



Her Majesty and the Warrior Conductor: Transformation and Safety in Playback Theatre

By Penny Clayton

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Essential to transformation is safety. In *transformational ritual theatre* such as playback theatre, the conductor must assert herself as the guardian of the ritual container and when necessary demonstrate her ability to ensure the safety of tellers, audience, and actors. Along with her basic tools for conducting a successful playback performance she must balance excitement with structure and be ever vigilant to what sabotages safety. Hannah Fox states in her essay, "Theatre Ritual & Community" (Spring 2001) that "[Ritual] create[s] a sense of familiarity and *knowness*, and therefore safety and trust, which is imperative in an environment of mystery, conflict, and change." A conductor must be prepared to greet these potentially hazardous unsafe situations with her humanity and compassion and strive to transform them into an opportunity to deepen trust and increase the possibility of a transformative experience.

The conductor has, on the surface, an obvious job of mc'ing the playback performance. She creates a respectful rapport with the audience by describing the playback process, eliciting tellers and economically collecting pertinent information for actors so that they may succeed in accomplishing fulfilled enactments of tellers' stories. She does this with compassion and artistry, making observations and decisions all along the way as she, with actors and musician, work together to create a successful playback performance.

In order for her to accomplish this, her tools are many. This essay specifically addresses the awareness and skills needed to greet what might be considered the *saboteur* of the safety provided by strong ritual and empathetic respectful listening. The conductor must always reflect the integrity of playback and convey her trust that playback theatre is ultimately capable of containing all aspects of

our collective humanity toward a transformative and compassion end. She must remain spontaneous and ready to improvise as these are "...aspect[s] of ritual [that] lend it authenticity and [keep] it alive in the present moment, which is a critical component to the art of transformation." (H. Fox).

Transformation is the act of being transformed; to change form or nature. Playback theatre is transformational theatre in that it provides art, ritual, and social interaction allowing for self reflection and reevaluation of one's ideas of self, others and the world in which we live. As Jo Salas states in her essay "What is 'Good' Playback Theatre?", "We need art in order to integrate and comprehend our experience." We need to look at ourselves in a safe context in order to transform our ideas. A positive personal transformation is one that expands our humanistic capacity by liberating us from fear so that we may embrace that which surrounds us with greater understanding and acceptance.

Transformation is change and change is scary, whether it's good or bad. We want change but resist it. We are, after all, only animals asking one question all the time - Is it safe? Though we like to think we can simply change our mind we need a safe place to do it in. We hold on to our old ideas because those were ones that, so far, have kept us alive and our idea of the world solid. We are freer to let go of these concepts if that same safety is offered during reexamination.

Of course safety isn't the only requirement for good playback. There must be a balance between this fertile safety and the excitement and daring found in risk. A conductor must pay equal attention to these paradoxical components. It must be exciting and skillful for the entertainment value to be expressed. If there is too much risk or the level of safety isn't satisfied for the audience, people get anxious, deadening the atmosphere. Audience members feel nervous for themselves and can project this discomfort to the actors with feelings of concern for the entire performance team. Conversely, if there is too much coddling a performance will lack the fire of risk. There would be no spark for inspiration to

tell stories. We are animals asking one question but we are also evolving humans with a bend to adventure inquiring, "Is there more?"

One of the most dramatic displays of the transformation of teller that I can recall was in my early days with HRPT. It was at a performance for families at risk. I was new in the company so just participated in the beginning for short forms. The rest of the time I sat with the musician and watched. The show was going beautifully. Jo Salas, conducting, conveyed without it being intrusive that we knew they were troubled families with troubled kids and that we could honor their struggle and acknowledge how difficult and often painful life was. She was masterful in combining humor and compassion in her responses to audience statements offered in the opening.

We came to the third and last story. A young boy raised his hand, volunteering a story. The actors were behind the curtain, set up for puppets, as we had previously agreed to do for the last story. The young boy, perhaps ten, told a simple but poignant story about how two years ago he had to be institutionalized because "of his anger". In the hospital time dragged on. He wanted to be released but eventually realized he would be there over the holidays. He was alone without his family during Christmas.

The telling was brief and although it was terribly sad his face remained down turned and expressionless. The only time he looked up was when choosing puppets for characters. During the entire telling his attention was intently focused on the methodical unbuttoning of his shirt. When the telling was complete it was totally unbuttoned. He opened it up, revealing his undershirt, in a gesture of settling in with guarded anticipation.

Let's watch! evoked the enactment. He sat entranced by the puppets. Though we could all guess at the depth of sadness and loneliness in this young person the

actors didn't embellish any of his feelings which were not alluded to or discussed. He only expressed how he wanted it to be different.

Then at just the right moment during the enactment he started buttoning up his shirt just as methodically as the unbuttoning, so that by the end of his story he was totally done up, his shirt closed. The timing was impeccable as was the unbuttoning. He was ready to return to his seat without much comment.

Jo, Debbie (Lan) the musician, and I watched this symbolic action of the opening and closing of his shirt, but the other actors behind the curtain working with puppets had no idea. Later as we were leaving the facility one of the social workers approached Jo to tell us that the young boy had *never* spoken to anyone about his institutionalization experience – not his family, his therapist, no one. This young boy was able to identify the safety and opportunity afforded to him in this presentation and take full advantage of the security of the environment to express what was earlier inexpressible.

The ritual we provided in this playback performance gave him the safety to change his idea from having an experience that is impossible to express to one that is possible to express, and to do so publicly. This recognition of safety and his willingness for transformation are factors that lead him to telling his story which ignited empathy and compassion in all of us and surely his caregivers.

A similar example of finding safety in the ritual to express what has yet not been expressed is seen in the show filmed for the "Performing Playback Theatre" training DVD.

Rhonda is our last teller. She tells of her illness and subsequent support from co-workers. In her telling she mentions that she just has never had the opportunity to properly thank those who "had her back" This story is similar to the young boy's in that she saves her words for this public environment. Rhonda has been

sitting on her story for some time now and senses the container and concludes this to be a safe place. Although she wasn't aware that she was going to be coming up to the teller's chair, once there her tears flow. She comments how she didn't realize she had these strong feelings. She is surprised by the depth of them. Jo put her arm around the back of her chair "so that she could feel sheltered... [a teller] can feel very exposed on stage..." (Conductor's DVD Commentary) and makes other "concerted efforts to keep her grounded and connected." Jo communicates in a way that lets Rhonda and the audience know "that it is fine to go into her feelings as much as she needs to." (Commentary) She is telling Rhonda it's safe to cry. It is safe to feel how scary it was and it's safe to feel how lucky she was. And that it's ok to feel overwhelming grateful. Whatever her feelings, they are welcome and we are ready.

We can't tell *what* transformation is happening but we know that when emotionally charged communication is listened to with empathy and respect, then reflected back with artistry we all feel *something – something is different*. I experience it as a subtle peacefulness. My faith in playback and gratitude for this form grows as does my faith in humans to change and grow.

In playback if we are successful in creating and maintaining safety for all individuals we will likely get deep stories. The playback performance will have, in some degree or another, created an opportunity for transformation. In the event of the presence of a saboteur to this safety, if greeted and handled well, the opportunity for transformation is increased.

When safety is challenged by a *saboteur*—an unethical comment, story, or reaction—the conductor and company are tested. This is a moment ripe with possibility and when handled properly is an opportunity to show our strength as warriors for justice and advocates for the unseen. The audience experiences the conductor respectfully countering the divisive action. They begin to identify her as someone who can take them *out* of an unsafe moment into a safer one. The

conductor has just increased the audience members' trust in her further than it was before the infraction.

In my training as conductor I adopted the metaphor of building a quiver of arrows which I would carry on my back to every show. I wanted to build my quiver with responses that I could use in moments that I felt could, if unattended to, undermine the integrity of our purpose and decrease our audience's willingness to engage. Each time I learn how to evoke or deflect a certain situation, I add a new arrow to my quiver. I have a sense that there is something I, as conductor, am prepared to do battle with. I am prepared to defend!

During a playback performance there is a subtle but powerful deity being summoned to the room. Her name is Story. She has traveled the evolution of humanity transforming our verbiage to the sacred. She teaches us about ourselves, each other and our shared journey. She is generous but demanding. We, as playback practitioners have developed a keen sense of her needs and we make ritual and art to invite and honor her. We revere her and when the sanctity of her ritual is threatened we draw forth our arrows in her defense. She is precious and though resilient, fragile. She is the weaver that guides the red thread and makes the rich tapestry that surrounds us all.

My concerns are when I feel that I am losing someone, or when I feel someone (present or not) is particularly vulnerable. How do I comment on the vulnerability without adding to it? How can I respond to mean or racially insensitive moments without hurting further or totally eliminating the humanity of the perpetrator? If I begin to sense a breach in the ritual container and I don't make a move, this lack of safety creates what I kinesthetically experience as a hole in the room where anyone, or the whole damn thing we're doing, could be sucked out in a vacuum, the way a hole in a plane flying in high altitude sucks out its contents.

This is scary and delicate ground for me and I'm sure it is the obstacle that keeps me from conducting more. I fear that my lack of skill at handling these delicate situations will cause someone pain. And in the greater context it will not promote playback theatre as a community forum for creative conversation with artistry and integrity.

But every time I conduct a show I load up my arrows and secure my quiver....

I gained an arrow after a public show a few years ago. The first story was told by a young woman. She was white, from the south and was visiting her girlfriend up here in New York. Her story begins at a rock concert she and her friend attended. It was hot and they were drinking beer. They were getting drunk and dehydrated and at some point she left the company of her friend to get water. Along the way she fainted in the crowd. She awoke to a couple of men leaning over her asking if she was OK. She described these men as "homies", and that, "of course", she was frightened, they were scary and "who knows what they wanted". She tells them she's fine, no, she didn't want their help and hastily returns to the safety of her girlfriend's company.

The essence of her story was that due to her making bad decisions about drinking too much in the sun, etc., for which she was embarrassed, she got herself in a potentially dangerous situation.

But I also heard a story of racism and stereotyping. She was a white person referring to black people as "homies". She then stereotyped these men as dangerous because they were black. Although I was aware of this going on I didn't have the arrows ready in my quiver. I lost an opportunity for deepening the experience and possibility of transformation. By not doing anything I let the bottom fall out of the ritual container. I abandoned the audience in their own ethical questioning and their questioning of our integrity. I left it to the audience to assume that these men were black and to assume *we thought the same*. The

integrity of our performance was challenged. I didn't ask about why she thought she was unsafe, thereby colluding with her stereotyping. The result was that I *and the company*, in effect ACCEPTED her interpretation of these men as being dangerous.

The enactment, as I recall, ended up being somewhat flat because I did not satisfyingly draw out the essential details of the story but instead skimmed over them. It is this lack of courage and skill that keeps a playback performance from evoking deep and meaningful stories. I did not convey to the audience my willingness to tackle complicated or delicate issues. The rest of the show went ok, but never went any deeper than this first story. I hadn't created the trust and though there weren't people of color in the audience, the lack of justice for this population was sensed and this affected everyone's judgment of the skill and safety available to them if they were to tell a story.

Her Majesty, Story, was only barely in the room.

In the debrief that followed the show I was, of course, horrified that I had let this go by and was aware of my own uncomfortable feelings that stopped my inquiry to the teller. In this particular instance it was my own discomfort and lack of understanding in the area of diversity and racism that stumped my fluidity to engage in a public inquiry into my guest's racism. I was afraid of being racist and in that fear appeared exactly that!

I acquired a couple of important arrows that night. One is an arrow that Australian playback pioneer, Mary Good, called "naïve inquiry" in her essay *The Playback Conductor, or How Many Arrows Will I Need* .

With a curious naiveté I should have asked her more about these men so that SHE could describe them, so that HER racism was identified as HERS. Even if I know exactly what she's talking about I could have said "I think I know what you

mean by “homies”, but I’m not sure. Could you tell me?” And further in her telling I could have asked “why were you frightened by these men, it seems they were concerned about you being OK?” Even if I can see her reaction was rooted in her racism I could have underlined “oh, you felt unsafe because these men were black? Is that the reason?” or “Can you tell me more about that?”

A powerful aspect of this naïve inquiry might be called yet another arrow: “the separation of teller and team.” Because I am illuminating HER point of view I am at the same time making a very important distinction: that even though this story is going to be honored, it contains values and assumptions that are not those of HRPT, or playback in general, but those of the teller. I am separating her values from those of my team and still honoring her story.

If I had been able to do these seemingly simple things I would have created a springboard for transformation. With the true essence of the story actors would be free to create powerful theatre. They are now ready to work with the dynamic, clear to all of us. The audience perhaps would have experienced a risky moment being embraced and the upkeep of an ethical standard. Now they would be free to engage in art and ritual and feel the safety for their self reflection. I, as the conductor, would have transformed from a fearful spectator barely holding on to ritual to an active warrior. The teller, well, just my questions alone would have illuminated her ideas. I would have made it clear that her ideas were not mine, nor those of the company. She would have had an opportunity to find the roots of her thinking. And in my naiveté I would not have blamed her, but simply expressed my desire to understand. She would be safe to see her reflection. Additionally, in maintaining this standard of ethic and integrity, the playback ritual would have been strengthened and the red thread would then move through the performance, perhaps finding a story that would illuminate the humanity of these men. The unseen would also be honored.

The conductor also has a role in keeping the actors safe.

“Playback theatre requires a particular kind of acting which we can call *authentic* acting.... In playback acting, the actor does not use a code to depict emotion but draws her portrayal directly from her sense of the teller and his story. “(J. Salas)

As actors, we discover our teller through the generosity of our empathy. We know that to create a fulfilled enactment we need to understand our teller. The depth of our discovery is directly related to our willingness to understand his point of view. We open ourselves to compassion so it can inform what we know to be true within us. We reach for the universality the human experience. We draw from our depths, to portray our interpretation of theirs lives. We *act* the authentic feeling because we are willing to draw on the same feeling within us. Playback artists are artists in service. This humble act of servitude can make us vulnerable to those who don't recognize it.

HRPT was performing at a fundraiser located on an expansive horse farm in a converted historical barn. The show didn't have a specific theme. We did a series of short forms which began with appreciating our beautiful surroundings and the spectacular day. Attention soon turned to the political turmoil and injustices of the time. (We were just approaching the 2000 elections.)

Before it was even time to turn to stories the adult son of our host called out that he had a story, raising his hand. He approached the teller's chair excitedly claiming that he has been wanting to see us “do it”. He himself was a professional actor, as was his now x-wife. He tells the story of their tumultuous relationship and hardships of being busy actors. They both had “strong personalities” and were “creative” individuals. Their marriage ends in a dramatic but mutually agreed upon break up. He told the story in a way that was well framed and seemed rehearsed. It was a sad story but he told it in a somewhat comedic fashion. The other family members in the audience joined in with laughter at parts they knew well, though these parts weren't particularly funny.

He again, at the end of his telling, states that he is ready now to see how we “will do it.”

It is clear from the beginning this teller is oblivious to the ritual of the performance. He doesn't recognize our humble service to Story, but instead wants to see a cute trick. We don't know why. What we see is a white privileged male, an *actor* impatient to be first to test us.

Jonathan Fox describes the moment of discovering the “narcissistic teller” in his essay, “A Path to Integrity”, “As playback practitioners, we sense at once if a teller has respect for the emerging story and humility before it, or whether she is gratifying herself, by any one of a hundred ways of demanding attention or manipulation.”

HRPT was in an awkward situation. Jo, who was conducting, had to be more generous than usual with this teller as he was the son of our gracious hosts. I and three others were the acting team. During the telling of the story there were knowing glances made between conductor and actors. These glances communicated volumes. The basic gist of the secret conversation was this:

“Here we have one (a narcissistic teller)”, actors and conductor confirm with each other

“You ok with this?” the conductor seeks our consent

“Yep! We're still hearing the story underneath and we can do it”, The actors are prepared to embody the story.

“Ok, briefly would be fine”, the conductor gives further permission to not spend a lot of time on this person's agenda.

The acting team had the support and understanding of the conductor. We were in this together and we were a team. She was asking if we were prepared to “do it”

for him. She recognized the position he was attempting to put us in and was checking in to see if we did also. Sometimes that is enough.

Regardless of the set up, we were able to identify the essence of his story. We could listen beyond his telling and not be frozen by the affront to the gift we are in service of giving. We went beyond his expectations. We were also keenly aware of what was beneath the story – the part that he didn't acknowledge—the love lost. We showed the love and subsequent loss of love he only barely alluded to and deemphasized his comedic interpretations of their moments of struggle.

But if we didn't have this almost telepathic communication with the conductor and a deeper sense of the story, we, as actors, would be at risk of feeling diminished by the teller's self indulgent attempt to *use us*.

“The Whistle Blower” names the arrow that comes to mind. The conductor must let everyone know that *we know* what's going on (even if they don't)—the “Its-all-about-me” teller isn't really playing within the rules of the game. The conductor must convey the *rules* without stating them. In effect she is saying, “This isn't what it's about but we'll keep playing.”

I can't remember exactly what Jo said in the interview but it possibly could be something like, “Playback isn't really about finding a story to challenge the actors' skills. But sometimes people are compelled to find and tell those stories anyway. We'll see...there is usually some other, perhaps unknown, reason for the telling.” She has stated the teller's challenge to the actors and that this challenge is inappropriate. She also announced that we won't be stumped and even further, she reclaimed a piece of mystery.

As she passed the story off to us she may have done so in a way that invoked our control and artistry. “So now we have all heard the story, but let's see what the actors will do with it. You [to the teller] may be surprised by what you see.”

“Let’s watch!” Again she has evoked mystery and informed the audience, teller *and actors* that the actors are still in command of their creativity and the improvisational process about to unfold. She has affirmed playback theatre’s commitment to all stories and maintained the ritual. Her Majesty is pleased.

The team’s attention to protecting the ritual in this way in turn protects our connection with the audience, their respect for playback, and their feeling of safety to continue telling. A member of the audience, who I will call Jack, tells me later that he was horrified, “It was so self indulgent and he was making a mockery of serious personal issues—even if they were his own—in front of everyone. And maybe because he was a well-known actor himself it felt like he was making a specific challenge [to the actors].” Jack experienced the teller as being “condescending and flippant” in his telling. Jack goes on to describe the teller’s reaction to the enactment of his story as being “blown away”. “It was the most powerful [playback] moment I have ever seen. You guys [HRPT] were able to draw an emotional depth from the story and gift him right back. I saw him transform. He was chocking back tears, shocked by the depth and emotion of the enactment. “

Jack recounts that this was “the most powerful [playback] moment [he] has ever seen.” Jack has been to a lot of playback performances and he’s seen a lot of good playback, but this moment stands out for him because he *experienced* the breach of safety and the skillful handling of this infraction. Additionally he witnessed the dramatic transformation of the teller.

Another arrow of intervention, once the narcissistic teller’s intentions have been sensed, is “Do a Short Form.” Short forms, more specifically fluids, are used in many occasions for a many reasons, this is one other. A conductor can change the direction of her interview to simple questions that would suffice for a short form. “We are going to see this a little differently. I think we will see this in a fluid sculpture.” She informs the teller and audience as well as clues in the acting

team. She could ask the teller for the pivotal moment of her story, ask for her feeling, then state we are going to see a fluid. Other short forms that might capture the essence of a full story is a Narrative V or Three Part Story or Tableau. This solution moves the focus quickly away from the teller as it picks up pace and makes room for someone new on the teller's chair.

This type of telling can be a bold clear breach of safety as in the story above. Sometimes it can be subtle, only recognizable by playback aficionados. I first learnt of this kind of infraction when I was in a School of Playback Theatre workshop at Vassar one year. The workshop taught by Christian Penny and Bev Hosking, focused on deepening acting skills and accentuating the "royal moment". We would be exploring stage craft and among other things, how to portray violent or intimate scenes non-literally. At the end of our first full day a story was told about a love affair which included a brief but steamy love scene. The actors did well, creatively using their bodies and cloth to convey passion and sexual union. When we returned to the teller for checking in, she was pleased with the enactment and mentioned that she had wanted to know "how they would do it". I was soon to learn these were words of Red Alert.

Class ended but the first thing we did the next morning was have a serious talk about the breach I didn't notice. The energy in the room was heavy. Bev and Christian were stoic and powerful warriors protecting something I wasn't even aware of needing protection, and certainly not from what I considered an innocent offering of a story. After all, I thought, we were in a workshop situation, calling on stories to give us material for the areas of study. Here was someone stepping up to tell just for that purpose. Why was this an infraction?

Many of us in the room learnt an important principle for the first time, and that even, or especially, in a workshop situation safety and ritual are paramount. Telling a story just to see how it is done is *not an ethical reason to tell*. In playback we surrender to the process of stories organically arising to answer our

needs. It is not for us, especially playback practitioners, to lose faith in her Majesty Story to guide us.

Bev and Christian were able to give us examples of the devastating effect on actors and their ability to be in creative generous service when they are merely seen as performing monkeys. Bev, with teary eyes, described compassionately one incident that required protection of her beloved team. It was this experience that made me acutely aware of the subtle continuous care a conductor takes to keep her team safe so that they may be open and ready to participate in this sacred theatre.

Every playback performance I am a part of I know I will be leaving it differently because within it I have the opportunity to change and grow. As I continue to experience playback ritual it is always my intention that all who are present have the opportunity to transform, if only a little. If I am an actor, a conductor, or musician, I participate in making the ground fertile.

Every arrow in my quiver reflects a process of my own transformation. I have to identify the saboteur, name it, find the place within me that is frightened by it and understand my fear by finding truth. Then I forge an arrow out of intelligence, grace and compassion.

Every rehearsal and every performance has brought me a deeper understanding of my world. It is a heavier load to bear and a brighter light shining. I know how I have been transformed. I know the breadth of my compassion and empathy has deepened. But most dramatically is the realization that the power of Story has grown in me to a point close to religious dedication. I attribute a large part of the reason for this personal growth to the safety and love that surrounds my playback experiences.

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