

**Playback Theatre Leadership**

# **Psychodrama & Playback Theatre - from Clinical to Community Practice**

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## Tribute to Veronica Needa

I was introduced to Psychodrama and dedicated to psychotherapy because of Playback Theatre (PT). As a playback practitioner, I often heard that Jonathan Fox, co-founder of PT, invented playback theatre as an extension of psychodrama. What interested me was how it is open to the community, not only with closed groups. Although it is not framed as a therapy, the therapeutic effects are still felt among the audience (community). So, I would love to take the chance to consolidate their elements and characteristics, hence enlightening further application in the future.

Veronica Needa planted the seeds of psychodrama in Hong Kong - and in me! She was not a psychodramatist, but her passion for playback embraced and bred lots of psychodramatists around the world, including me.

I was honoured to accompany her for the last two years after I relocated to the UK. I was also honoured when she invited me to be the co-director of 'True Heart Theatre', her precious playback garden. I was flattered and honoured, but I didn't decide on the spot; I could not say 'yes' without thought. But now I feel grateful to the universe, and I understand it's time for me to be the medium serving the community with my integrated skills of psychodrama and playback theatre. As a legacy...

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## Introduction

Imagine stepping into a world where the boundaries between reality and fiction blur, where personal stories become vehicles for healing and community connection. In the realms of Psychodrama and Playback Theatre, this imaginative journey unfolds, offering individuals and communities unique pathways to self-discovery, emotional catharsis, and shared understanding.

Psychodrama, born from the visionary mind of Jacob L. Moreno, and Playback Theatre, a brainchild of Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, are two captivating forms of artistic expression. While distinct in their methodologies and objectives, these approaches share a common thread — they use the medium of drama to bridge the gap between introspection and communal engagement.

This essay explores the evolution of Psychodrama and Playback Theatre from their clinical origins to their dynamic roles in community practice by delving into their distinct principles, methods, and applications to uncover how these transformative approaches have transcended therapy rooms to become instruments of personal growth, healing, and collective empowerment.

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## The Origins and development

### Psychodrama

Psychodrama is a therapeutic method developed by Jacob Levy Moreno, a psychiatrist, and psychotherapist, in the early 20th century. Moreno's innovative approach combined drama, group therapy, and role-playing elements to help individuals explore and address psychological and emotional challenges. Moreno coined the term "psychodrama" in the mid-1930s to describe his therapeutic technique, combining "psyche" (mind) and "drama" (action). He continued to refine the methods of psychodrama, incorporating concepts like role reversal, mirroring, and soliloquy. He introduced the "auxiliary ego," where group members could play roles in someone else's psychodrama, enabling different perspectives and insights.

Moreno also expanded psychodrama beyond individual therapy to include group therapy and community-building applications. Psychodrama gained recognition and popularity in the United States and Europe during the 1950s and 1960s.

After Moreno died in 1974, his wife, Zerka T. Moreno and other practitioners continued to develop and teach psychodrama techniques.

Today, psychodrama remains a respected therapeutic method, valued for its ability to engage individuals in creative and experiential processes that facilitate emotional expression, personal growth, and healing. It continues to evolve, adapt, and integrate with modern psychological theories, making it a versatile tool for therapists, educators, and facilitators worldwide.

## **Playback Theatre**

Playback theatre is a form of improvisational theatre developed by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas in the 1970s. Unlike psychodrama, which is primarily used for therapeutic purposes, playback theatre focuses on building connections and community engagement through storytelling. While Jonathan attended the Moreno Institute for a weekend open session led by Zerka Moreno, speaking about Moreno's Theatre of Spontaneity in Vienna in 1973, he had known nothing about psychodrama before or even studied psychology, while impressed by Moreno's theatre experience and the value system of psychodrama, with its emphasis on spontaneity and creativity, on group process; on existential validation of each individual; and the emotional power of dramas.

Various theatre practices influenced Playback Theatre; psychodrama is one of the elements. In 1976, Zerka Moreno invited Jonathan Fox to teach playback theatre at each 3-week Moreno Institute training in exchange for psychodrama training for himself and company members. Playback theatre began to perform at the annual psychodrama meeting and started the co-related development process among many playbackers and psychodramatists.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Playback Theatre expanded beyond its origins in the United States and gained popularity in different parts of the world. The method resonated with diverse cultures and communities, providing a platform for sharing personal experiences and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Playback Theatre performances often focus on themes such as identity, belonging, conflict, and social issues. The method is often referred to as a "theatre of transformation," as it encourages participants to explore their emotions and experiences in a creative and supportive environment.

The International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) was established in the 1980s to connect practitioners and promote the exchange of ideas, techniques, and experiences. The IPTN supports the growth of Playback Theatre worldwide and hosts international conferences and gatherings.

The Centre for Playback Theatre (CPT) evolved from the first School for Playback Theatre in New York State, begun in 1993, by Playback Theatre's co-founder and first Executive Director, Jonathan Fox. The School was established in response to a growing interest in training in the US and internationally. Jo Salas, co-founder and member of the original playback company, became the School's co-director in 1995. A phase of concerted growth began around 2004, with courses offered during a Winter Session. Playback Schools in several countries were first established during this time, with the support, guidance and curriculum developed by the original School. The CPT is now under the leadership of the Board, with working committees responsible for ongoing projects and maintaining ethical and professional guidance in the practice of Playback Theatre.

Playback Theatre's journey from its inception to its present status as a global movement highlights its ability to engage audiences and participants in meaningful ways. By giving individuals a platform to share their stories and experiences, Playback Theatre contributes to creating empathetic and connected communities.

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## Distinction in Principles and methodologies

Psychodrama primarily focuses on therapeutic outcomes under a clinical setting and framework, delving into personal growth and healing, while Playback Theatre emphasizes community engagement and storytelling for social connection and advocacy.

**Psychodrama** is a therapeutic technique that employs role-playing and dramatic enactment to explore and resolve emotional and psychological challenges. It offers individuals a safe space to confront their inner struggles and gain insights into their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, starting with the warm-up. Psychodrama encourages participants to tap into their spontaneous and creative impulses. This involves letting go of preconceived notions and allowing authentic emotions, thoughts, and expressions to surface. The protagonist, the individual whose issue will be explored, selects a role or situation to work on. This role could be a person, an event, an emotion, or even an aspect of themselves. The protagonist sets the stage by identifying crucial elements of the chosen role or situation. This may include other roles, objects, and the context in which the scene takes place. It draws from role theory, where individuals take on roles within the dramatic enactment. Participants take on the roles assigned to them within the chosen scene. The scene is acted out in real time, with participants engaging in dialogue, movement, and interaction. One of the fundamental techniques in psychodrama, role reversal involves participants switching roles with each other. This allows the protagonist to experience the situation from different perspectives, leading to increased empathy and insights. The protagonist has an opportunity to express their inner thoughts and emotions while in



character. This soliloquy provides insight into the protagonist's internal world and adds depth to the exploration. This allows participants to explore different perspectives, understand motivations, and gain insights into their emotions and behaviours. This process aims to facilitate catharsis, allowing participants to release pent-up emotions and experience emotional relief. During the enactment, participants may engage in mirroring and doubling. This involves other participants mirroring the protagonist's emotions, gestures, and expressions, creating a deeper connection to their feelings. The scene is played out with a focus on exploring different choices, outcomes, and resolutions. This allows the protagonist to experiment with alternative approaches and gain a sense of closure. After the enactment, participants gather to reflect on the experience. The protagonist and other participants share their thoughts, emotions, and insights. This reflective phase often includes role feedback and personal resonance as support, not advice or opinions.

The enactment provides a safe outlet for expressing intense feelings. The psychodrama session concludes with a debriefing and integration phase. Participants reflect on the experience, share insights, and explore how the insights gained can be applied to real-life situations. Psychodrama practitioners prioritize the safety and well-being of participants. The director ensures that the psychodrama environment is supportive, non-judgmental, and respectful. These principles guide the practice of psychodrama, allowing participants to engage in meaningful self-exploration, emotional expression, and personal growth. It's important to note that the application of these principles may vary based on the participants' specific needs and the session's goals.

**Playback theatre** is an improvisational form of theatre that involves performing teams and enacting personal stories shared by audience members. The performance begins by inviting the audience to share personal stories based on a theme or topic. This theme could be broad or specific, depending on the context of the performance. Audience members volunteer to share their stories, experiences, or emotions related to the theme. The stories can be happy, sad, funny, or reflective, representing diverse human experiences. It aims to foster empathy by reflecting the emotions and experiences of the storyteller. This connection between performers and storytellers creates a sense of validation and understanding. After sharing the story, performers immediately enact the story using improvisational techniques. Performers use improvisation to transform stories into theatrical performances spontaneously. They capture the emotions and key moments of the story without trying to recreate every detail. This encourages creativity and allows for unique and unpredictable outcomes. Playback Theatre embraces stories from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. It highlights the richness of human experiences and promotes inclusivity within the community. Not only can everyone share their stories in audience, but they also become the citizen actor, actively engaged in their community, participating in social and political issues, and advocating for change. There are sets of training for participants to improve their skills in active listening to capture the essence of the storyteller's narrative, including emotions, tone, and key details. This listening ensures that the enactment accurately reflects the storyteller's intentions, embracing spontaneity and creativity and spontaneously using improvisation to transform stories into theatrical performances. This encourages creativity and allows for unique and unpredictable outcomes, using archetypes and metaphors with symbolic elements, such as movement, gesture, and music, to

enhance the emotional resonance of the story. These elements add depth and layers of meaning to the performance.

Playback Theatre creates a sense of community by sharing personal stories and experiences. It highlights the shared human emotions and challenges that connect individuals. The storyteller retains ownership of their story, and performers focus on enacting the essence of the story rather than imposing their own interpretations. After the enactment, the storyteller is welcome to share their here-and-now feelings or clarification if any. This feedback process validates the storyteller's experience and offers closure.

Playback Theatre practitioners adhere to ethical guidelines that ensure the well-being and consent of participants. They prioritize the comfort and boundaries of both storytellers and performers.

These principles guide the interactions, performances, and overall experience of Playback Theatre. They contribute to its ability to create meaningful connections, promote emotional expression, and facilitate dialogue within communities. Playback Theatre's format is adaptable to different contexts, themes, and settings. Performers can adjust their approach to suit the needs of the audience and the nature of the stories shared.

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## Group Dynamics and Narrative Reticulation

**Group dynamics** play a significant role in psychodrama sessions, impacting how participants interact, express themselves, and engage in therapeutic processes. The Psychodrama director relies on observing the interactions among participants to create a safe and supportive environment for exploration and healing. Group dynamics refer to the interactions, relationships, and behaviour patterns that develop within a group of people. It involves understanding how individuals within a group influence and are influenced by one another. Group dynamics can significantly impact decision-making, communication, conflict resolution, and overall group cohesion. Sociometry is an excellent tool for illustrating group dynamics and finding group choices. And this can also apply to Playback Theatre. A conductor can use sociometry skills to warm up and understand the audience, observe the group, including the audience and performing team's dynamic, or even the transference and countertransference of self-awareness.

**Narrative reticulation**, a term invented by Jonathan Fox, refers to weaving individual narratives or stories into a larger, interconnected narrative. It involves finding common themes, shared experiences, and connections between personal stories. Narrative reticulation is often used in contexts where diverse perspectives need to be synthesized to create a broader understanding or a collective story.

Common themes or threads can emerge when individuals share their stories in playback theatre performances. These themes provide a basis for connecting individual experiences.

Narrative reticulation involves identifying points of overlap or similarities in different narratives. These overlaps highlight shared experiences or emotions. A deeper, more comprehensive understanding can be constructed by weaving individual narratives together. This process helps create a unified narrative that reflects the collective experiences of a group. Narrative reticulation fosters a sense of community and belonging by showcasing the interconnectedness of individual stories. It emphasizes that each story contributes to a larger tapestry.

The concept of narrative reticulation can also be applied to consolidate ongoing psychodrama group psychotherapy. The director can look for the red thread of presenting issues among group members as a dialogue from time to time and explore possible insights. For example, first, a group member presented an exploration of communication problems as the parent role within the family; another young adult member might be warmed up to explore how to express the self towards the boss (authority figure) in the coming (few) session. So, the narrative reticulation curve in a playback performance is transferrable to a series of sessions in a psychodrama group.

In summary, group dynamics shape the interactions and behaviours within a group, influencing its functioning and outcomes. On the other hand, narrative reticulation involves connecting individual stories to create a broader narrative that reflects shared experiences and themes. Both concepts are valuable tools for understanding and enhancing group interactions, communication, and cohesion in various contexts.

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## Applications

Psychodrama was initially developed as a clinical therapy approach in individual and group settings. Clinical Applications:

- **Trauma Healing:** Psychodrama provides a structured outlet for individuals to process and heal from trauma.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** Role-playing aids in enhancing communication and relationship-building abilities.
- **Self-Exploration:** Participants gain self-awareness and insights into their underlying emotions and conflicts.

From time to time, it has evolved to be applied in various community settings to promote personal growth, enhance communication, and foster creativity. Some ways in which psychodrama has been used in community practice include:

- **Personal Development Workshops:** Psychodrama techniques are utilized in workshops aimed at self-exploration, self-awareness, and personal development. These workshops may be offered in community centres, schools, or other community-based organizations.
- **Conflict Resolution and Mediation:** Psychodrama methods can be adapted for conflict resolution and mediation processes, allowing individuals to express their feelings and perspectives in a safe and structured environment.

- **Team Building and Leadership Development:** Psychodrama exercises can be utilized to enhance team dynamics, improve communication skills, and develop leadership qualities within community groups or organizations.
- **Social Skills Training:** Psychodrama techniques can help individuals, such as children with social difficulties, develop essential social skills and improve their ability to relate to others.

**Playback Theatre** was initially designed as an interactive theatre form to be positive for all involved. It aimed to create a safe space for individuals to share their stories and experiences. Beyond clinical & therapeutic settings, playback theatre was designed as a community-based form of expressive arts and continues to thrive in various community settings worldwide. Its emphasis on active listening, empathy, and community engagement makes it a powerful tool for community practice. Some applications of Playback Theatre in community settings include:

- **Community Performances:** Playback Theatre troupes often perform in community centres, festivals, and events, where audience members share their stories, and the performers enact them on the spot. This fosters community connection and validates the diverse experiences of community members.
- **Social Advocacy and Awareness:** Playback Theatre performances have been used to raise awareness about social issues, such as mental health, homelessness, and cultural diversity, thereby promoting understanding and empathy within communities.

- Dialogue Facilitation: Playback Theatre techniques can be used to facilitate dialogue and constructive conversations in community gatherings, helping community members share their perspectives and experiences openly.
- Healing and Trauma Recovery: Playback Theatre has been used in communities affected by disasters or traumatic events, providing a space for collective healing and support.



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## Conclusion

Psychodrama and Playback Theatre are distinct yet interconnected approaches that utilize dramatic expression for therapeutic and community purposes. The transition from clinical to community practice has expanded its reach and impact in both psychodrama and playback theatre. Psychodrama aids individuals in navigating their internal worlds, fostering self-awareness and emotional healing. In contrast, Playback Theatre extends its reach to communities, creating spaces for dialogue, empathy, and social change. Both are valuable tools for personal growth, community building, and social change beyond traditional therapeutic settings to me.

Both Playback Theatre and Psychodrama, whether in clinical or community contexts, harness the power of storytelling and dramatic enactment to facilitate growth, healing, and connection, showcasing the transformative potential of the arts in human experiences. They offer creative and experiential approaches that can complement traditional therapeutic methods in clinical settings. These interventions must be conducted by trained and qualified psychotherapists who understand the techniques and can provide a safe and supportive environment for participants' emotional exploration and growth.

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