



Rules vs. Spontaneity

By Jari Aho

This material is made publicly available by the Centre for Playback Theatre and remains the intellectual property of its author.

RULES VS. SPONTANEITY

By

**Jari Aho
School of Playback Theatre
Leadership 2006**

Background information and this essay

I teach in HAMK University of Applied Sciences in Finland. Degree Programme in Crafts and Recreation involve planning and leading different kinds of activities and events for people who participate in the activities voluntarily, in order to learn or promote their functional capacity. There are a wide range of possible activities using various methods of arts and crafts, group work, creative arts, role-plays and games, camping and other exercises. These methods are used for leisure, hobbies, recreational, stimulation or rehabilitation activities - either with individual clients or groups. The aim of the different activities is either a pedagogical or therapeutic one, depending on the client's needs and health condition.

I am responsible for Therapeutic Recreation major and international relations. I teach client work, co-operation, group work, group facilitation etc. We have had playback theatre training already six years and we started a playback theatre company Kikatus already five years ago. Past study year I instructed a playback theatre course where nearly all company members joined. We rehearsed monthly and had four performances inside university. Topic and idea for this essay came from discussions during this course and mainly from two students: Soul and Summer (names changed). Thanks for you. We discussed during the lessons, in tutorials, via e-mails, in Internet discussion group and had a group discussion in cafeteria in the end of the semester. This essay is based on these discussions, reading some playback material and my thoughts.

Both Soul and Summer had earlier experience in theatre, including playback theatre, improvisation and other forms of performing arts. In the beginning of playback theatre course the focus was naturally on techniques and forms of playback theatre. Many of participants were not familiar with playback theatre at all. Three of participants were open university students and had been members of other playback theatre company for couple of years.

Topic and target of this essay and lots of open questions

Rehearsing playback theatre and playback theatre techniques means in the beginning (or does it need to be so?) focusing on rules and regulations - rituals - as we playback theatre people want to say. The students saw rituals more as rules and said "how this needs to be done" or "is this the right way to sit and hold hands" etc. Quite soon we started to do playback theatre with our own stories, starting from "short techniques" and ending up to real stories. In the beginning we did some group/team building exercises.

During the process Soul and Summer (some other joined their idea) replaced the idea that rules are limiting their spontaneity, creativity and expression. They can't be themselves when acting or their energy is focused on wrong things, like remembering the right way to sit and hold hands while sitting. Soul said: "this is my way to sit and concentrate on listening the teller. Which is more important: listening my way or sitting in the right playback theatre way and looking like I'm listening, even I am not?"

Another thing which was questioned by students was interpretation: I emphasized that we need to follow teller's story and not interpretate/analyze it. As playback theatre actors we can't play our given roles "over" or add our own ideas, thoughts or emotions to teller's head and life. Students asked how to be creative and enthusiastic, but not analyzing/interpretating ?

Rules and rituals were understood to come more from the needs of the audience than playback theatre actors. They give security and confidence to the audience. The audience sees that playback theatre group is listening and feels that it's serving the teller and his/her needs.

Students were asking what playback theatre can give to the actor if rules and audience's needs play so big role? How (s)he can express his/her own emotions? Specially if your earlier experience is that you have been using other forms of art specially for expressing yourself? What does it mean that you express yourself? When doing playback theatre are we both giving and getting? How does playback theatre help us to express our own emotions?

And they followed if playback theatre can be done without an audience? Are we still using too much of talking instead of expressing with our body? Is playback theatre again one more form of living in a role/life what is controlled by someone else than yourself? Are we really ready if people are openly

expressing emotions? If the world and its borders and rules are not clear like black and white, how can we learn them? When can we hurt audience or teller? Can hurting be avoided if we want to take risks?

What are playback theatre actors really doing if they are not allowed to analyze, but "picturing" - copying and showing exactly same as story teller has told - is not wanted either? Do playback theatre actors need to have special, overnatural talents in psychology, nonverbal communication and sensitivity, to do their work properly?

How can we guarantee that critics (by conductor, teller, audience member or company member) in learning process concentrates on action, not personality? Can we divide those two, when own personality is our tool, specially when working in nonscripted theatre? And can we concentrate in technique learning and expression at the same? Should we actually learn forms (=techniques) first and then fill them with own expressions and ideas, like they do in dance training?

These were some of the questions which were asked by Soul and Summer or came to my mind when reading our discussion or memos. Serious, difficult and wise questions about playback theatre and human life itself. Challenging questions to me as playback theatre actor, company director, educator and human being. In this essay I try to find some understanding to some of those questions.

We playback theatre people have learned that rules or rituals give us basic limits and basic security and confidence, like a frame, inside which we can express ourself freely and openly. Is it really so? Or does these students have special problems with authorities and these would cause partly this questioning like they think themselves? Or is this issue of different generations and young ones are breaking all our stupid rules and making their own ones?

Are their background art experiences and training (playback theatre, theatre, other art forms) causing these questions? Or am I facing again the same challenge as before: rules seem to be really important for us Finns. This has been my experience really often when we Finns (myself included) have been trained by foreign instructor.

Help from Jonathan

Now I try to find some answers or thoughts from playback literature. Jonathan Fox says in *Acts of Service, Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre* (all from this source in future) that signs of spontaneity are vitality, appropriateness, intuitiveness and readiness for change. There's also mentioned that blocks for spontaneity are thinking, asking questions, planning and analyzing. Full commitment is needed for spontaneity. In the search of spontaneity, regressive behavior is necessary and healthy phenomenon. Keith Johnstone writes that there are three sources of blocked spontaneity: fear of being unoriginal, fear of being crazy, and fear of being obscene. Playback theatre actors are also encouraged to act nonadult and animal way to find spontaneity.

Learning - or better finding - spontaneity needs forgetting rationality, physical nonverbal work to take people out of the thinking and expanding capacity to move and make sounds. Specially roles which are blocked need to be practiced. Spontaneity training can demand also sharing our personal experiences which prevent from acting with spontaneity.

These thoughts make me wonder how well we have been using these ideas in our company training? Have I understood totally what warming up really means in playback theatre process? I notice that I have not been thinking this part enough. We have been concentrating too much on techniques and stories. But later more about this.

But spontaneity doesn't mean only that it's not thinking. One idea is that audience and playback theatre company actors need to know that what happens on the stage is not real. It is giving a picture of something – real or unreal – but only a picture. Audience and actors need to have some rules or deal or frame about what happens, what roles actors and audience are taking and giving etc. These "rules" can come from human life, "connecting culture" or they can be made in the situation (verbally or not), rules can be conscious or unconscious.

"Even though 'not thinking' is involved in order to receive basic sensory and affective inputs, spontaneity also involves thinking of the highest order, where the nonrational and rational are comprehended in an understanding which surpasses the limitations of each." We will achieve something better and higher, at least different when we do not separate nonrational and rational; not thinking and thinking. What creates when putting them to work together? Maybe we can "construct a truly spontaneous experience, a point of transcendence in which audience and actors are joined in their sense of

involvement and purpose, the moment which we both experience and understand.”

It is mentioned that we need to have rough plans of the mixture of techniques. But what are rules for techniques? How new techniques are invented? How same techniques are used so differently among companies? This leads easily to discussions about mood vs. program and structure vs. freedom or shape vs. content. When looking out playback theatre technique, we need to think structure/shape (rules), but also at the same time content (why and when technique is used). I think that we can change rules and the structure of playback theatre technique, if the same intention or purpose is accomplished. But easily in playback theatre and elsewhere we forget the content and concentrate on structure, likewise mood is forgotten and we hang on only on the program.

Fox says that it's not important to fight which structure or freedom is more important in theatre, but the most important is to focus on liminal state between those two. That I should have understood earlier with my playback theatre group. And also the idea that actors need to consciously seek out liminal moments, which leads me to think means constant personal growth.

So freedom and structure are not opposite forces fighting each other, we need to get them both in use and same time.

More discussion with students

When discussing these Fox's and other's ideas with Soul and Summer, I realized that there's actually not any conflict with main topic. But in this discussion on end of the semester I realized many things of our company and its group process as well as myself as group leader and conductor. And also the real (at least how I think now) reasons why this topic came up. It also gave me direct and undirect feedback how I should act in my position. So this essay moved more to practical report or essay with title 1) hidden agendas, 2) importance of basic elements and ideas of playback theatre or 3) group spontaneity.

Students told me that understanding the role of audience and story teller took some time, but they understood and accepted that playback theatre is not only method of self expression. Students seem to be having found balance between getting and giving in playback theatre. It's important, even necessary that you get something to yourself as actor and human being, but

we cannot forget the audience and story tellers. But story teller can't be either conductor or subscriber ("I'd like to order following experiences....").

Literature I read is mostly based on spontaneity from individual's point of view, what it demands from the person, how it creates and which are blocks for person's spontaneity. And I noticed that in our training we did not do enough personal spontaneity training. We should have been more in roles of animal and nonadult. We should have done more physical nonverbal exercises and more sharing about spontaneity and fields of life. Students would have had lots more personal capacity to spontaneity.

But what is group's spontaneity or group's role in that process? Spontaneity is not only personal ability; it needs right mood or land to grow up. And group leader has major position in that process, especially with a new group.

Like I told earlier Playback Theatre Kikatus and playback theatre course on past semester had three experienced playback theatre actors from a different group joining the process for this year. Their interest was to maintain their skills and get training, because they did not have a group leader that year. Before the course I thought long time, if it's good idea to take open university students joining the course. And we discussed with these three students about their needs and what it would mean to their own group. I emphasised that I will not be their own group's leader, especially when everyone is not taking part in course and they have their own rehearsals and meetings as well. I hesitated a lot, but one reason I needed to accept these students was the group size.

But what I forgot was the really important theme: what does it mean to other company members who are just starting their acting and are facing the playback theatre first time. I thought that experienced actors will help me in teaching and students in learning playback theatre. I was unconsciously pressing these three group members to the different role. They should have had equal rights as group members. I noticed now that I wasn't even getting them equal feedback, which caused confusion in the group. I should have corrected them in some occasions, but I didn't do it.

These three students acted as role models (not depending if they wanted or not). In other words, the rest of group got education in the official way (me) and unofficially and indirectly from those three students. And those two messages were sometimes contradictory and these different ways of thinking or doing were not discussed.

And all this I should have understood, but I didn't. We should have done lots more team-building exercises, constantly created more and more trust which creates openness. Lots of hidden agendas stayed hidden. Too much time was used to getting ready for performances. Now I think that we had (paid) performances in too early phase. The company was not ready ensemble.

And I should have emphasised that expressing emotions and relationships in acting is important and tell actors to try to act out something from between the story teller's lines and try to reach something from liminal state, not just follow the rules or "picture" it again. And this all would have needed safer and more open group.

Concentrating themes and trying to find metaphors would have helped away from "picturing" and rational talking. I tried to express the idea that actors do not play the role, they are in the role and at least that gives some freedom and material to do the role as actor. The actor have been chosen by the story teller and will get some materials from teller and then can do the role work through her/himself and give expression what is combination of teller's story and her/himself and hopefully also society, present group and metaphoric stage.

Finding the rules and regulations requires often that we need to make mistakes and break the rules. That's the only way to find unhidden culture. It might even need that we need to experience that rules are broken towards us. We just need to hope that it doesn't hurt us too much. Hurting a teller can never be totally avoided. Playback theatre company training should include intentional mistake making and rule breaking exercises. Some rules come from playback theatre culture, some are more group agreements, but we need to know the difference between those.

Growing as playback theatre actor demands exercises, group process, but is mostly personal project which will take all your life. It does not need special trained talents, but need of being in different roles and situations and reflecting own emotions. Learning and living life itself is compulsory. But all this demands group process, mirrors from other people.

Conclusions

This essay walked totally a different path than I thought. Students gave me the idea and I thought that now I can teach them how wrong they are

thinking and even experiencing playback theatre. But it worked totally in the opposite way. Students opened my eyes and gave me really valuable information not only for this essay, but playback theatre work as well. I understood (again) the power of group process and need to build the group and feed the group process always and try to help hidden agendas to come out. The trust in group is the growing place for individual spontaneity to grow and become something more and shared together. Students seem not to have any special authority issues, I might had.

As I told earlier this essay was partly group work and students have been commenting even the final result. Thanks again. My thoughts were accepted and students thought that my ideas how I should have lead and trained the group in different way would have led the group in better way for them as well.

It helped students when I told my idea that we can change rules and the structure of playback theatre technique, if the same intention or purpose is accomplished. Of course this process needs to be proved at least by the company – all together. Rules and regulations itself without any meaning or purpose are meaningless and can be changed. If we are making our own rules and regulations ourselves and that way understanding the purpose of those, it's lots more easier to follow them. The lack or rules makes us to make necessary rules to ourselves, but if we have too many rules, we might want to protest against them without any real reason. Our group worked too regulation-oriented.

We should have shared more about our lives. And finally had lots more fun together. I was like Mr Holland high school music teacher in his early years, ("Mr Holland's opus) before he realizes that first of all playing music needs to be fun, not just following rules: notes.

I and my group need to concentrate in philosophical issues in playback theatre. Basic questions like why is it done, what it gives to actors, musicians, conductors and specially story tellers. When training playback theatre, stories told by actors, cannot be just material for technique training. They need to be real stories from real life and telling and seeing them done (played back) needs to be real experience and teach something of the purpose of whole playback theatre.

When training young adults there are a bit different challenges than training middle-aged people whose personality is often more stable and not so

influenced by other people's opinions and acceptance. The home playback theatre group where I have learned most of playback theatre has been demanding more and more feedback and critics from the group leader and other company members. Has that been influencing my way to work with this playback theatre group? And what is the influence that I am student's teacher and study counsellor at the same time as playback theatre trainer and conductor?

One part of emotional intelligence and learning about emotions is expressing your emotions, but recognizing and admit emotions as well. I think that playback theatre can help us specially with recognizing and admitting process. This part was not mentioned by students and can also be more difficult to understand and express. Freedom of expressing your own emotions and thoughts is one stage, but we need to phase also that some of our emotions are not so wanted or accepted by ourselves or society. But all the emotions are good and relevant information for us.

Need of rules and structure and need of not having them comes and goes. The next generation is often either making stronger rules or loosing them than earlier generation. But which rules we need to have in playback theatre that we can call something as playback theatre. And who is the one to make decisions? In the other hand I hate even the idea that we need the rules that much.

I am finishing this essay during the first days of leadership summer course in New York. Even now the course have given me new understanding to this topic, but maybe more later. This essay and reflecting my own conducting made me quite obedient and nearly feeling that I'm total zero in playback conducting. But we need these phases to be able to grow.