



A New Paradigm of Popular Play: Playback as Bakhtinian Novelistic Theatre

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A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence – Bakhtin (*Problems* 252).

Playback Theatre draws upon a time-tested and global tradition of popular theatre forms created by and for the people. The Western “traditional” theatre community has often marginalized such modes, in part due to an unnecessarily rigid (and out-of-touch) definition of theatre, and in part due to a pervasive inability to view and value such performance practices on their own terms. Linearity, complexity of character, verisimilitude and intricate plot, while not alien to the world of popular spontaneous theatre, are rarely the privileged components of this performance style. Spontaneous theatre has often reluctantly defined itself in opposition to ill-fitted script-based concepts such as these. In doing so, improvisational play inadvertently places itself squarely in the controlling shadow and rubrics of its scripted kin, thereby belying or marginalizing its own unique potentials and character. Improv’s very nomenclature, as non-script-based, pre-literary or oral performance, places this spontaneous tradition in an unfruitful binary in which it is typically viewed as the lesser partner, defined primarily by its lack (of script, literary manifestation or text), rather than its essence. This relationship has proven to be problematic at best, as improvisational forms have historically struggled to adequately exert their own unique and distinct identity free from their scripted counterpart. It is difficult to truly value such a widespread performance mode when it is invariably defined in often unflattering or clumsy comparative terms.

A possible alternative avenue of exploration for the definition and celebration of improvisational forms, such as Playback Theatre, lies (perhaps ironically) in the critical

work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. His model of the modern novel, and an appreciation of the global concepts contained therein, provides a positive template for what spontaneous theatre *is* and *does*, rather than what it *is not* and *does not* in comparison to the scripted realm. Bakhtin's theories of the chronotope, prosaics, dialogism and the carnivalesque all provide insight into the potentials and powers of an otherwise often maligned and under-valued form of performance. Though developed initially as descriptive tools for the modern novel, Bakhtin's powerful lenses provide a new way of seeing and appreciating improvisational theatre. Furthermore, an application of these evocative principals to the site of Playback not only enriches an understanding of this radical form and its core values, but also places it firmly and fittingly in an historical tradition of improvisational community-based theatre forms. In this manner, a refocused Bakhtinian novelistic analysis enables an image of spontaneous theatre to emerge that is worthy of true appreciation in the full light of day.

Bakhtin developed the first of his global novelistic concepts, that of the chronotope, to elucidate the concept of time and space in the artistic endeavor: chronotope literally means, "time space." For Bakhtin, artistic works embody and propagate particular spatial and temporal assumptions. He writes in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics" that, "every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope" (258). Within this work, Bakhtin charts the relationship between humankind and literary time and space, noting that each major period's works reflect and reify a certain perception of humankind's existence in the spatial/temporal realm. In Bakhtin's view, the novel approached eminence as a form when it first embraced *real* historical time over prior

fragmented and disjointed models. At these crossroads – for Bakhtin, most notably in the writings of Dostoevsky – the human experience first presented itself in a specific socio-political context, and was no longer subsumed in diminishing grand narratives that erased nuance and peculiarities. Heroes and heroines no longer floated in an ahistorical ether. Morson and Emerson characterize this new modern view of time and space as possessing a “rich understanding of ‘freedom,’ ‘initiative,’ and ‘human potential’” (411-2).

Modern theatre has largely embraced this notion of historical time and specific place, privileging the chronotopic notion of the situated *there* and *then*. Contemporary dramatic works typically recreate finely etched portrayals of explicit locales and periods, eschewing the former melodramatic norms of generic timeless travails set in overly exotic, but seldom lifelike, surroundings (although this tradition of escapism clearly lives on.). While entrenched firmly in the *there* and *then*, live theatre also unavoidably flirts with the present, as the participants both on and off the stage share in the performance event that, by its very nature, exists only in the present moment. Scripted theatre, however, rarely privileges or fully utilizes the true wealth of this intimately shared time and space. The literal or metaphoric proscenium arch bisects the event, separating the performed fictional action from the factual world of the auditorium and the audience. Improvisational theatre, on the other hand, relishes this chronotopic orientation of the *here* and *now*, and seldom seeks the level of consistency in recreation that sentences her scripted kin to the domain of the past. This unique way of intersecting and interacting with time and place forms an important constituent element of spontaneous performance.

Improvisational theatre, subsequently, has an unmistakable spatial “attitude.” Hazel Smith and Roger Dean imagine the ideal improvisation performance space in their

Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945. They write that the ultimate features of this hypothetical venue should include: “flexibility, mutability, multiplicity, and continuity [...] arranged such that there is no necessary division of function between audience and performer, so that performers can choose the degree of control they permit the audience” (261). The above features are worthy of brief examination as a means of understanding improv’s spatial sensibility. Though Smith and Dean posit these characteristics as ideals, it quickly becomes apparent that their observations reflect common practices in the field of improvisation. Flexibility is seen in the very choice of space itself: the unpredictable street or common of the Bread and Puppet Theatre and San Francisco Mime Troupe; the portable trestle-stage or tent of the Roman mimes and European medieval players; the co-opted restaurant or Laundromat of Boal’s Invisible Theatre and the Pageant Players; and the bustling bar or spilling stage of the Compass and various Comedysportz franchises. Playback Theatre freely navigates these categories with ease, displaying a provocative resilience as it makes itself equally at home in transient, temporary, non-traditional and conventional spaces alike.

Improv’s tendency towards “poor” production elements (either mimed or real) allowing playful transformation and semiotic richness reflects Smith and Dean’s notion of mutability and multiplicity. Provisional meanings are made and discarded individually by both player and spectator as the creative endeavor imbues old materials and ideas with new contexts. Playback’s standard sparse scenic elements – scattered boxes and scarves – allow for just such an attitude towards the space of performance. Imagination and ingenuity enable magical transformations from the simplest of tools. While there are examples of technically complex or “rich” improv extravaganzas, such as Carlo Gozzi’s

fiabe of the 1700s, improvisational theatre tends inextricably toward the innate freedom of scenic sparseness. Whether it is Spolin's doctrine of imaginary space objects, the Philippine Educational Theater Association's (PETA) aesthetic of poverty in production, or Boal's similarly simple scenography, space is seen as essentially malleable in the hands of the performer and the minds of the participants. This attitude towards space celebrates humankind as an essentially creative agent and multiple (perhaps conflicting) perspectives can coexist and enrich one another.

In regards to space, Smith and Dean also speak of the merging of audience and performer, a goal improvisation meets with its breaking of the fourth wall and its active engagement of all those present, in the here and now, in a playful, informal collaboration. Often traditional outdoor settings, such as those employed by Apidan Drama troupes, afford no vestiges of a "fourth wall" as the space is truly defined and redefined collectively by those gathered for the performance. Site specific protest performances created by groups such as Greenpeace similarly challenge the notion of performer/audience separation as they incorporate real events and environments. Even more conventional Western venues seldom assume the pernicious status quo of audience segregation from the rite of theatre in the hands of the improvisational player. Sometimes the fourth wall is broken literally, as is the case when the teller in Playback Theatre steps onto the stage, the conductor invites a reaction or suggestion, or those assembled exchange informal greetings and responses. On other occasions, the breach is more emotional in nature and less tangible taking the form of a deeply felt sense of recognition, a cherished moment of catharsis, or an acknowledgement of shared humanity in spite of seemingly overwhelming isolation. While Smith and Dean posit the

theoretically perfect performance venue, it would seem that many practitioners excel without custom-built arenas for play: the very chronotopic lens of improvisational theatre itself provides an ability to view *all* space as inherently malleable and porous and thereby fit for spontaneous play.

Improvisational theatre exhibits a similarly unique fingerprint in terms of its relationship with time – the second dynamic contained in Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope. Moreno refers to this temporal relationship in a description of his early work in the 1920s when he notes, “The [spontaneous] theatre is a theatre of first nights only. We believe in it. It goes to the bedrock of the real substance of the theatre” (quoted in Moreno *Theatre*, 103). Credited with coining the phrase, “here and now,” Moreno literally defined the chronotopic mantra of most spontaneous forms (Sternberg and Garcia 15). His words highlight an important foundational understanding for this type of performance: improvisation unavoidably has a particularly interconnected and multifaceted relationship with time. Whereas fixed texts may seek to capture moments for later recreation – either in the minds of the reader or the eyes of the viewer – spontaneous theatre exists only *in* time. Janet Coleman, Compass historian, remarks, “There are no ‘what ifs’ in improvisation: the beat goes on” (303). These qualities result in a temporality that Smith and Dean refer to as “improvisatory time” (27), namely that the performance is in *real time*: the seconds ticking on a spectator’s wristwatch are completely synchronous with those on the performer’s. Subsequently, they note, such theatre involves a heightened “attentiveness to the present moment, so that creativity is a response to the here and now” (ibid. 26). Improvisation can only exist under these

circumstances – inseparably connected and dependent on *this* place and *this* (passing) time.

Moreno's notion of present time and place is wholly consistent with Bakhtin's chronotopic preference for historical and biographical time and social space. Both men also consider time to be an important creative element. Bakhtin writes: "[T]he power of time is a productive and creative power. Everything – from an abstract idea to a piece of rock on the bank of a stream – bears the stamp of time, it is saturated with time, and assumes its form and meaning in time" (quoted in Morson and Emerson 413). Moreno echoes the imperativeness of context:

We may not forget, though, however much we may learn in the course of time, however accurate our sociometric knowledge of certain sections of human society may become, that no automatic conclusions can be carried over from one section to another and no automatic conclusions can be drawn about the same group from one time to another. Each part of human society must always be considered in its concreteness. (Fox *Essential*, 21)

While conventional theatre characteristically seeks reproducibility and the commodification of a product that may be mass marketed and experienced, improv theatre revels in its nowness, its unique spur-of-the-moment combination of immediate locale and site-specific impetuses. Performance that truly privileges the chronotope of the here and now is, by definition, unrepeatable – it is willingly disposable, gladly consumed in its moment of birth. Playback Theatre cheerfully shares this orientation, reflecting and releasing the stories, energies and emotions of its participants. Though universal or archetypal stories and dynamics may emerge – particularly as the red thread linking the various offered experiences – performances tend towards the highly personal, crafted as gifts of the moment. Meaning and significance are inextricably linked to the

time and place of creation and, in stark contrast to text-based traditions, defy later recreation or reassembly.

Bakhtin's second global concept of interest to the improvisational endeavor is that of prosaics. Bakhtin scholars Morson and Emerson coined the term in order to distinguish two dominant themes that reappear throughout this literary figure's writings. Firstly, it "designates a theory of literature that privileges prose in general and the novel in particular over the poetic genres" (Morson and Emerson 15). While many theories exist extolling and elevating the dynamics of elite "poetic" language, Bakhtin was groundbreaking in his efforts as a literary theorist to pursue an understanding and appreciation of the everyday – the language of the proverbial street. This communication, Bakhtin argued, was equally alive, varied and worthy of study; this was, to him, the world captured and celebrated in the pages of the modern novel. The second designation of "prosaics" for Morson and Emerson, and the more pertinent in this context, is used to describe a "form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, the 'prosaic'" (ibid. 15). In Bakhtin's view, the poetic pursuit seeks a language of universality and objectivity. The poet rejects experienced situatedness "in order to write in a language that is timeless—timeless in the sense that it does not call attention to its specific historical shaping as the point of view of one, merely partial, kind of experience" (ibid. 320). Indeed, for Bakhtin, the poetic style seeks *one* totalizing language and assumes communication beyond the nuances of a specific socio-political terrain. In terms of chronotopicity, it defies change, motion and context: "any sense of the boundedness, the historicity, the social determination of one's own language is alien to poetic style," he argues, "and therefore a critical qualified relationship to one's

own language as but one of many languages in a heteroglot [multi-linguistic] world is foreign to poetic style” (“Discourse,” 285). Poetics seeks to impose a strict order: prosaics, alternatively, recognizes many-voiced chaos and mess.

Bakhtin praises the modern novel as a vehicle suited to a distinctly prosaic understanding of language and the world. In opposition to poetry’s depersonalization and generalizing, the novelist is capable of speaking “the language of specific passing days” (Morson and Emerson 320). Furthermore, while poetics predominantly reifies the realm of the elite and its inherited knowledge, prosaics prefers less austere surroundings, placing itself in the service of the common and stressing “ordinary events as the most important” (ibid. 32). Bakhtin proffered the everyday as “a sphere of constant activity, the source of all social change and individual creativity. The prosaic is the truly interesting and the ordinary is what is truly noteworthy” (ibid. 23). The common and everyday world offers its own source of knowledge – a *prosaic wisdom* – embodied metaphorically in the novelist’s employment of the fool. “[T]he author needs the fool,”

Bakhtin writes:

by his very uncomprehending presence he makes strange the world of social conventionality. By representing stupidity, the novel teaches prose intelligence, prose wisdom. Regarding fools or regarding the world through the eyes of a fool, the novelist’s eye is taught a sort of prose vision, the vision of a world confused by conventions of pathos and by falsity. (“Discourse,” 404)

The fool, and his/her common language and estranged naïveté, is able to penetrate convention and tradition, and offer new insight and a new, satiric, way of seeing.

Prosaics, then, privileges the experiences, stories and language of the everyday over the reified and elite – a provocative stance that fundamentally links the majority of improvisational movements. While the chronotope considers the where and when of

performance, a prosaic lens allows an examination of the *who* and for *whom*.

Improvisational theatre tends dramatically towards reflecting and representing specific, local communities. In some circumstances, such as David Shepherd's *Compass*, ideals of a worker's theatre inadvertently gave way to a slicker, "professional" model; on other occasions, such as during the formation of Boal's Forum and Image Theatre, the desire to give voice to marginalized groups was more fully and successfully realized. However, this passion for the prosaic, regardless of its success in implementation, undeniably serves as a powerful unifying impetus for the spontaneous theatre movement as a whole. Playback Theatre's *raison d'être*, for example, is to share the stories of those assembled, therefore fittingly embodies Bakhtin's concept of *prosaics*. Fox states, "the whole Playback idea was based on the premise that *any* story was appropriate" (*Acts*, 117), thereby emphasizing the all-encompassing grasp of the form: elite content is abandoned in favor of the everyday stories of the community. Subsequently, Playback Theatre, alongside countless other spontaneous forms – Moreno's public psychodramas, Spolin and Sills' *Game Theatre*, Johnstone's *Life Game*, and Community-based theatre models such as that employed by the Kenyan Kamĩrĩthũ Cultural Center – manifests a commitment to serving and freeing the voice of those who do not usually have access to the means for public performative catharsis.

In addition to serving the voices of the underrepresented and artistically dispossessed, the very ranks of improv troupes often assume a prosaic form. Spontaneous theatre is in many instances synonymous with amateur theatre. In the scripted realm, such a label often denotes less than favorable qualities: a lack of experience, limited physical or financial resources, and a less-than-professional product.

For the improvisational company, however, amateur status is more akin to a badge of honor or statement of ethic rather than an apologetic disclaimer. For Chicago's Annoyance Theatre it was indoctrinated philosophy: "To maintain their purity of motive, Annoyance members are never paid to perform. They remain amateurs in the classic sense of those who love what they do" (Seham 125). For Fox, an embracing of an amateur status was also a founding principle:

I told my actors that I never wanted them to do this work more than half / time, because I did not want them to share the fate of many modern actors, forced to become exotic, hothouse flowers, with brilliant colors and severe pruning; instead I wanted them to live in the world and be like their audiences, men and women of common work, family responsibilities, and civic duty. (Fox *Acts* 2-3)

Such an orientation has historically afforded spontaneous forms a greater degree of accessibility and inclusiveness. Generally, improv troupes actively seek to represent and reflect their host communities in their ranks. Due to the labor-intensive nature of this style of performance, improv also provides the very tools for formerly excluded groups to branch out and explore their own voice. Amy Seham, in her *Whose Improv Is It Anyway*, characterizes the "third wave" of Chicago improv in just such a manner as teams of players emerged that reflected the beliefs or experiences of previously marginalized sections of society.

It is important to note, however, that while improv theatre is largely an amateur-friendly or amateur-driven mode, this does not suggest a lack of skill, commitment, artistry or drive on the part of its players and participants. The primary distinction between improv and its scripted counterpart is in who is given access to the tools and rewards of the performance event. Boal provides a fitting metaphor when he characterizes the improv player as friendly magician: "as artists, we should be like the

magician who performs his magic tricks and teaches others how to do them. I like magic tricks: I do them; I am a teacher and like to teach them” (*Hamlet*, 340). While the notion of the individual star of great and mysterious talent underpins much Western scripted theatre, spontaneous performance typically recognizes the creative potential in us all. Creativity is posited as an essentially human endeavor, one in which we can and should all share.

Bakhtin’s third global concept, dialogism, provides insight as to the structure and systems of improvisational theatre, offering insight as to *how* this messy prosaic wisdom finds structure and mediation. Bakhtin uses the notion of dialogism as a qualitative measurement for considering the comparative density, complexity and power of a communicative act. (This term also housed other meanings and nuances for Bakhtin that are less pertinent in this context.) Discourse can be ranked in terms of its respective monologism or dialogism (see Morson and Emerson 147). Monologic modes include single-voiced discourse, typified by direct unmediated discourse. In this mode there is no intention to have another voice present or cited, it is speech without intentional quotation marks. Occupying the middle of the scale are passive double-voiced events, such as unidirectional “stylization” where another voice is co-opted in typically sympathetic service of the new discourse, and varidirectional parody where one privileged voice critiques another in an oppositional fashion. True dialogism emerges with active double-voiced discourse: in this dynamic one voice no longer dictates or contains another. Bakhtin writes, “In such discourse, the author’s thought no longer oppressively dominates the other’s thought, discourse loses its composure and confidence, becomes agitated, internally undecided and two-faced” (*Problems*, 198).

Although Bakhtin's terminology and taxonomy is somewhat complex, his ultimate goal is quite simple: rich and meaningful communication. Boal recounts a story of a psychiatric patient's effort to define the concept of dialogue. After much thought, the patient offered, "when there are two people talking on their own" (*Legislative*, 4). Simply put, Bakhtin's view of dialogic communication seeks to amend this sense of individual isolation in which language is variously self-serving, monologic or impotent. Boal's patient acknowledged the pervasive incommunicativeness of speech acts and their subsequent ineffectiveness. Contrarily, Bakhtin (and Boal) seeks the condition of heteroglossia, an exchange of multiple *languages* representing multiple subjectivities and speakers. Yet, the mere presence alone of different perspectives is not the ultimate aim: these voices must have a particular relationship to one another. Languages do not dominate or silence each other in Bakhtin's exemplary communicative engagement. Rather, these various stances interact freely and independently; unified and totalized meaning surrenders to multiplicity. Ideal discourse, then, is not merely the presence of many voices, or heteroglossia, but specifically the event of many voices speaking to one another as *equals*. Discourse that attains this communicative ideal becomes polyphonic, or "dialogized heteroglossia" to employ Bakhtin's terminology to its fullest. Polyphony – the overt privileging of engaging other voices as equals in the creative endeavor – emerges as the ideal mode of artistic language.

Overtone of polyphonic play abound within the works of key improvisational practitioners. The very social nature of play and its interactivity provide a dialogic basis for the North American Boyd/Spolin tradition. Spolin writes, "The techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating" (5) and her games, in no small part, seek to

enable each player to develop his/her own voice in tandem with his/her fellow

improvisers. Paul Sills, her son, more explicitly calls upon the notion of dialogue:

True improvisation is a dialogue between people. Not just on the level of what the scene is about, but also a dialogue from the being—something that has never been said before that now comes up, some statement of reality between people. In a dialogue, something happens to the participants. It's not what I know and what you know; it's something that happens between us that's a discovery. (Sweet 19)

“Reality is shared,” (ibid. 17) he writes: it is a conversation. Johnstone employs dialogism in his definition of dramatic action as “the product of ‘interaction,’” defining interaction as “a shift in the balance between two people” (Johnstone 77), and Playback Theatre’s Jo Salas’ “conversational” view of improv with its “constant reciprocity of offers” (“What is ‘Good,’” 26) evokes a similar comparison. Likewise, Boal’s work is replete with dialogic images. “Theatre is this energy [of the gaze] passed from one actor to another, *between the two of them*” (*Hamlet*, 146), he writes. “It is not what each person creates in isolation, but the thing they make together [...] the smallest theatrical unity is two people” (*Legislative*, 49).

To assist in this dialogic interplay, improvisational structures, with few exceptions, are inherently fluid and provisional. Just as the Renaissance Commedia dell’Arte troupe “jammed” from a basic structure pinned to the frame of their makeshift stage, so too do modern troupes predominantly embrace the unexpected within the performance event. Structural flexibility is essential to attain the truly dialogic ideal. The unforeseen and unheard voice must be dutifully accommodated, whether this voice resides within the company itself, as is the case with traditional Theatresports troupes, or in the greater community of participants or Boalian spect-actors. Oftentimes “dialogic enablers” facilitate this inclusive stance in the performance venue. Spolin’s side coach,

Boal's Joker figure, Psychodrama's director and Playback's conductor all serve to maximize the potentials for unfettered contributions. A sincere and conscientious effort is made by these figures on behalf of these traditions to welcome voices and stories that may not usually find a receptive ear. Playback's loose structure serves as an exemplar model. While it may be predetermined on any given night that a certain number of fluid sculptures, short forms, songs and enacted stories will take place, the peculiar needs of the participants and/or the specific demands and opportunities of the shared accounts may invariably dictate on-the-spot structural adjustments. Improvisation not only allows such transgressions and redirections, but also often encourages and savors them.

The transgressive nature of spontaneous play is further elucidated by Bakhtin's fourth and final global concept, that of the carnivalesque. The spirit and potency of the carnival is the central theme of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. This mode of being is unquestionably subversive and radical in that it equalizes, for good or bad, all those engaged in its pursuit: Bakhtin writes, "all were considered equal during carnival" (10). Carnival suspends "hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it . . . All distance between people is suspended" (Bakhtin *Problems*, 123). This satirical stance also undermines the assumed and oppressive roles of the "agelasts," those who seek to stand above the populace. Imposed systems of governance and rule are replaced with a prosaic wisdom and experience:

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. (Bakhtin *Rabelais*, 255)

This experience is principally noted for its elevation of the sensual over the intellectual, and lived reality over the imagined or theorized, qualities espoused by key improvisational practitioners such as Spolin, Moreno, Boal and Johnstone. Bakhtin's carnival unites its participants, incorporating a "strong element of play" (ibid. 7). It is "playful, non-hierarchical and sensorily excessive" (Cohen-Cruz 167), a "form of eroticism which transgresses all ideologies" (Boal *Legislative*, 12). Behind the literal or figurative mask, the carnival player-participant transgresses, suspending normative codes of behavior in favor of the disruptive pursuit of physical play. Thus is created the physical, playful and political dance of the carnival.

Although spontaneous theatre generally operates within its own codes of normalcy – Playback as ritual has very particular components that are repeated in the vast majority of performances – improvisational performance shares the radical tone of the carnival in that it overturns, questions or suspends greater societal norms. In the parlance of anthropologist Victor Turner, improv sites provide a liminal space where rules of governance are temporarily suspended. Improvisers often serve as artistic transgressors in this liminal space of performance, giving voice to the dispossessed and hope to the disillusioned. Bakhtin writes, "Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals" (*Problems*, 123). Improvisation offers a similar performative site for the embodied exploration of human potential: its irreverence and comic optimism looks gleefully into the future rather than staunchly into the rigid customs of the past.

Carnival and improvisation are united by their mutual political commitment to change. Disdaining isolation from the socio-political sphere, improvisation recognizes

and embraces its own sense of politics and politicalness. While the specific agenda pursued by improvisational performance varies to suit the specific chronotopic needs of its host community, the essential political spirit of the mode can be seen as revolutionary in that its creative drive constantly explores variation and playful reinvention. This is the unbreakable bond between improv and Bakhtin's carnival, and as Schechner notes, the palpable connection between the vast potential of boundary-blurring spontaneity in both the aesthetic and political realms. Ultimately, he observes, "[t]he difference between temporary and permanent change distinguishes carnival from revolution" (204). Salas makes a similarly provocative observation in terms of Playback's mission: "It is the telling and believing of real stories, whispered, remembered, repeated, that can lead to the cry for change, even for revolution" (*Improvising*, 142).

Bakhtin's consideration of the modern novel clearly holds a profound affinity with the site of improvisational performance. Through a close reexamination of his core principles, Bakhtin sheds considerable light on the form, force and function of collaborative theatrical play. Spontaneous theatre exists in Moreno's state of the immediate present, reflecting the subtle nuances of the host culture and time, and maximizing the hidden creative potentials of the current moment. Improv assumes a powerfully prosaic orientation, valuing the experiences, language and stories of the everyday. It is a people's theatre, created by, for and with the communities in which it finds itself. Furthermore, improvisers seek dialogic modes that allow the free interchange of voices rather than the reification of monolithic and monologic mantras. This sense of playful conversation takes on the features of the carnivalesque, as power structures are questioned, challenged or overturned under the banner of unbridled creativity. Playback

Theatre serves as a fitting exemplar of this Bakhtinian novelistic spirit. Valuing inclusivity, specificity and service to those whose stories are often lost or devalued, Playback Theatre stands as a powerful model of an alternative (antidotal?) performance practice that thrives when freed from the shadows of its scripted kin. As a playful paradigm, Playback suggests a rich application of Bakhtin's core creative principles, offers a vivid example of embodied polyphony, and points the way towards an alternative definition of theatre that privileges the desire for communion, collaboration and change in the chronotope of the here and now.

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