

Storytelling, Agency and Community-building through Playback Theatre in Palestine

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Abstract: According to its initiator, Jonathan Fox, Playback Theatre is a kind of theatre which comes back to theatre's "earlier purpose of preserving memory and holding the tribe together" (Fox 2000, n. p.). Playback Theatre blurs the boundaries between performer and audience and connects different individual stories with a broader collective framework, allowing a phenomenological understanding of personal events. My paper aims to explore how Playback Theatre progressively builds a collective narrative starting from individual stories. It does this within the Palestinian context through some practical examples of my experience touring with the 'Freedom Bus'.

In this sense, I want to question how the re-enactment of the shared and yet individual experience can potentially strengthen community identity, and, at the same time, how this process of 'community building' may be doubly mediated, first by the actors who 'translate' the narration into theatrical language, and secondly by the audiences who witnesses this translation and anchor the community in a reiterative narrative of trauma.

What is Playback Theatre?

Playback Theatre is a form of non-scripted, interactive community-based theatre created in the 1970s in the United States by Jonathan Fox. A Playback Theatre event usually lasts around seventy-five minutes and it is constructed from the stories of members of the audience who are invited by a conductor to share short or long stories, or ideas, with the rest of the audience. The new storyteller steps forward and sits on the edge of the stage, where he or she is seen by the performers and by the audience. With the help of the conductor's questions, this new 'storyteller' narrates his or her experience allowing the performers to understand the personal feelings lying behind the story and to translate them into improvised theatrical language.

After the magic words of the conductor 'Let's see' (*'Khalin Nshuf'* in Palestinian dialect), the performers transform these stories into short improvised theatre pieces. In their improvisation, they apply basic theatrical devices and simple staging to extract the essence of the experience presented by the teller (Dennis 2008, 212). The performances are usually accompanied by live music and, by the end of each representation, the teller is asked whether he or she felt represented by the enactment. One story follows the other and, as we will see later, an interesting dialectic is established among the different stories.

Playback Theatre is currently used in over sixty countries and, as applied theatre, it is considered both an educational tool and a 'frame for healing' (Salas 2000, 445). It has also been used as a conflict resolution tool (Hutt and Hosking 2004, 6-24; Cohen 2005, 1-61). My paper will focus on its use in Palestine, its potential to assert individual and collective agency, and its possible impact on communities badly hit by the Israeli occupation.

The Freedom Bus

Since 2011, the Palestinian group 'The Freedom Theatre' has periodically organized the 'Freedom Bus', an initiative that brings together Palestinians and Internationals in a ride inspired by the 1960s Freedom Rides that travelled across the South of the United States to highlight and challenge racism. The Palestinian version tours different towns, villages, Bedouin encampments and refugee camps throughout the West Bank using Playback Theatre and, according to the Freedom Bus webpage (2012), "cultural activism to bear witness, raise awareness and build alliances throughout occupied Palestine and beyond." The Freedom Bus Playback Theatre troupe consists of Palestinian theatre artists from the Occupied Palestinian Territories and from current Israeli territories.

The Freedom Bus challenges the movement restriction imposed over the Palestinian population. During the different stages of the tour, the riders tried to reach isolated communities in Area C, which is the area of the West Bank that is under direct Israeli control. These communities are obliged to go through a long and difficult bureaucratic system of permits if they want to construct or rehabilitate any structure, with all the hardship that this system entails for a fast-growing population.

Motivated by my interest in Playback Theatre and, more broadly, in cultural activism in Palestine, I joined the Freedom Bus on March 2014. During the two weeks ride, I was able to participate as an audience member in several shows and I was even invited to participate in a 3-days Playback Theatre workshop in At-Tuwani, a community located in South Hebron Hills that is harshly harassed by the surrounding settlements and by the Israeli military forces. The workshop was conducted by Ben Rivers, the founder and coordinator of the Freedom Bus, and Fida'a Attaya. In this sense, taking part in the workshop allowed me to become storyteller, actress and audience at the same time; it is from that standpoint that I write this paper and that I propose a "phenomenological performative approach" (Park-Fuller 2003, 294) from what I understand to be a privileged three-dimensional position.

My privileged position, however, could be interpreted as double-bounded. On the one hand, the presence of a group of almost twenty international observers in the ride might reinforce the attempts of the locals to present a story of the struggle fixed by the conventions of what they think needs to be told rather than allowing a relaxed space for sincere sharing.

On the other hand, the 3-days workshop naturally opened that 'relaxed space.' The heterogeneity of the group (gender, nationality and age mixed) reduced the possibility of expressing experience through means other than pure theatrical representation. Only 6 internationals were invited to the workshop. The group acted as a warming hub where stories were abstracted from our different personal contexts and mattered for themselves. This means that the personal concerns expressed through these stories became universal and every single person in the workshop could relate to them in some way.

These two elements –the individual story and the collective experience- confer to Playback Theatre a double dimension that has been widely recognized by different theorists and practitioners (Rivers 2013a , 15; Rivers 2013b, 163; Rowe 2007, 85; Nash and Rowe 2000, 18; Garavelli 2001, 3; J. Fox 1999, n.p. ; Hoesch 1999, 2). My paper aims to explore this aspect of Playback Theatre without falling in a reductionist binary vision of individual vs. collective and teller vs. audience-.

In this sense, in Playback Theatre, one story goes through three different mediations that may affect its meaning; a meaning that is fluid, changing, and that pervades the space in which the Playback Theatre performance takes place. In this sense, the story is first of all mediated by the teller from the moment of the story's utterance, which is the verbalization of the experience that will always depend on the personal circumstances and purpose of the teller.

Secondly, the story goes through the re-enactment of the actors and actresses, who need to extract the essence and find connections between their physicality and the teller's sense of being; their work is highly dependent on empathy and balance as we will see later. Thirdly, the audience will make sense of the story, they will react according to their collective experience and how the story is inscribed in their common narratives. In this last step, the audience digests the story and incorporates it into the wider "multi-faceted narrative" (Rivers 2013a, 4). This mediated process of communication opens a new space for identity negotiation and for the understanding of alternative actions for resistance.

The Teller

We will first focus our attention on the ‘teller’, the individual who volunteers to tell a story. Their starting point is thus memory, but they want to be *part* of the theatrical event that is happening in the present time. Their participation allows them “to effectively separate past from present, and thus engage with the traumatic material from a more empowered stance” (Rivers 2013b, 162). Fiction allows an open space to create reality, and at the same time, it allows individuals to become both persons and community members. It humanises them and asserts their personal identity and their sense of belonging.

During the workshop in At-Tuwani, a participant named Samir¹ admitted: “When I tell a story and see the actors, it gives support and encourages me. Makes me feel people cares about my story. To see it from outside gives me more strength.” Telling a story is, first of all, an act of individual agency that talks to the collective. It asserts the relative indivisibility of collective and individual dimensions within community theatre, and it challenges the idea that the individual and the collective exist in binary opposition.

I will not elaborate on the therapeutic dimension of Playback Theatre in this paper, but I want to highlight the fact that Playback Theatre works against the “privatization of personal pain and distress” (Nash and Rowe 2000, 18) by bringing this personal pain and distress to the fore. According to Nash and Rowe, this privatization is a trend connected with “Western European Culture;” in our culture, the experience of distress is thus not only segregated from the everyday, but it is also separated from the collective by the overwhelming emphasis on the necessity for individual personal growth (2000, 18). In Palestine, the emphasis on individual personal growth is not as relevant as the disconnection between the different notions of ‘the collective’, due to the political situation. So, when we look into the Palestinian context, the term ‘privatization’ may be substituted by the notion of ‘fragmentation’.

‘Fragmentation’ is an idea that was present, for instance, in the discourse of the participants in the Playback Theatre workshop in At-Tuwani. In 2013 the Freedom bus brought that community a play developed from a session of Playback Theatre in Nabi Saleh, a Palestinian village in the West Bank where weekly demonstrations have been held for three years in protest against the confiscation of the village's land and the takeover of their spring by the nearby Israeli settlement, Halamish. Samir told me:

¹ The names have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

The last Freedom bus brought us the story of Nabi Saleh. The Freedom bus brought the real experience, the real problems of Nabi Saleh and presented them to the people in South Hebron Hills. The Freedom theatre brought messages from the North to the South and that helped (because) it is people who tell the story, you extract history from people, and that helps.

In a geographically and politically fragmented context, bringing personal stories to the collective does not aim to make 'public' personal struggles, but instead to connect personal and collective struggles in order to create common narratives within a highly fragmented community. These common and shared narratives may have a different impact in terms of community building.

The Actors and Actresses

The stories uttered and articulated by the tellers then go through the second mediation, which is charged with the artistic responsibility of the actors, actresses, and musicians for "translating the literal/verbal telling into theatrical language" (Dennis 2008, 212). In the Freedom Bus, most of the actors and actresses were Palestinians, which provided them with a profound "understanding of the psychological and socio-political context of the stories they encounter" (Rivers 2013b, 160).

However, Playback Theatre does not seek a naturalistic representation of the stories; as a matter of fact, performers should avoid naturalistic representations and formulaic interpretations of survivors' stories. Therefore, the performers diverge from Stanislavski's naturalist approach to acting, developed in his book *An Actor Prepares* (1936, reprinted 2008), which is based on the physical and psychological memories and the emotions of the actors and actresses. Playback Theatre is not a matter of 'imitating' real stories, but of re-enacting them to create new ones. Besides, Playback Theatre posits two additional challenges for performers:

On the one hand, the lack of text and the immediacy of the communication between teller-actor-audience places over the performers' heads the burden of 'listening' for what Denborough defines as the "double-story" (Denborough et al 2006, 21) of an account; they need to look into the hidden aspects of the presented story. On the other hand, and according to Floodgate (2006, 9), actors and actresses in Playback Theatre are defined by a 'social responsibility', drawing upon Brecht's and Boal's theatres in the sense that the ultimate goal is to foster a critical reaction from the audience. To do so,

Brecht's concept of 'alienation'² (1961) acquires a new relevance: the performer has to 'alienate' him/herself and reject any empathy with the character's emotions (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2005, 69), thus fostering a critical reaction from the audience.

In Playback Theatre, performers need to recognize and reflect not only the story but also the varied ways in which the protagonist responded: how they tried to protect themselves; how they helped others; the skills and values upon which they drew; what resources were mobilized and so on. Their mediation is key for the conformation of the final meaning; the audience listened to the story, but, ultimately, their final impression will depend on the visual impact of the performance.

However, ultimately, it is the teller who needs to feel that their story has been faithfully represented. That is why, by the end of the improvisation, the performers turn to the teller, thanks them and wait for their opinion on the performance. If the teller is not fully satisfied by the representation of the story, they can ask for variations.

In a Playback performance in At-Tuwani, one of the inhabitants of the village narrated how workers from At-Tuwani had to go to Israel to look for jobs as opportunities in the community were scarce. Two weeks before, a group of men were trying to cross into Israel to look for a job without permission, when they were stopped by the Israeli army. They were taken to jail in one of the settlements inside the West Bank and they were kept there for six hours without water or food, and without being interrogated. After complaining about the situation, he was beaten and mocked -'Go and ask Abu Mazen'³, the Israeli soldier told him. He was released two hours later and was warned that he should not try to go again to ask for a job in Israel. He ended his story by telling how, the same day, he went back to Israel as he really needed a job.

This final expression of resistance sparked a long and joyful applause from the audience. However, after the performance, the villager said that he was not fully satisfied with the improvisation as reality had been much harder than what the actors presented, but he did not ask for any change in it. The audience's reaction after the storytelling had a powerful effect on the atmosphere. The connection

² The exact term used in German by Brecht is *Verfremdungseffekt*, which means both alienation and distancing in a theatrical context.

³ Abu Mazen is a 'kunya' or a teknonym given to Mahmoud Abbas, leader of the Palestinian Authority. It is formed by the word 'Abu' (Father) and 'Mazen' (the name of Abbas' eldest child).

between the narrative of resistance and the collective struggle was so powerful that the enactment was reduced to an embellishment of this connection.

Theatre to Bring the Tribe Together

Finally, the third and central mediation is done collectively by the audience who participate in the Playback Theatre event. The teller speaks to the 'collective' trying to appeal to their individual consciousness. As recognized by Hannah Fox: "As I hear your tale and watch it unfold onstage, I am moved because it reminds me of a part of my own story. Suddenly I feel less isolated; I experience human interconnectedness" (H. Fox 2007, 99).

In this sense, according to its initiator, Jonathan Fox, Playback Theatre comes back to "its earlier purpose of preserving memory and holding the tribe together" (H. Fox 2000, n.p.). A Playback event is a ritualisation of the theatrical experience (J. Fox 1999, n.p.) in which certain patterns of conduct must be followed. These include the teller coming to the chair in front of the audience and actors, the conductor asking questions to uncover the hidden story, and the actors being silent during the teller's narration.

Beyond its ritualised aspect, Playback Theatre aims at 'holding the tribe together' by connecting individual stories with memory and heritage; as recognized by Harper and Gray (2006, 42-44) stories perpetuate knowledge and promote pro-social behaviour. Apart from the possible thirst for psychological relief through sharing, the tellers may also want to speak to their communities, remind them of the hardship of their resistance against occupation and the need of cohesion and steadfastness (*summud*, in Arabic).

It is precisely this willingness to talk to the community which, in my opinion, triggers what some authors call a "red thread" (J. Fox 1999, n.p.; Hoesch 1999; Rivers 2013b, 4): this is an "unconscious pattern of dialogue" that develops throughout the show and ties the stories together. Once that the performance starts, and one of the community members 'dares' to share one story with the other members of the audience, it triggers a wayward and unpredictable reconstruction of the shared experience.

In the Playback Theatre performances that I have witnessed in Palestine, the occupation was present in all the different stories. This larger matrix of control of the Palestinian population marks a *leitmotiv* that pervades all the narrations and re-replaces the audience in the context of an unjust and

oppressive system of power. It is as if an invisible needle was knitting a unique collective narrative, presented, represented and even corrected by the audience.

In this sense, the 'dialogue' is not established among teller-actors-audience, but among the members of the community in a mediated-process of communication – defined as 'dialectic' by Ben Rivers (2013a, 4) - that can be observed in the relationship between one story and another. This means that the dialectic is established among the stories and not among the individuals. When a story ends and the next teller steps in and narrates another personal story, the whole dialectic dynamic is reset. In my opinion, Rivers' definition of a dialectic interaction offers a highly interesting insight into the dialogue and collaborative potential of Playback Theatre. Playback Theatre can become a tool to deconstruct hegemonic narratives and oppose the binary individual-collective relationship, as will be explained hereafter.

Subverting Hegemonic Narratives

Bardala is a Palestinian village in the North of the Jordan Valley, hardly afflicted by Israeli land confiscation strategies. A Playback event was organized in the school's open air courtyard; it was windy and the courtyard was packed with women, men and children from the community and participants of the Freedom Bus. It was difficult to listen to the conductor and the teller even though they had a microphone.

Almost by the end of the event, Mohammed stepped forward and told a story: One day, during Eid in 2005, at the Tayazeer checkpoint, he saw how some children were stopped and kept in the rain by the soldiers. With his phone, he took pictures of the children and the situation. When he himself was crossing the checkpoint, the soldiers stopped him, searched his phone and found the pictures. They accused him of being a ' Hamas photographer' or a 'jihad photographer' and arrested him. They destroyed the phone throwing it to the ground. They kept him detained until three in the morning, also in the rain. He finished the story saying that, as it was Eid, everybody else was at home celebrating while he was stuck at the checkpoint.

Mohammed chose Hassan, one of the male actors from the Freedom Bus to play himself. The two female actresses played the Israeli soldiers. The audience reaction to the performance was mainly laughter and amusement. Mohammed was presented as a regular man, re-enacting his story through

the common language of the everyday. Here, Playback Theatre tries to dismantle any attempt to create a narrative of heroism, which could arise in response to the de-humanizing system of the occupation. According to Peteet, “beatings and detention are construed as rites of passage into manhood. The ritual of violence is understood as a performance of political agency against the occupation, while at the same time it both reaffirms and transforms internal Palestinian forms of domination” (1994, 31).

Therefore, theatre in this case is re-humanizing and it deconstructs the images of heroism inscribed into structures of power at a larger level. In my opinion, this example responds to a widespread concern about Playback Theatre allowing the reproduction of a larger matrix of control within itself (Park-Fuller 2003, 297; Rivers 2013a, 22; Sajnani and Read Johnson 2011, 10). Power structures may be so intrinsically intertwined in social dynamics that it can be hard to identify them. Both audience members and performers – and everyone in a Playback Theatre event can be performer or audience – are responsible for unmasking these normalized ideas and practices that perpetuate hegemonic agendas. Storytelling can bring to light, through its silences or its speech, these forms of discrimination or inequality and to recognize these, it is necessary to accept that “story is not necessarily truth, but rather meaning” (Canning and Reinsborough 2010, 20).

At the same time, Playback Theatre’s potential also lies in the space it allows to envision alternatives. Playback Theatre opens a “special social space in which the usual customs and conventions do not apply, creating an atmosphere of ambiguity” (Davidheiser 2006, n.p.). Tellers are re-humanized and theatre allows the recognition and representation of alternative ways to subvert the occupation. This was acknowledged by one of the participants, named Asma’a, in At-Tuwani’s workshop: “Playback Theatre allows her to see the weaknesses, where they could have acted differently.”

In fact, I understand that Playback Theatre needs to aim at showing and discussing possible alternative actions. Even though, contrarily to what happens in Theatre Forum plays for instance, Playback Theatre do not present live alternative actions. As stated by Ben Rivers, “when the audience responds to one story with a similar or related story, the recognition of shared experience can result not only in new or renewed knowledge about the larger matrix of control, but also in heightened awareness about the popular mechanisms for its subversion” (Rivers 2013b, 163). If we take this notion into account, then Playback Theatre can be a powerful tool for the subtle negotiation of resistance strategies within communities, provided that, as we saw, larger matrix of control (in the Palestinian case, both the

Israeli occupation and the internal sociopolitical dynamics within Palestinian society) are recognized and challenged.

Conclusion

Playback Theatre allows the connection between the individual and the collective in different ways; it connects the personal stories to the collective narrative to reinforce community cohesiveness and, at the same time, the community gathering becomes a forum where hegemonic narratives can be deconstructed and alternative patterns of resistance can be individuated.

As stated above, it is and will ever be a technique that depends on the 'event' even more than other improvisatory techniques. Playback Theatre is a technique in a never-ending development whose impact depends highly on the three different mediations mentioned above; however, in Palestine, it fosters the rephrasing of collective narratives that might be underpinned by the matrix of socio-political power structures. Theatre constitutes a breathing-space for local communities within the hardships of occupation both because it permits the release of some personal traumas and because it can strengthen their sense of belonging.

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