of living our lives fully, not only to exist in life, but to experience it totally.

Therefore, while for many people it is impossible for one person to change the world, I do believe that individuals can make a difference.

My awareness of health and wellness has also been influenced by my presence at and active witnessing of a number of significant illnesses in my extended family, and my experience as a School Counsellor. It was in this position, where issues relating to young people’s mental health were paramount, that I became convinced of the potential of Arts-based work in healing. In addition, it has become clear to me that this path to “wellness” is extremely important in preventative health including strengthening of identity and the development of role flexibility. Good social health can go a long way, in my view, to ameliorating many social issues facing us today.

This concern with healing can be clearly seen to connect with education, community and PBT when health is understood as “a high level of wellness that fosters the freedom and power to think, feel and act in ways conducive to individual and collective growth” (Ullman

1985:385). Finally, an understanding of the construct of meaning and meaning-making is important because it is in this way that PBT can be educational.

Meaning and Playback Theatre

The most fundamental and ubiquitous aspect of a human social setting is that of meaning. These underlying meanings are the linguistic categories that make up the participants' view of reality, and with which they define their own and other's actions. The making of meaning is the development of a humanly constructed set of concepts that are consciously singled out as important aspects of reality. Meanings are *transbehavioural* in the sense that they do more than describe behaviour—they define, justify, and otherwise **interpret** behaviour as well.

The two life themes previously described—learning and healing—are linked by meaning; that is, more specifically, a hermeneutic approach to meaning as described by Ricoeur (1981), where interpretation is co-jointly constructed, and the specific cultural and historical context is considered. More specifically, this study reflects a hermeneutics of *restoration* that is concerned with issues of **presence, presentation, and the restoration of wholeness** (Ricoeur 1970), notions that inform PBT itself.

These two themes provide pathways to understanding meaning that is at the heart of one of the great existential questions. The question of meaning, therefore, is one that has concerned philosophers for some time. Without falling into tautology, the word “meaning” can have many different meanings or connotations. In *Meaning and Truth in the Arts*, Hospers (1964), for example, described sixteen different variations of the word and the way it is employed.

The meaning of a word or a phrase typically **names** what the word refers to. The meaning of a work of art, or PBT by way of distinction, relates to the **effects**—not necessarily emotions—that it evokes in us, and whatever effects it does evoke constitutes its meaning for us. It is in the nature of this evocation—including understanding and explanation, consciousness and feelings—that the potential for learning and healing occurs. It is also important to understand, in terms of this study, that the creation of personal meaning involves a “*dialectic* between reason and emotion, explanation and direct experience” (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone 1997:157). Indeed, this is a process that I have been through in trying to develop some understanding of my own PBT experiences.

Not surprisingly, the question of meaning and meaning-making is also at the heart of drama education, with “Drama as Meaning Making” being the title of four separate conferences in the UK, USA, and Australia within recent times. This interest by the drama

education community is also reflected in many of the influential texts that inform theory and practice within this community. This, in part, explains my attraction to this genre, where the adult-in-me wishes to understand what the child-in-me experiences.

Meanings, and the transformation of meaning, are also fundamental, if not essential, aspects of effective psychotherapy (Power & Brewin 1997b). What is important about this notion is that transformation implies that learning has occurred in the interplay of the individual's inner and outer world. Indeed, in the concluding chapter of their volume, Power & Brewin (1997a:204) describe meaning as part of "a core set of themes and processes that are not only highly clinically relevant but are consistent with knowledge in biological, cognitive and social psychology". What this implies for my research is that meaning is not only pervasive in human activity, but also relates to a variety of cultural and scientific communities.

Therefore, an understanding of meaning, and the active process of meaning-making in particular, will be important in investigating the educative potential of PBT itself. In addition, insight drawn from two particularly influential experiences of my own with PBT will help complete the background to the investigation.

Two Influential Experiences

Experience one: Shuttleback Theatre.

In the early 1980's I attended an annual conference of our state-based Educational Drama Association. At the end of this particular conference and as part of the closing ceremony, a theatre company with two members, one female and one male, was introduced. This company was called Shuttleback Theatre², the name deriving from the shuttle used in the weaving process, a powerful symbol that was analogous to weaving a story. And in fact, this was what they did.

First of all, one member of the Company asked for a word that described how the conference had been. This word was then interpreted and played back to the person who volunteered the word as well as the rest of the audience. This process continued on with conference attendees talking about what was most significant to them from the conference

² Shuttleback Theatre was started by two people who undertook PBT training when Fox, and members of the original company, arrived in Sydney to run workshops in 1980.

and specific instances that stood out for them. What seemed amazing about this work was that the two actors worked with, and embodied, these perceptions so well that I wondered how they could do this when they hadn't actually been at the conference until this final session.

One particular story still stays with me. A conference participant shared with the forum an experience not of the conference itself, but of a memory that a particular workshop evoked. This workshop was based on Clowning, and as part of the workshop process the leader had asked members to go back to an earlier age and re-enact a significant event in order to help capture some of the naivety of a child that is part of a clown's persona. In this particular story, the person told of an early experience when she was just starting to develop a sense of her body, and with a friend, were both talking about and looking at their bodies. An adult, presumably one of the children's parents, came across them and through an adult's eyes completely misread the situation, not able to see the situation as the children did—that is, through the eyes of a four year old without worldly experience. After a verbal berating, both of these children felt shamed, and at this point, there was a loss of innocence.

This story was then played back by the two actors. Amazingly, this story resonated not only with many there, but also with an early childhood experience of my own, up to this point, completely forgotten. This childhood experience was not exactly the same as my own, but close enough for me to be able to re-experience what was “felt” at the time. Importantly, as a result of this Playback I was able to see this experience in a new light; struck by the loss of innocence, surprised and reassured that this experience was not unique to me, and flabbergasted about how this Playback experience could have such a profound impact.

My curiosity was piqued. How could these actors so completely understand and portray this story? What training did they have in order for them to be so in the moment and spontaneous? Why did this story and performance move so many who witnessed it? How was it possible to explain the bonding that many watching felt as a direct result of this story being told? What was going on in me as I developed a new understanding of my own experience? Why did this work seem so significant? What was this process that enabled me to feel so much more OK about myself as a human being? And, although I was an audience member on this occasion, what was the teller's experience?

Experience two: Staff development with Playback Theatre.

Some six/seven years later, I received an appointment at my current University on a short-term contract. This was a particularly stressful time for me. My partner was 39 weeks pregnant with our second child, and my then employer did not wish to release me to take up

this position. The academic year had already started, another member of staff was covering the teaching for me, and I only received confirmation of the position on a Friday with a request to start teaching the following Monday morning. In addition, I had been ringing the real estate agents in town for some time, seeking accommodation, but as the academic year had already started we had not been able to find anything suitable. Furthermore, I had not been able to give a definitive “yes” to confirm anything that might be coming up. Consequently, upon our arrival we lived in a motel for a week, with the baby being born the first day after moving into a house.

Some five or six weeks after taking up this position, Sydney Playback Theatre came to Armidale as part of a staff development project. I attended this performance, and told the story of my appointment. I was able to tell of this stressful time, have it witnessed by others, and see for the first time what this had meant for my family and myself. Seeing the actors work with, and playback, my story left me deeply moved. This gave me pause for thought. I knew, from a “felt” level, that PBT was one way that could help in understanding human experience and make sense of its stressors and challenges, and I thought that I could help reveal this idea.

These two particular experiences, therefore, led me to consider PBT as a topic for research. I thought if I could get some understanding about the nature of PBT, how it worked, and some evidence that my experience of learning and healing was not unique, then others might also see this genre as potentially useful in education.

I knew, for example, that learning can be facilitated through the activation of the senses and cognition via theatre processes, with the results of this being learning about self, others, and self in relation to others. I also understood that embedded in this range of learning, made particularly powerful and cogent through theatre, can be healing, increased “wellness”, and more generally, in Haedicke and Nellhaus’ words (2001:3) words, “[an] increase [in] the participant’s agency”. This agency, I felt, would be particularly profound if manifested with a community.

The Need for Community

One of the revealing developments in the world of mass media and entertainment that provides impetus for understanding the potential of a genre like PBT is the recent metaphoric rise in popularity of “Reality TV”. Reality TV can be seen in one sense as appealing to the same basic need in people for community that seems to be met in PBT, and is reflected in

such shows as *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. In *Survivor* (2001), a number of people from different backgrounds are “marooned” on a desert island for 60 days. During this time they have to complete a series of challenges and set tasks, with participants variously being voted off the island by their peers at regular intervals. The incentive to persevere with the challenges and complete the allocated time on the island was that the winner won \$1,000,000; the winner being decided by a quorum of participants previously voted off.

This form of TV reflects a number of contemporary issues. First, community is disappearing as people experience greater degrees of uncertainty and separation in their lives. Putman (2000), for example, described how in the West we live in affluent but lonely times, and in spite of our relative prosperity, we have never been so disconnected from our institutions, communities, families and friends. The established “reference points” for people are no longer so apparent, and Reality TV, in part, fills this void. Second, Reality TV has many of the elements of a good story: a challenge to be overcome, a relationship to be managed, and elements of tension and conflict. These elements are so important to the genre that the participants are intentionally put through a “contrived” set of experiences, in order that they might encounter the full range of human emotions. Third, these stories access human emotions with relationships established and breaking down, alliances formed, strained and broken. Finally, this form of TV is entertaining, people have fun, are immersed in challenging situations, and reveal their human side with all that this entails.

The popularity of such a genre is staggering, with the 2001 series of *Survivor* being watched by 25 million people an episode in the United States. This form of TV reflects much about contemporary society and also highlights the hollowness in many people’s lives that a form like PBT could potentially fill. As an aside, the popularity of Reality TV also reveals in humans a voyeuristic and/or narcissistic tendency (Buchanan 2001) that, at its worst, is also present in PBT.

Another motivation for this research was that, while PBT as a form has developed considerably from the early days of the original company, critical analysis of the form remains underdeveloped. The bi-annual conferences of the PBT community have focussed on practical workshops—with the exception of the Kassel symposium (Fox & Dauber 1999)—and the essays written for the PBT School have not been widely disseminated. In addition, the International Playback Theatre Network (ITPN) newsletter is predominantly written by practitioners, and while some have probed deeply and focussed on critical analysis and theorisation, they are the exception rather than the rule. The strength of this history has

been the strong “groundedness” of the PBT movement; however criticism and theorising around the PBT form is patchy and uneven.

This study seeks to redress this imbalance. I do this partly through a consideration of the literature that helps to contextualise, and therefore reveal, PBT. This literature includes theorising in Education, particularly Arts and Drama Education; in Theatre, Performance studies, Drama and Narrative, more generally; and, finally, in the intersection of Therapy and the Arts including Drama Therapy and Psychodrama. In one sense, PBT can be seen to sit at the nexus of each of these fields. This confirms the multi-dimensional nature of PBT itself.

The Research Site: Sydney Playback Theatre Company

In this thesis I consider a number of public performances of one company, Sydney Playback Theatre (SPT), over a two-year period. I chose to focus my research on one company in order to place some boundaries around the investigation. I also understood that the way to a universalised perception of all PBT is via an intensified way of perceiving one. That is, an understanding of the specific nature of one PBT company provides insights into the form itself. Interestingly, as an aside, this process can be seen to be analogous to the artistic process that opens up a similar experience within the spectator of *intensification* and *definition* (Grainger 1990:18).

I chose to work with SPT for a number of reasons. First, this company had regular monthly performances. This meant that I could guarantee regular performances over the two-year period that I collected data, and plan ahead with a reasonable degree of certainty. Second, each public performance served a consistent purpose, whereas commissioned performances fulfil a diverse range of interests. For example, Corporations have commissioned performances for management training of executive staff. Health Services, by way of contrast, have commissioned performances for providing alienated and disenfranchised youth with a “voice”. Therefore, using the regular public performances that were similar in scope and nature as a site for my research provided some degree of continuity.

Third, I knew that this particular company had established skills and a sound knowledge of the principles and practices of PBT. The artistic director at that time ran international training workshops in the form and the company was one of the first established outside the original

company in the USA³. Fourth, the artistic director had expressed an interest in my project, and had done much to facilitate my research with this company.

Aim of the Investigation

Generally speaking, I set out to investigate the nature of PBT as a special kind of human encounter that is always a “meeting together” (Neelands 1998:11). More specifically, I sought evidence that might support the use of PBT in education, broadly speaking; that is, education that is not limited to schools or traditional educational sites.

I saw my goals as three-fold.

1. To chart the waters of PBT. This seemed important as PBT has not been subject to the level of intense scrutiny and debate that might be expected, considering that it is performed in 30 different countries (Fox & Dauber 1999).
2. To search for evidence that PBT does indeed have characteristics that facilitate change.
3. To document the results of this empirically based investigation for practitioners and other scholars who may have an interest in this work, thereby helping to develop the form.

As a result of my early experiences, my professional interests in learning through the arts, and some of the values that I hold, I devised the following research questions.

A. Theoretical Research Questions

- 1(a) What does the available literature on PBT say about its nature and characteristics?
- 2(a) Where does the theory and practice of PBT sit within contemporary theoretical developments?
- 3(a) What claims regarding PBT are made in the literature regarding its potential to contribute to Education and Health?

B. Empirical Research Questions

- 1(b) What is the Lived Experience of Playback Theatre?

This question was devised in order to look for the first time at what the experience of PBT was for those who attended it. This seemed important, because if there are indeed any benefits as a result of this experience, then it is the audience who should be able to identify them.

³ This company had its first performance in Sydney in 1980 (Brandon 2001).

This question also arose out of my reading in both Phenomenology, Phenomenography, and a renewed interest in the writings of Dewey (1938; 1959). It was Dewey (1938), who highlighted that teaching and learning are “a continuous process of reconstruction of experience”. In addition, in Phenomenology it is the *lived* experience that is important, and as scholars like Benner (1994), Crotty (1996; 1998), Spinelli (1989) and Van Manen (1997) foreground, human beings live in the world in a pedagogic way, using experience and reflection on experience as a way to make meaning of their world.

Phenomenography, as a research specialisation, also argues that the qualitatively different ways in which *people* see, experience, understand and conceptualise various phenomena in their life-worlds are important to how they learn and interpret reality (Marton 1988). This research question, then, will examine the nature of PBT, and what is inherent in the form that might precipitate changes in participants’ interpretation and learning.

2(b) How do Participants Make Meaning in Playback Theatre?

This question was devised in order to investigate how PBT works. There are a number of dimensions to this question. First, if it was possible to unpack—from the participants’ perspective—how PBT works, this could reveal the learning potential of the form. For example, such unpacking could reveal evidence that learning does occur through this process, and what this is. Furthermore, the two research questions are intrinsically linked because if “experience is the bedrock upon which meaning is constructed” (Diamond & Mullen 1999:23), then it can be asked, “does experiencing PBT result in meaning-making?”

3(b) Do the findings from 1(b) and 2(b) indicate that PBT in practice has the nature and characteristics extrapolated from examining the literature? (A. previously)

4(b) Do the findings from 1(b) and 2(b) support the theoretical claims regarding the contribution that PBT can make to Education and Health?

In addition, an understanding of meaning-making through PBT would also help reveal more about the processes of learning through theatre and the arts, and therefore add to this developing body of knowledge. Making these explicit in PBT would develop the form itself by revealing for the first time what these processes are. This revelation would have implications for the use and teaching of PBT, and potentially open the form up for further critique and theorising. One further, and ambitious, aim of the study was to formulate in a tentative and emergent form a “theory” of PBT that would “explain”—as well as “describe”—my findings in relation to these two overarching research questions.

The following chapter is an evocation of one PBT performance. In this chapter I foreground my own lived experience and meaning-making process as a way of describing the event, thereby setting the context for what is to follow.

CHAPTER TWO

The Lived Experience of Playback Theatre: An Evocation

Until the stories are told, there is only the thing itself without its history, without its cast, without its incidental music. Until the vitality of its life is distilled in the telling the construction of a bridge across a gorge cannot become the bones of life. Until a heartbreak is fashioned into pearls of remembrance, there is only the heartbreak. (Clarkson 1995)

Introduction

This chapter is an evocation of Playback Theatre (PBT) through my first-person account of a public performance of Sydney Playback Theatre Company (SPT). I not only evoke here a performance for the reader, but also set the context for what follows providing a phenomenological description of a performance that reveals my own meaning-making process.

This performance (November, 2000) was videoed by me after I had attended nine monthly public performances to collect the interview data, and had transcribed and coded these data. There were two reasons why a performance was videoed at this point in the project. First, even though I had initially planned to video performances as part of my methodology, the company had not felt comfortable with this. Thus, when I sought permission early in the project (August, 1996) to record each performance that I attended, the company politely declined my request, raising, in part, the issue of protecting the confidentiality of participants. Struck by the realities of working in a naturalistic setting, in contrast to my ideals of methodology, I let this idea go.

A significant time later, I came to a point in my project where I wished to describe an actual PBT performance in a way that would evoke it for those not present. When I came to do this, using the field notes that I took during the performances as a prompt, I was struck by the inadequacy of a linear word-based account to evoke such an organic multi-modal theatrical event. Hence, my desire to record a performance that would encapsulate more than one dimension was rekindled. Therefore, this video material was not collected with an especial view to collect “more” data as such—after all, I now had 47 substantial interviews—but rather with a view to providing visual material that would act as a stronger *aide memoire* than my incomplete sets of notes⁴.

In the years since my initial request to video a performance, I had worked hard to build up the company’s trust, confidence and respect. I achieved this by regularly attending the monthly public performances—nine in all—going to rehearsals⁵ on the Monday afternoons when I was in Sydney, and providing regular feedback sessions to the company as the project unfolded over the two-year data collection period. In addition, I also attended an international PBT conference⁶ that was held in Fremantle, Western Australia. At this conference, which members of SPT attended, I participated in forums and practical workshops with a view to developing my knowledge of PBT in both an embodied and intellectual way. During this conference, one of the most established members of SPT came up to me and said, “You are serious about this work, aren’t you.” Hence, when I made my final request to video a public performance, the company felt confident in my integrity and commitment to the nature of PBT and gave me permission to complete this phase of the project.

I approached the videoing of this performance with both excitement and anxiety. Paradoxically, this visual record, even with the limitations of one camera and even the video process itself, helped reduce the distance from the performance as it also increased it. This is because even though the video itself is a delimiting representation of a performance, it has

⁴ As an aside, what happened in many of these performances was that my field notes were initially detailed and comprehensive, becoming more and more fractured as each performance continued, and as I subsequently got more and more involved in what was happening “on stage”. Hence, these notes provided incomplete accounts of the public performances.

⁵ It is important to understand that these rehearsals focus on working with the form itself, developing individual performance skills, and developing the ensemble, rather than performances as conventionally understood that work towards the realisation of a script in performance.

⁶ “Under Southern Skies”, University of Notre Dame, January 1998.

also the capacity to capture the sound and movement of the performance in a way that an interview after a performance can not. For that reason, the video was more able to re-create or prompt the sense of “being there.”⁷

What I describe next is the evening performance that I videoed. This description is my “take” on the evening, literally through the lens of the video camera. What this “lens” did was to both shape and frame what I saw, and therefore describes only one potential view of the evening that was coloured by my own excitement and anxieties, and one that was also influenced by both the people I was with and my role as researcher and camera operator.

The November Public Performance

The Setting

I leave my companions in the Thai restaurant where I had hurriedly gulped down some dinner, as I want to get set up early before any of the audience arrives. I walk with two bags of gear and a tripod in my hand the fifty metres to the Edge Theatre, Newtown. The theatre is around the corner and up the stairs off a busy inner-city road. You wouldn’t know it was there unless you either knew where to look, had been there before, or saw the folding billboard that was placed at the bottom of the stairs one hour before the performance. The theatre space itself is not large—there is space maybe for eighty people—and there are high ceilings, polished floorboards and a pressed metal ceiling that reflects the age of the building.

Theatre lights illuminate not only the performance area⁸, but also the audience’s seating, and these lights are left “up” all evening so that everyone can not only see the actors, but also each other—everyone is on “show”. If you look around the space you see a long black curtain that hangs from ceiling to floor on one side. This curtain acts as a partition that separates the performance space from the toilets and a small room where the actors get changed.

I set up the camera just off to one side of the audiences’ seating and start to test record as the actors stand in a circle after finishing their warm-up. Panning across the seating for the audience, I notice that it is arranged in four rows of about fifteen seats each, with each of these rows placed around three sides of the performance space. I also note two individual

⁷ A further evocation of a performance can be found in the Appendix to Fox (1994:217-261). It is interesting to note the similarities of rhythm, structure and language of this 1981 performance to the one described herein.

⁸ The performance space is represented diagrammatically in Appendix D.

chairs placed side by side that seem to sit curiously halfway between the audiences' seats and the performance space—these are for the teller and the conductor. I continue to pan across the performance space and pick up the four blue upturned milk crates sitting in a straight line facing the audience—these are for the actors. Further across is a single seat for the musician with a colourful cloth on the floor next to it. On the cloth is a collection of exotic instruments.

To me, the seats for the audience, the two chairs for the conductor and teller, the musicians' chair and the four milk crates seem to create a symbolic circle or “frame” around the performance area. It is in some ways a “sacred” space, a space that both *reveals* and *contains* the stories of those who choose to tell in PBT. I am reminded of Peter Brook, one of the most influential contemporary theatre directors, and a workshop I attended with two actors from his company. In this workshop, the actors spread a piece of thick rope out on the floor that described a space—a *sacred* space, they said—half stepping in and then quickly stepping out again, thereby charging it with an air that almost made me fearful of stepping into it myself, not knowing what might be revealed. This “framing” of the space is important and seems to add to the ritualistic nature of the form. I am struck with how the actors can move in and out of this performance space, and how the audience as tellers can also move in and out. The space is revealing, and also “holds” what is exposed.

My ear picks up some taped Middle Eastern music—I can't see anyone playing anything—instrumental only, I notice, as I am prompted to focus the camera on the pastiche of instruments laid out on a piece of Tibetan cloth. I see the familiar and the strange in the seemingly eclectic collection of a xylophone, a set of shakers made of dried gourds with beads tied around them on nylon string, two drums, a bamboo flute, cowbells, and something that looks like an auto-harp. A well-used double bass lies on its side just next to them, with a guitar next to it. They collectively seem to offer considerable potential. Just behind these instruments, and closer to the performance space, my eye is drawn to a moveable screen with lengths of brightly coloured material draped over it—vivid blues, reds, orange and purple. These are the props of PBT.

By now, people are starting to drift in and I turn to try and capture some of the moments of “arrival”, wondering if people would feel OK with me videoing. Another thought crosses my mind—what if they don't even notice? They arrive in pairs, couples holding hands, or small groups; some of them are puffing as they come to the top of the steep narrow stairs and stop to pay their money at the old laminex counter that serves as the “ticket office”. I pick up in the edge of the lens a low bench off to one side of the counter. On this bench is a collection of

pamphlets advertising workshops, performances and community meetings. This space is shared equally with an assembly of mismatched mugs, herbal tea bags, instant coffee and disposable cups. These are used after the performance for those who wish to stay and talk—as many do. I wonder if I will get any questions about my research project, and if anyone will sign the consent forms prominently displayed.

I watch the new arrivals make their way to the blue pressed metal seats; these scrape on the floor as people push past to find their way to sit down. The noise level continues to rise as more people arrive and find seats. Greetings are called out as someone recognises friends and acquaintances, and some people who clearly know each other well exchange hugs with obvious warmth. The temperature inside the theatre begins to rise and I feel a sense of expectation in the air. Not for the first time I wonder if I have enough tape.

I look around the growing assembly. There is an interesting mix of people present. I see older couples whom I would not necessarily expect to see out on a Sunday evening in the inner city, young people who are well dressed—casual, not expensive—and a group who I presume are university students, exuding a certain life and energy. They enact caricatures of someone they all know and laugh uproariously. I also notice those who are dressed in a florid way, with African shirts or Chinese silk jackets that seem to announce a bohemian nature, and same-sex couples holding hands who obviously feel comfortable in this place. This is not the sort of crowd that, for example, I would anticipate appearing on the social pages of the Sunday papers after the premiere evening of the latest Tim Rice extravaganza. They have come for a different purpose, it seems.

The noise level continues to build. On one side near the entrance, a couple of children excitedly push past James—the artistic director of SPT and conductor for the evening—as they rush to be seated before the performance starts. James waits for them to settle, and then helpfully shows some other latecomers to empty seats—no standing on formality here! I pan back to James as he moves to centre “stage” and waits.

The Introduction

The background music fades and the audience gradually quietens down. The air is charged with anticipation as James begins to speak. His voice is not conversational or even “helpful” as he was a few minutes before; he speaks as one who calls our attention. His change in register introduces the **frame** of the evening.

This is the last public performance for the year, and some of you might have already noticed the video camera at the edge of the audience.

Heads turn in my direction, and some people notice me for the first time as James introduces me as the researcher, and my research project. I feel a little self-conscious behind the camera and look up and smile. I bend down and look at James again through the lens. He goes on:

If, at any stage during the evening, you want the video turned off, just say. If at the end of the evening you think, [James puts his hand to his mouth with a look of mock horror and everyone laughs], say, can you erase that bit. Because Playback as you know is you, participating, and it is to some extent. There is an outline here of what Peter is doing [raising consent forms in his hand], and there are also consent forms, [James pretends to read] 'I agree to being on the video', these will be on the table here and you can read them at the end of the performance [James points]. We'll be starting in one or two minutes [he exits].

I'm relieved; no one at this stage is rushing over to pick up the forms. The noise level rises again as conversation flows, and then starts to subside as the two musicians for the evening wait by the side of the performance space. One musician I know well, and I wonder if he is 'training' someone new, as it is unusual in my experience for there to be any more than one musician during each performance.

The Musicians

The two musicians, both dressed in black, come and take centre stage. Rob picks up his double bass, and Marciel stands with him, relaxed and poised. They look at each other, smile and nod, and Rob plucks a note on the double bass. Marciel, unaccompanied, begins to sing the blues—her voice is deep and resonant; she sways slightly as she sings:

*I wish, I knew, how it would feel, to be free,
I wish, I could break, all those chains, that hold me,
I wish I could say all those things that I could say,
I wish, ...*

The bass comes in, and Rob joins in the chorus, providing harmony.

"I wish, that I knew, how it feels to be me."

The audience, focussed now, applauds as Marciel sits and picks up a guitar—Rob thumbs the double bass, taps his foot and begins to sing:

"Four seasons in one day"

Ah, I recognise the Tim Finn song and hum along under my breath. Marciel provides harmony in the chorus. This is a song that we know.

The Actors

The audience applauds and the musicians move stage-right to their collection of instruments and chair; Marciel sits on the floor with the instruments spread out in front of her and Rob on the chair next to the drums. Our attention is then drawn to six Playback actors—three women and three men all dressed in black—walking in a straight line, one behind the other, entering the performance space. I notice that there are six; again, this is unusual as traditionally there are four actors, and I wonder how they will manage with only four milk crates for them to sit on. The actors take up a position in tableau on the floor, three kneeling in front, left arm on left knee, and the remaining three standing behind. James follows closely and takes his seat in one of two chairs opposite. Importantly, he takes the one closest to the audience, leaving the other seat closest to the actors free.

One actor begins to speak; we look at him: “*I moved to Sydney because I wanted to be a poet.*” His voice falls away as another comes in: “*The only thing I know about my dreams is I always **think**...*” Another cuts in, “*I saw the moon rise red*” followed by each of the others: “*I dream that I’m going to find a house; bloody dreams, they always disappear; dreams, I mean, who ever remembers them?*” The actors start to talk across each other, with each other, and against each other, voices building up together in a dynamic way until they merge as one. They fall silent as they reach out together with arms out-stretched *as if* trying to catch a dream that seems to whisk across the stage. They chase the dream across and back again, reaching, stretching, straining as one, and finishing in a tableau, frozen, clutching *as if* at a make-believe dream that got away.

James calls us to witness, in a voice full of ceremony:

Dreams are the visions that come in the night while we’re asleep. They are also the thoughts and musings and hopes we have during the day. Dreams sometimes look into the future, and sometimes they tell us about the past. Sometimes, they are just plain inexplicable. As children we dream of the things that we want to do, as adults dream of things, we dream of things we want to do [pause]—often while we’re at work. The pen doodles [he draws in the air], as dreams go off the page. Dreams frighten us, dreams recur, some dreams don’t have any pattern, we are disappointed in our dreams, sometimes we don’t dream at all, and there is an absence of dreams. But we all have some sort of relationship to dreams, whether we are dreaming, or not dreaming and this is our theme for tonight, dreams. And because it is a playback theatre performance, it will be you and your dreams, you and your hopes, you and your visions, you at night writhing in the bed, you at day [pause].

When you think about dreams, now, what is the word that comes to mind for you and your experience of dreaming or not dreaming, day dreaming or not, what is a word or phrase that comes to mind?

“Fluid Sculptures”

A voice replies from the audience: “Reflection”.

“*Reflection*”, James echoes, musing. “*Reflection about what?*” James takes the few words and repeats them, as if savouring the feel of them in his mouth. “*Is this a pleasant thing?*” he enquires. “Not really,” is the reply, and we all laugh. He reflects this feeling of “not really” in his body as he scrunches himself up, and makes a sound like a child being presented with a yucky food, *ehhhhhh!* Everyone in the audience laughs. James asks, “*Your name is?*” And then says, “*Let’s watch.*”

The Tibetan cymbals strike together and a musician’s voice—I can’t see who it is—lets out a long wail that seems to pick up the potential unpleasantness alluded to. One of the actors walks forward—I try and focus on his face—and peers intently into the milk crate he was sitting on, as if looking deeply inside for something that can’t quite be seen. The next actor walks forward looking into an imaginary mirror, grimacing at his own reflection. The third actor moves forward and sits at the feet of the other two, and starts a monologue—I just can’t make out what she is saying—while the fourth walks forward with her blue milk crate and stands on it, behind the others, overlooking them, and stretches, yawns and says in a bored affected way, “*la-de-la-di-dah*”. The first actor finds something very small in the crate and brings it out to examine it. “This is the *best* thing I’ve done all day?” he says quizzically. I suddenly see each different facet of the reflection in the fluid sculpture—the searching, the unpleasantness, the voice in the head that won’t shut up, and the couldn’t-care-less.

The audience laughs, and the actors freeze. The cymbals chime again, and the actors all look at the audience member who offered the few words. The **look** speaks volumes without saying a word. It is the handing back of the *offer* to the teller, it represents a “gift” of the Playback, it says to the person who offered it: “We acknowledge your experience”, and “We give you back more than what you offered, we have embodied it and expanded it, your experience is now part of ‘our’ experience.” The audience applauds again, recognising the end of this component, and the actors return with their crates to the original set up.

James returns to the stage and asks, “*Lets have a different word*”. Someone else offers the word “essential”. James probes, “*Essential, what is essential about daydreams?*” The audience member describes how daydreams are important for her creative processes. James

summarises and picks up on the feeling associated with the offer, “*You’re passionate about daydreams—and your name is Helen.*” Everyone laughs; James responds in mock indignation over his shoulder as he moves to the side of the stage, “*I know **some** people here.*” One of the musicians starts improvising and sings in the background as the fluid sculpture unfolds, revealing passion, excitement and inspiration, and for me, confusion. There is a “busy-ness” in this fluid sculpture, and it builds to a cacophony of sound, the actors somehow each seeming intent on their own work without the overall connection to each other that seems to characterise work that I find satisfying. There is so much happening that I can’t focus the camera on any one spot, and the sound is overwhelming. The story is somehow lost in the overt “theatricality” of the fluid sculpture. I wonder if the word is too abstract to be easy to work with? It finishes, and I am conscious of a feeling of relief!

James comes back on stage and looks to the person who made the offer: “*Is it that intense?*”

“Sometimes”. The person who made the offer doesn’t seem convinced; maybe she didn’t find it satisfying either? “*I think we got into the passion of it!*” Everyone laughs. It seems like an understatement.

James looks at the audience and asks for another word. A different audience member responds with a sigh of exasperation and the word “busy”. James picks up on both the verbal and the non-verbal; he indicates to the actors: “*Let’s see the business of the dreams and the feeling of ‘pew’. Your name is?*”

This process is repeated, and “insightful” is offered. James reflects back not only the word, by repeating it, but also the audience member himself by modelling how he is sitting—in the pose of ‘the thinker’—one hand on his knee and resting his head on his hand. This reminds me of my counselling training when we were taught that emulating the posture of a client helps create a feeling of empathy and being listened to. James helps the teller—and actors by default—by seeking to make this word “insightful” concrete. He does this by asking for one insight that this person has had from a dream—we wait—it seems that the audience member can’t answer on the spot. James seems to sense this; he turns to the whole audience and says in a mock serious tone, “*You all have to answer this question before you leave tonight.*” This elicits a laugh—and importantly gives the audience member some breathing space—then turns back to him. “*Does one come to mind?*” The audience member talks about this, although I can’t hear what he is saying; he is sitting in front of me and I try and focus the camera on the back of his head, remembering that zooming the camera in also zooms in the

microphone. No, still not clear. I hear James summarise what this person has offered as a feeling state where **wonder** predominates. “*Let’s watch*”, he concludes and sits on the floor and looks at the actors as the fluid sculpture unfolds. I know the person who made this offer, and in my mind, try and guess what it was that he said.

At the end of this fluid sculpture, James turns and acknowledges the audience member who made the offer—thus honouring the offerer—and asks for a few more words that **haven’t** been heard before. He seems to be going for *difference* and diversity of response—and he consciously works both sides of the audience, looking deliberately left, right, front and back. In each case, I notice that what James asks for is the feeling that goes with the word—this is to help the actors, I think—repeating these words as prompts almost; everyone listens **intently**. It is the *quality* of listening that stands out for me, the inflections, nuances and even pronunciations conveying important information that will help the actors, musicians and audience alike. At the end of each fluid sculpture, the actors take the blue milk crates and reset them across the back of the space and sit on them—at least four of them do, with the other two standing off to one side. I watch them interchange positions both on and off the blue milk crates as each new fluid sculpture is performed. They seem to do this without any predetermined sense of who will be “off” or “on”. This reflects, I presume, the strong sense of ensemble within the company; I was curious how they would manage that.

The audience applauds more enthusiastically now; clearly they are becoming warmed up to the form, and the actors are also become more facile. James probes, “*Maybe you thought of a word that’s* [pauses meaningfully], *and you thought, oh, I couldn’t say that!* [He puts his hand to his mouth in mock embarrassment]. *Or, I am allowed to say that?* This looks like a deliberate attempt to expand the boundaries of what is OK in this setting. Someone responds, “They’re all a load of crap!” [He got what he was looking for!] Laughter ripples through the audience. James amplifies this response.

You watch. The next fluid sculpture unfolds.

The Development

James comes back on:

I wonder if you were going to tell us a dream that you have, or tell us a time in your life when a dream got ruined, or a dream got realised, or an image that you remember from one of them, I wonder what it is that you would tell here tonight? What I am going to invite you to do is turn to someone near you, if you are feeling a little bold, someone that you don’t know, if you are feeling not quite so bold, someone you do know, and if you don’t know anyone here, wait and see what

happens [everyone laughs]. And tell the person you are talking to something of what you would tell about dreams tonight, and then I'll invite some people to come and sit here with me (indicates the teller's chair), and we'll have a conversation and hear more about the world at our end. Do this now, turn to someone or even get up from your chair and meet someone and tell them what you would tell if you were going to tell a story.

People turn around in their chairs, get up and move and the room erupts with noise as people talk to each other. It dawns on me that the audience members are progressively being warmed-up to take bigger risks and greater degrees of self-disclosure—this process starting from the actors saying something personal in the very first fluid sculpture. This process, in turn, also has the effect of connecting audience members with each other and so helps to build community. Friends turn to those near them, and strangers turn to strangers. I stop the camera and think what would I tell? I decide that I would tell about my father's death and look for someone free to talk to. Everyone nearby is engaged. I notice that some people are laughing with each other, and others are sitting close, leaning in to each other, and seemingly sharing something intimate. This “connection” with others seems so important in this form, and is actively developed through the rituals of PBT—like this time.

The Longer Form

After a few minutes, James comes back into centre stage and waits for quiet before speaking:

I thought before we went any further we should probably introduce ourselves. I am James. [All the rest of the actors and musicians also introduce themselves using their first names. James turns back to the audience and asks no one in particular]. If you were going to tell something tonight what would it have been about? What would it be about?

Someone from the audience offers, “An intuition that led me astray.” There is laughter at this suggestion, and I think for a moment of my own recent experience of an occurrence like that. Some other hands go up, and he doesn't seem interested in taking the first offer.

“Yes. Somebody else—what would you tell about?” [James points to someone in the audience from the opposite side, then repeats more softly] “What would you tell about”?

“A significant dream from childhood.” Someone else offers: “Searching for the lost goldfish.”

I also straighten up and put my hand up. James points to me and I suddenly feel **part** of the group: “I'd tell a dream about my father being alive.” The suggestions flow quickly and James observes: “There is already a rich array of stories here.”

The Invitation

Who's going to come up and tell [pointing to the teller's chair] the first story? [He pauses expectantly, then in a welcoming voice as someone moves from their seat in the audience], the intuition that led me astray. We applaud the first teller as she walks down to the teller's chair and sits next to the conductor.

The First Story

"How about, first of all, you tell everyone your name."

Teller: "Nancy."

"Choose one of the actors to be you." The teller chooses and the actor stands in front of his milk crate.

[James musing] *"An intuition that led you astray, [pause] when [pause], did this intuition lead you astray?"*

James listens carefully to the teller and paraphrases her responses, highlighting the feeling component of the teller's comments. His comments help her frame the story—*"What happened?"* The teller recounts the experience, with James eliciting pertinent details. What this seems to do is to highlight significant features for the actors, such as places and names, to help them in their playback of the story. James also visualises the teller's picture as she paints it, following the teller's directions as she points first this way, then that, mirroring the teller's movements with his own, further creating a feeling of being heard and togetherness between them.

As the teller recounts her story and introduces other characters in the story, James interrupts: *"Choose a person to be your mother. Do you call her mum? What would be a couple of words for your mum?"*

They continue: *"OK, then what happened?"* And the story continues.

James: *"The story ends with what?"*

The teller recounts her final thoughts in a mock-serious tone: *"Something is going to happen to that woman."*

"Ah", James says, *"the next intuition [the audience chuckles], you watch."*

The double bass begins to play, as the actors leave the performance area, clearing the milk crates with them as they go. The musician sings in a lilting voice: *"Can you feel it?"* The actor chosen to play the teller picks up the milk crate and carries it over his shoulder (as the

intuition); he tells the first part of the teller's story, improvising around what was said and embodying the key ideas and feelings. Another actor appears as the home-unit the teller was after, and kneels behind the teller's actor and becomes the voice in the head. This reflects the two opposing thoughts that the teller related. A third actor takes a length of bright blue fabric and becomes the trees around the area that the teller described as desirable. The trees call out to the 'teller' in a seductive way, like a siren's song to a travelling mariner. The musician sings quietly in the background "*Can you feel it? Can you feel it/ your intuition, Can you feel it?*" as there is the transition into the next part of the story.

I look through the lens of the camera at the teller's face. I see various emotions play over her as she watches this playback; there is the laughter of recognition, as she sees herself in the story, the dawning of understanding as she recognises some of her motivations being played out before her that were not previously apparent to her. A different actor, not previously chosen for a role, intuitively steps in as another character in the story that was alluded to, but not mentioned by name. She senses that it is important to show this character, and this reflects her experience with this form. Humour is injected into the Playback through providing a caricature of this person who is a symbolic, if not actual, presence in the story. The teller laughs as she sees embodied, for the first time, what she was reacting to.

The actor chosen to play the teller over-emphasises the feeling of disappointment that the teller felt when things didn't work out [eliciting laughs], and the teller wipes tears of laughter from her eyes. The actors come to the end of the Playback and freeze, then turn to look at the teller, acknowledging her, and her experience, and offering the gift of their Playback to her. The audience applauds loud and long, many still chuckling, as James turns to speak directly to the teller.

"Is there anything that you want to say having seen this story enacted?"

Teller: "Just the image of my mother doing the [gesture with her hands]"—everyone laughs. This seemed to capture something of the person her mother was. "It was great, thank you", she concludes.

James leaves the conductor's chair as the teller resumes her seat in the audience. He moves to centre stage, as the actors reset the performance space with the milk crates. He continues to work the audience: "*That was the intuition that went wrong. What will the next one be about? It might be something quite different.*"

The Second Story

Another teller from the audience volunteers. “I have one.” The audience turns to look at who has spoken, and claps as she leaves them and goes to the teller’s chair. James also resumes his seat: “*Tell us your name.*”

Teller: Diana.

James: “*Your story is about what?*”

Teller: “It’s a career dream.”

“*It’s a **career** dream. Choose someone to be you.*” She thoughtfully rubs her chin and chooses an actor to be her.

“*When does this career dream start?*”

“It starts when I was sixteen, a long time ago.”

“*A long time ago. So, sixteen, you were where?*” The teller names the vision, and then describes a vision she had of a job, and a tension between choosing between two different employment fields that she was then attracted to. James reflects this tension by mirroring the teller as she shows first one hand with one idea, then the other with the second idea. James looks at first one of his hands, and then the other. “*It was like why do this? Or this?*” he asks. She nods.

“*And you had an amazing vision, what was the amazing vision?*” The teller recounts this vision and James summarises: “*A grand vision of a counselling practice, successful, thoughtful, deep.*” She nods.

“*What would be the next part of this story be?*”

The teller recounts moving to Sydney, describing the shock that she first felt upon arriving. James picks up on this word: “*What was the shock? You said it was a big shock?*” He listens intently, and probes further: “*What was it about [this city] that you wanted to get away from?*” James summarises the story so far, and asks: “*What would be the next part of the story?*” and this is recounted.

“*So what is it like when you first started to practice counselling?*”

“Oh, it was really exciting”—the teller recounts starting to work, pauses, and then observes, as an addendum, “Except for my first client who told me that I was being condescending. I was devastated.” She laughs self-consciously. “Oh,” comes a cry of

sympathy from the audience. It seems that there are a number present who can identify with her position.

“Choose someone to be the client.” The teller thoughtfully looks at all of the actors and points to one who stands in front of her milk crate. *“Choose a couple of words to describe how they were.”*

Teller: “She was very aggressive, and um...”

“She called you condescending”, James offers.

Teller: “Yeh.” James then summarises, and then provides a space for her to continue: *“First, it was very hard, but then...?”*

“But now I’m qualified, it’s really good, but it just takes all of my energy, and it’s really draining.”

“How many years has it been?” The Teller recounts, “Fourteen years.”

“Fourteen years of carrying a vision, and now you’re getting tired.”

“And it’s a bit disappointing, and like it’s really draining...”

James thinks out aloud in a musing tone: *“So what state is the vision in?”*

“The vision is a bit unfulfilled, it hasn’t gone, but there is a sense of, [pause] is this it?”

“So it is disappointing?”

“Yes”

“What else is there? What other feelings go with ...” [he tapers off providing space for the teller to answer].

“It’s also exciting. There are also chronic moments and it is a lot of hard work.”

James helps to make it concrete. *“What is a moment that stands out?”* The teller describes a moment where there is a breakthrough with a young person that she is working with. *“And how does the story end?”*

“I suppose the ending is like, where does it go from here?”

James summarises, *“So you need to rest for a while, and there is a big question ... Let’s watch.”* She nods. The musician improvises and sings: *“Things were going to be so grand”* as the actors clear the stage and then re-enter in character.

Two of the actors stand face to face with hands held high in between them, forming an arch over their heads. They appear to be embodying something fixed. The actor playing the teller enters and is intrigued by the shape of the structure, “What is it?” she asks. “We’re parliament house,” they answer. “We’re governing the country,” as they continue to stand still doing nothing—we all laugh. It dawns on me that what they are doing—besides the humour—is to encapsulate the place where the story begins; this also activates the dream so that it becomes alive and can be seen.

The actors continue to work with, and off, each other, accepting the offers that are made and saying, “yes” to them. The sense of improvisation is exciting and the audience are enthralled, sensing that the actors are taking big risks, and could easily “fall”. Two different actors embody the different choices that the teller described, textiles or counselling. I turn the camera to capture the teller watching the Playback. I see her watching with obvious delight, and then the smile seems to freeze on her face as she bites her lip; something in the Playback appears to strike her. The teller shakes her head as she recognises other people in the story and suddenly sees the effects that they had on her. The flute and shakers play softly in the background as one part of the story segues into the next scene, which is set with a different emotional dynamic.

Tears well up in the teller’s eyes as a poignant moment is played back. The actors then transform and become the weight of the load that the teller carries. The actor playing the teller then ‘shhs’ them up and says strongly to them as all of the elements of her story, “Give me some space”—they freeze, and again more quietly, “Give me some space.” The teller nods her head, “Yes,” and the audience applauds. The teller also applauds, still nodding her head as the importance of what she has seen strikes home.

James waits and turns to her. “What stood out for you?”

“A couple of things, but Barbara Streisand singing... [Everyone laughs] but it captures the, the [pause] an interesting space [pause] and seeing all of the stages in my story [pause, she shakes her head in wonder], thank you”.

The Third Story.

James walks to the front and stands and looks at the audience for a long time, taking them all in with his eyes and acknowledging their presence. “*I thought that maybe we could have a night-time dream now. We’ve had two daytime dreams. Maybe it’s your turn tonight,*” he says to the audience at large. He doesn’t wait long. A volunteer from the audience calls out, “I’ve

got one,” as a couple of people put up their hands. James looks around and indicates that there were offers “from both sides of the audience” but he responds to the first strong offer. He indicates to this person “right there”, and gestures for her to come down to the teller’s chair—the audience claps—and he acknowledges the other offers, “*I see you there.*” James sits down as the new teller joins him. “*Your name is?*”

“Maree, it’s my first time here,” she nervously answers, with a grin on her face. “*It’s the first time here for Maree,*” he continues, and then connects her to the rest of the audience. “*Who else is here for the first time?*” People raise their hands. They both look at the others who are also there for the first time. James turns to look at the teller again. “*That’s very brave of you,*” he acknowledges.

“My heart is pounding,” she replies, grinning even more widely, holding her hand over her heart.

“*Pounding because?*”

“Of the attention.” She is still grinning—broadly—and I feel like I am getting mixed messages.

James says to the audience in a stage whisper, “*Every now and again look down or look away for a minute*” [We all laugh]. James waves his arm, encompassing all of the actors. “*Choose someone to be you.*” The teller points, “This lady here.”

“*This dream, when did you dream this dream?*”

“Probably about three years ago.”

“*Where did you dream this dream?*”

“In my bed in a townhouse in Hornsby.”

James repeats: “*In your bed in a townhouse in Hornsby*”, then softly to the teller: “*Is it at night?*”

“Yes.”

“*What happened in your dream?*”

“Well it was a dream about, um [she closes her eyes to remember]; it was about a religious cult where all the members are dressed in black” [everyone immediately starts laughing at this point as the whole company, actors, musicians, and James are all dressed head to toe in black]. James laughs and leans forward in his seat, gripping it tightly with both hands and

squints with one eye half-closed, *“Do you ever feel like all of your dreams are coming true? Perhaps the doors are locked!”* The whole theatre completely erupts with laughter—we enjoy the humour of his comment. The teller describes her dream where there are lots of symbols *“that escape me during the day, but speak to me at night.”*

“What are some of these symbols?”

“A white horse.”

“Choose someone to be the white horse [she does]. What’s the quality of the white horse?”

“Deeply religious, spiritual—all goodness.”

“What is its energy? What’s its energy, is it very active or slow?”

“It’s sort of a life-force energy, very strong and powerful.”

“What is another of these symbols?”

“I suppose the black robes.” I groan inwardly; the continual smiling as she tells reminds me of a cat with a saucer of cream in front of it. James indicates to the actors: *“Who can be the black robes?”* The teller chooses. *“What are a couple of words for the quality of the black robes?”*

“Sinister and [she closes her eyes to think] sinister and [pauses] plotting.” James emphasises to the actors: *“Sinister and plotting. So what’s their energy, the horse is like life-force and powerful, what’s the energy of the black robes?”*

“Well, it’s sort of like a deep dark dead energy.” James repeats this again emphasising to the actors: *“Deep, dark, dead energy.”* I feel like we are being sucked into a vortex.

“Yes.”

“Any more important symbols?”

“Yes, I suppose it’s a cliff, it’s a cliff and um, blood.” James repeats this information. *“Who can be the cliff and blood?”* The teller chooses. *“Tell us about the cliff and blood.”* I feel uncomfortable, not with the content of what is being said, but with what seems to be her pleasure in the telling. It is not a pleasure that is being shared, at least, particularly, by me.

“Well, the cult members in order to um, show their um, cleverness [James leans back in his seat and rubs his eyes as she speaks] and outsmart each other and show their supremacy in

their group, their aim was to actually use their wives to coax the white horse to death over the cliff.”

“Whoa!” says someone in the audience as he or she is struck by the dark image.

“To show their power over the life-force, so they’re trying to get it over the cliff.”

“Yes.”

“Do they succeed?”

“Yes.”

“Ohhh,” comes from the audience, even more strongly. Someone else from the audience asks the teller, “Are you in the dream?”

“No.”

James points to his chest and asks in a mock serious tone: *“Who is asking the questions here?”* Everyone laughs, and then he says: *“That was my next question.”* He laughs.

“You’re not in the dream?”

“Only like, observing from the roof top—a fly on the wall.”

James points to two other actors: *“Can George & Barbara be members of the cult?”*

“Yes.”

“Tell us about them.”

Teller: “Um, I suppose, power reigns supreme, and that is through intellect.”

James repeats these words and rubs his hands on his knees. I can’t work out if he is pleased with what is offered, or dismayed at having chosen her to tell.

“They coax the horse over the cliff, does the horse die?”

“Yes.”

“Huh!” Says someone in the audience in surprise. “Ohhhh,” comes from a few more in sadness. Everyone laughs at this reaction. Perhaps **I’m** completely misreading this person?

James: *“What happens then?”*

“Nothing.”

James looks from right to left and back again. *“That’s the end of the dream?”*

“There is a celebration in the group,” she answers. Is this being made up as she goes along?

“How do they celebrate? What is the quality of the celebration?”

“Clandestine, and sort of brings the group more closely together.”

James repeats these words, mirroring the teller’s hand movements that she used as she described this part of the story. The teller continues: “Because they have shared that dark secret, and they’re closer together.”

James: *“What’s happened to the horse?”*

“Blood and guts.”

James repeats this for emphasis. *“How does the dream end?”*

“With the celebration.”

“What would you say is the overall atmosphere of the dream?”

“Um, I mean it is a good versus evil.”

James: *“Where is the good?”* A very good question, I think!

“It is the horse, but there is lots of horses in the rest of the world too.” James summarises what the teller has said so far, and the teller continues, “It is not frightening, no, it’s somehow the language of pictures and there’s not a huge amount of words but there also is lot of ritual in the dream, through the celebration”.

“And you wake feeling [pause] what?” The teller sits forward on her chair and looks down as if looking down on the dream and says, “Wow, look at that” [she laughs at herself doing this]. James mirrors her action. Teller: “I think I sort of say, Wow, I never think that way in the day and what an amazing language.” This, I notice, is not a “feeling” response.

“You watch,” James rubs his head, and his eyes, and glances at his watch. Maybe I’m not alone in my intuition about this story? The musician starts with a droning voice and a discordant harmony.

The playback unfolds with a fairytale like quality. The teller watches with a smile on her face that becomes more pensive as she watches; she licks her lips, smiles and bites her lip. Could the smile, that I initially found so off-putting, be merely nervousness? The last actor to speak says: “There are other horses, and other nights.” The applause is subdued by the dark nature of the Playback. I swing the camera around to try and get a sense of the audience as a

whole; they are quite subdued. I'm impressed with the way that the actors worked on this, with plenty of life and energy, and I'm reminded that everyone has a story to tell, and perhaps the challenge is to work with what is offered without placing value judgements on it. There might be a lesson in this for me.

James: *"Dreams are intensely personal, we might not have been able to recreate it as it happened, but what stood out here?"*

"Um, the connections in relationships, somehow, and um, with the cliff."

"Connections between the horse and the cliff?"

"Yeh, and I suppose the dream was actually so devoid of emotions and to see emotions put into it was actually very interesting, and also not having the happy ending was really freeing". I'm struck by this response—freeing without a happy ending? This hints at more depth than I initially surmised.

James: *"It happened in the night, and then it is the next day"* [long pause].

"Yes."

This story, and the discussion around it, is then complete. Everyone claps, and the teller returns to her seat. I wonder what it is that we have just seen here? James gets up and walks to centre stage and responds to some of the latent darkness of the last story. *"How about you just turn to the person next to you and tell them what you are thinking or feeling at this moment. Just take a moment to do this."*

The room becomes noisy as everyone uses the opportunity to release some of the darkness that was induced by the last story and Playback. It also gives James and the actors a mental break. James waits for a few minutes, and asks for another story. A young woman near the front offers to tell, "I will". James's eyes scan over her and he turns again to the audience at large. "I do notice that one pattern that's emerging about the telling" [everyone chuckles because it has only been women who have told in the longer forms this evening]. I cast my mind back over other performances; I don't think I can remember another night when this gender imbalance has been so pronounced.

"Maybe we could have a man tell something, I know that's not what we usually do, we men." I smile at his comment. He looks at a man in the audience who is hesitatingly raising his hand and lowering it. James mirrors his actions—hand tentatively up and down—smiles at him and beckons him to the teller's chair. I notice that it is my colleague.

The Fourth Story

This person says, “Yeh, I think so,” stands and walks across the performance area with his hands clasped in front of him. It’s like his hands are leading the rest of his body to the teller’s chair. James indicates the chair for him to sit down on. “Oh, goodness,” says the teller with a little bit of trepidation. He sits with his legs crossed and James mirrors his posture. James picks up on the feeling, and says to him, “*What is the ‘oh goodness’ about?*”

“I don’t know whether I should be sitting here right now” [he gives an embarrassed chuckle].

“*Why not?*”

“Well, ah”, he shrugs his shoulders and smiles, seemingly lost for words.

James chimes in: “*I was just coming to the theatre to night, and I wasn’t going to say anything* [the audience chuckles], *and this is the second time I’ve opened my mouth*” [more laughs from the audience]. I am struck again by some of the wisdom and perception that members of this company reveal. There is wisdom that seems to come from working with this form, and a sensitivity that appears to heighten their perceptual ability to read the smallest of micro-cues that people give.

“It happens all of the time actually.”

“*What was your name again?*”

Teller: “Liam”.

“*And yet you’re here* [indicating the teller’s chair]”.

“Yeh, right, I’m sitting here.”

“*Choose someone to be you* [he does]. *Is it a day time dream or a night time dream?*”

“It is a **lifetime** dream actually.”

“*A lifetime dream! It begins when?*”

“When I was seven.”

“*Where were you when at seven?*”

“I was living in Los Angeles when I was seven, and my father died. There were three in my family [he clears his throat] and I decided— It was very difficult growing up because I didn’t have a father”.

“*How did he die?*”

“He died in an aeroplane crash in 1960. This is a very sober and serious story and ... maybe I should just go right back” [and points to his seat in the audience]. Everyone chuckles; he makes no moves to go.

“So, he died in an aeroplane crash when you were seven.”

“Yes.”

“And you say it was hard growing up without a father.”

“It was yes. I had a stepfather, and my father was a dentist and he was well educated, and my stepfather was not. So that made life difficult for me growing up”.

“Choose ... [he ponders, musing] I’m not sure ... [he leans his head towards the teller] a moment of life’s choice,” he says, trying to put humour into his indecision.

Teller: “Shall I go on?”

“Well, [James ponders for a moment] it’s just whether or not to have your father and your stepfather in the story.”

Teller: “Well that’s OK.” Everyone chuckles, including James. This looks like a little role-reversal to me.

“What’s OK?”

“They both die actually, my stepfather died in 1988.”

“What’s the dream, the lifetime dream?”

“Well it was very important to me to have family.”

“Choose someone to be your father.” James is now convinced that the father needs to be in the story. The teller does this. *“What was his name?”*

“Ron.”

“What did you call him?”

“Dad.”

“What would be a couple of words to describe him?”

“Charismatic, and, um, brilliant.” James echoes this back.

“What is one thing that he did with you?”

“Water skiing, water skiing, I learnt how to water ski when I was three.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeh, that’s great, he was very helpful, he was pushy.”

“Choose someone to be your stepfather.”

The teller lets out a sigh “Ohh”, that James amplifies with his voice and body, and the teller laughs.

“What was his name?”

“Don”.

“A couple of words for Don.”

“Simple and um, um, [pause, shake of the shoulders, as if to say I don’t know] pleasant.”

“What’s one thing that you did with your stepfather?”

“We had a saddle-tack and feed store, and used to raise horses, and I rode them and broke them, and so on.”

“And your dreams about having a family.”

“Yes [he heaves a big sigh]. So I have three children, and three wonderful children and I married a beautiful woman, and I have a wonderful wife and wonderful family and met a woman and fell passionately in love with her”.

“Who is not your wife.”

“Who is not my wife.” James and the teller look at each other—it is like a look of recognition—the audience laughs.

“So does this mean that the dream is finished?”

“I don’t know where the dream goes, I’d love to see where it goes actually.” Everyone laughs; I think to myself, we’d all like to see where our dreams go.

“Choose someone to be your wife [he does]. Her name?”

“Oh, um, um...”

“A pretend name?”

“Linda”

“What would be a couple of words for Linda?”

“Just blessed, and um, lovely.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Twenty-three years.” James echoes this.

“What would be one thing that stands out from those twenty three years?”

“Um, a sense of, um, wholeness.”

“Choose the woman that you fell in love with [he does]. Her name?”

“Um, um, um [James smiles at his hesitation], Janet.”

“A couple of words for Janet?”

“Um, brilliant, and beautiful.”

“How did you meet her?”

“Um, in a city, um, um, far away.” James echoes this.

“How did you meet?”

“Um, um, at a convention.”

“So this is like you sort of saw each other, and were interested in each other” [he does a little dance with his fingers to illustrate].

“No, we’d known each other for three or four years before we knew each other really well.” James picks up on the teller’s reluctance to disclose too much: *“It’s a bit hard to know how much to say.”*

“Yeah, some of these tapes will have to be erased I guess” [everyone laughs].

“You can do that, you can tell him to turn it off, or get him to wipe this bit, it’s your choice [James pauses and waits]. *So what happens when you meet ...”*

“An absolutely magnificent, romantic, torrid romance in exotic cities for eight months.”

“Torrid romance in exotic cities for the last eight months.”

“A dream come true actually.”

“Which is different to the dream of family.”

“Yes, quite, quite, *quite*, different.”

“How is it a dream come true?”

The teller drops his voice and I can’t hear what is said. It is like a little intimate moment between teller and conductor.

James: “*What is the end of the story?*”

“I don’t know.”

“*Caught between dreams to come, and your marriage. This is caught between two dreams. And at the moment you don’t know what is next.*”

“Hmm” [in agreement].

“*Let’s watch.*”

The musician begins, which helps me move from the cognitive state of the telling to the affective state of the Playback: “*How can I have this dream, wooo, ummmm.*”

I pan the camera back from the teller’s and the conductor’s faces, to capture the whole performance space. The first scene starts with the father teaching the son to water ski; he drags him around the space with a length of cloth as the ski rope, then he stands behind him with the son on his lap as he teaches him—“I’m going to be like him when I grow up”, says the son to the audience as he is whisked around the stage, “just like him.” The scene and mood gradually changes, and the second part of the story commences. “*Gone,*” wails the musician in a falling voice reflecting the father’s death, “*My family doesn’t exist.*” The scene changes again, the musicians sing, “*He’s not like the other one,*” as the stepfather enters, sits down, and just sits. The actors move and create the store and the horses.

Son: “One day I’m going to have my own family, and it’s not going to be like a wild horse, it’s going to be beautiful.” We are carried along with the Playback to the next scene of the family, the actors portraying this stereotypical image of the ‘perfect’ family. The husband and wife get into a dance with each other as he strives for the perfect family. “I love you,” calls the wife to the husband, “I love you too,” he calls back. There is an air of stylised unreality about the family, heightened by the ‘children’ as they get into a ‘picture’ with them as the happy family. It is the *movement* that brings this to life for me.

The next scene in the story starts with a sensual dance as one actor embodies the desire that the teller expressed, and one actor stands behind the husband with his arms intertwined around him [almost as the monkey on the back] and eggs him on after the dancer as they play out to two conflicting desires—“Let’s go get her!” he whispers in one ear. “But I’m a family man!” he answers. The dancer and the actor merge into an erotic dance, back-to-back, moving sensuously together, as if one. They turn to face each other. “Paris in summer time, San Francisco in winter time,” comments an actor in a far away voice. The wife reappears with a length of material, drawing circles in the air. The drama of the two opposing forces pulling at

him unfolds, and a different actor gives voice to the opposing forces at work within him—we are seeing what’s on the inside, on the outside. As the tension builds we see it reflected in the bodies of the actors, and hear it in their voices. The father reappears, and the son pleads with him in desperation, getting more and more plaintive: “Which one, dad, what would you do? Which one?” Did you ever, did you ever, I mean—”

All fall silent.

The musician comes in a monotone, “*You didn’t dream it would be like this, you didn’t dream it would be like this.*” The father speaks, “Remember that day on the lake? Remember the water-skiing?”

The son: “How does this one end? How-does-this-one-end? I-don’t-know-where-it-goes. Or how it ends!”

The father steps forward and rubs his son’s heart. The musician fades out “*Nobody knows—*” They freeze, nobody moves in the theatre for a long, long time.

The applause starts, as the audience overcomes the poignancy of the moment. “Magnificent!” the teller says under his breath and heaves a huge sigh, while the applause continues. James waits, mirrors the sigh, and says, “*What’s behind the sigh?*”

“I’ve just realised how intense my life has been actually, just watching this, some of the things that I saw, [his voice fades as emotion takes over]. Some of the things with my father, and just the conflict, it’s such a factor for me, and beautifully done [he sighs again, then to the actors], thank you so much, it was wonderful”.

James: “*And thank you for telling the story.*” There doesn’t seem anything more to say, and I’m struck by the strong aesthetic quality of the work we have just seen. There is loud and long applause. James stands with the teller and walks with him to the centre stage as the teller returns to his seat. James turns to the audience. “*What’s a word for how you are right now?*” “Numb”, volunteers a woman from near the front.

“*You watch.*” The actors create a fluid sculpture that reflects the dimensions of numbness.

“*Let’s hear from a number of people. What’s another word?*” Another woman speaks out from the audience, “Confused.”

“*Confused,*” says James, “*as to whether you can be brilliant, beautiful, blessed, wholesome at the same time—as a woman. Can you be all of these things at the same time?* [A number of people chuckle] *You watch.*” The fluid sculpture unfolds.

“*One more, [A man this time] moved. In what way moved? [James repeats the comment so that everyone else can hear]. Moved that you can share stories even when you feel...*”

The third fluid sculpture is performed. James returns to take centre stage and his voice, once more, takes on a ceremonial quality.

Once there was a woman who had an intuition that went wrong. Once there was a woman, who dreamed of the death of a horse.

Once there was a man, who was caught in the corners of his dreams.

Once there was a room full of dreams that had not yet been told, or even dreamed.

Once there was a playback theatre performance, and it was the last one, some people said, for a millennium.

See you in 2000.

The actors, the conductor, and the musicians all hold hands and bow, to loud and long applause. I let out a huge sigh and straighten up. I bend over backwards to stretch my back, remember the camera, and switch it off.

I too, am relieved.