

Playback Theatre as a Methodology for Social Change

Bev Hosking and Christian Penny

October 2000

Christian Penny : xtn@xtra.co.nz

Bev Hosking : mosking@netlink.co.nz

Playback Theatre as a Methodology for Social Change

What is Playback Theatre?

Playback Theatre (PBT) is spontaneous improvised theatre created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience. Someone tells a story from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, then watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape and coherence. The telling and acting of these stories becomes like a conversation that enables a community to get to know itself better.

A performing group usually consists of a conductor (the facilitator), actors and a musician. The whole performance is improvised - the actors, musician and conductor have practiced together and they follow a simple structure, but the content of what might emerge during a performance is unknown.

Playback Theatre was created and developed in the US in 1975 by Jonathan Fox and a group of theatre artists. Currently individuals and groups in over 25 countries are practicing this form of improvisational theatre in their local communities - in public theatres and workshops, in community, educational and clinical settings.

Playback Theatre in the development context - two projects

PBT has been learned and practiced extensively in the so-called developed countries and only recently have there been moves to explore whether this form of theatre might be a relevant community and social development methodology in so-called developing countries.

This paper refers to two such initiatives, one in India and one in Kiribati, and offers some reflections on this work.

These two PBT projects are different in many ways - in how the projects were conceived, the structure and support for the work, the composition of the groups, and their stated purposes not to mention the differences in the two cultures where the work took place. Detailed reports of this work have been completed for NZODA.

India: 1998-2000

In 1995 an International Women's PBT Company was formed to attend the NGO Forum in Beijing. The aim was to work with participatory theatre practitioners from other parts of the world, and to introduce PBT as a social change methodology.

Good contact was made with activists from India who were already using theatre as a medium for community development and social change. They were searching for a theatrical means to bring out the social realities of a community in order to assist them to

face their experiences and work towards more enabling solutions. They saw PBT as a form that could complement their street-theatre work.

Together with two women activists from Tamil Nadu, various possibilities were explored for supporting the interest of the women in India in training in the PBT form. A number of initiatives were taken, including an invitation to PBT consultants, Bev Hosking and Mary Good, to run some PBT training workshops in the south of India.

Since January 1998 in the course of three visits, eight training workshops have been run for groups of social animators, street theatre practitioners and activists from throughout Tamil Nadu, and more recently Karnataka.

These workshop participants work in a range of settings focussing on the education and development of 'dalits', women in both rural and urban settings, child labour and bonded labour issues, and the welfare and rights of street children (with a particular emphasis on girls and young women).

Since the first workshops a high level of on-going involvement and commitment of the participants has been evident. The groups have continued to meet to practice and to develop their skills. They have also offered numerous performances with grass roots community groups and villages, often in very challenging circumstances. Alongside some quite extraordinary work, there continues to be a robust questioning of the relevance in PBT in the Indian context.

There are currently three groups working with PBT in Tamil Nadu and two groups in Karnataka.

Early on this work was undertaken on a voluntary basis with some support from local PBT communities. However it was not feasible to continue on this basis, and in 1999 the NZODA Good Governance Programme approved funding to enable this PBT training to continue.

Kiribati: 1998 -1999

The starting point for this initiative was a UNIFEM (International) project "Traditional Media for Gender Communication". PBT was suggested as a parallel methodology with shared values that could address the same questions and achieve similar goals.

PBT consultants, Bev Hosking and Christian Penny, were asked by the MSC for the 'Women in Development' Project in Kiribati, Margaret Mohamed, to pilot a grass-roots project using Playback Theatre. The aim was to enhance the status and participation of women in the community, through the telling and enactment of stories and the consequent raising of awareness within the community.

The pilot was run in two stages - November 1998 and May 1999. The work with each community took place over six days in each stage.

The PBT consultants worked directly with members of two village communities in their local 'mwaneaba' - one 'rural' and one 'urban'. The groups comprised housewives, gardeners, fishermen, labourers, adolescents, mothers and grandmothers most of whom had little formal education.

Women and men participated in the workshops, playing together and telling their stories. In this process, enough trust was developed between the women and the men in the group so that some of the core stories and conflicts around gender emerged, both privately in the workshop sessions and then more publicly in the performances.

Women and men were able work closely together and build on the work of each other in the enactment of stories. Actors were chosen to play roles in their stories without reference to gender. This was a very powerful approach to facilitating a greater understanding of the world of the other.

New pictures and possibilities of relationships between women and men were beginning to be voiced and witnessed in the community.

The work had an effect on those directly involved in the training, the many who sat observing throughout, and also on those who witnessed the stories in the public performances.

The process of learning the basic skills of PBT in the training workshops and the public performances created many opportunities for a growing understanding and strengthening of the relationships between women and men. It enabled women's voices to be heard, and made explicit the roles women play in the community. It provided a platform for the community to gain a deeper understanding and valuing of their contribution and promoted women in active and attractive leadership roles.

Playback Theatre as a methodology

Playback Theatre is a methodology that enables an exploration of an issue or concern rather than delivering a message. It is not an approach that offers teaching or immediate solutions to a situation, and in this way PBT differs from other social action theatre approaches.

With this methodology the possibility of directly changing someone's attitude is unlikely, but there is a strong chance that a person will see a situation or someone else in a new way through hearing and seeing the experience of another. The telling and re-enactment of a story creates the opportunity for a new perspective on the meaning and implications of the story to be opened up and for new and different responses to emerge.

With PBT the starting point is not an attempt to move a community towards something, but a working towards a comprehensive understanding and expression of what is occurring and the underlying social values. There is a mirroring effect, which brings the hidden values or questions to the surface and to people's awareness. In this way, the community

gets a richer and more complex view of its own nature. Any movement towards change is grounded in the current reality as expressed by the members of a community through the telling of their stories and it emerges from a change in perspective on the part of individuals or the community as a whole.

The work is organic and slow and it is only possible to work within the parameters of what the group will tolerate. The group will only bring forward the stories they feel willing to share. In this way there is an inherent self-regulating function. It is unlikely that the group will address themes beyond what is comfortable and purposeful. The indirect nature of PBT can be frustrating and challenging for those who feel an urgency to find quick solutions or to see immediate changes.

PBT presents the challenge of working without judgement and of promoting understanding of others who may have different values and beliefs. It is an effective process for bringing out the points of view of different sub-groups in a community and encouraging people to speak and listen to each other. In this work differences can be told, seen and heard alongside one another.

Working with, not against

With PBT we are working towards a coherent sense of group and community while respecting current custom and not undermining it. We are not making assumptions that any of the present values are inadequate, instead we are working towards different questions or explorations chosen by the community.

It may be used to stimulate change, to celebrate achievements, to explore questions, to address conflict and at the same time it will always build connections and strengthen ties within the group and in this way enhance the sense of community.

The PBT methodology offers the opportunity for an open forum that can sit alongside traditional structures and doesn't seek to change or replace them. However, the stories and the themes brought forward in a PBT performance have the potential to inform traditional modes of decision-making

The value of personal experience

PBT creates a forum for members of a community to tell of their own experience and it also creates both a purpose and a vehicle this for sharing.

There is an underlying belief that each person's experience is of value and that it is important to create a place for everyone to be heard and seen. In any community there are people who are on the margins, there are stories that are not told or hidden, and while they remain untold, the value or respect that a community grants each member is limited to some degree.

PBT has been created in so-called developed countries where there is a high valuing of the individual and it is a form based on the telling of personal stories. The question of cultural relevance does need to be taken into consideration, as encouraging the telling of personal stories may not always be appropriate. To date an exploration of this question has taken

place as a key component of our PBT work in development contexts.

Some groups have questioned the emphasis on the 'personal story' as opposed to focussing on 'real social problems'. There has also been an appreciation of PBT as a personal-political approach to empowering people. As the work with personal stories has developed, so has the awareness that there are social and cultural dimensions to every story. When these are listened to and reflected with respect, an individual and a community can become more aware of itself, and act more consciously towards living in accordance with its core values or revising these.

Conclusion

PBT work is in the community and about the community. Every story that is told is an affirmation of the life lived in that particular culture.

Each time a story is told by an individual and witnessed by the community, there has been a strong response - delight, recognition, hope, at times grief and sadness. Above all there has been a strengthening of the connections between people. The value of the 'witnessing' in PBT and the effect of this in breaking down isolation in a community has been experienced and acknowledged extensively.