

Story is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories. (Le Guin, 1979 p. 31)

## **Introduction**

A young woman sits transfixed as the dramatic action unfolds before her. A smile appears on her face followed by a wistful look. She watches intently, leaning forward on the edge of her seat, seemingly transfixed. First, laughter wells up inside her and she laughs out loud along with other members of the audience, then, moments later, tears roll down her cheeks. The playback finishes and she sighs, sits back on her chair and mouths the words “thank you” to the actors. The conductor<sup>1</sup> waits a few moments for the audience to settle, and asks: “Did that capture something of your experience?”

“Yes [long pause] the part where the actors showed the tension between whether I should stay or go was just so real. I didn’t realise just how much emotion was in it for me!”

This portrait describes part of a Playback Theatre (PBT) performance where audience members tell stories from their lives, and the actors and a musician then 'playback' that experience for the benefit of the teller and the audience; it is these immersive experiential participatory processes that enable PBT to be profoundly educational.

PBT, as a form of Applied Theatre, draws on the human need for story—both to express and frame experience—and also to be 'heard' and affirmed. These uniquely human characteristics are encapsulated through the Playback form where PBT functions both as

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<sup>1</sup> The conductor acts as the “MC” during a performance and facilitates the telling of personal story as well as a bridge between the actors, the teller, and the audience.

a mode of social-aesthetic inquiry and community building, and as a site where human experience is revealed and affirmed (P.R Wright, 2002a).

This paper first describes PBT and its genesis, the research processes of this study, and an emergent model of PBT foregrounding the processes or enablers within it that make the form rich with potential for change and transformation. In particular, I describe three essential practices of PBT, and five dimensions of learning flowing from them that reveal how PBT is educational. I further describe PBT as site for inquiry, expression and feeling that is endowed with aesthetic and relational qualities; these attributes giving the form its power and salience in contemporary society.

### **Playback Theatre**

PBT is a form of non-scripted theatre that belongs to the emerging genre of Applied Theatre<sup>2</sup> (Prentki & Preston, 2008; Taylor, 2003; Thompson, 2003), and has its genesis in a number of fields including traditional forms of Folk Theatre (Fox, 1994), Commedia dell'Arte and Psychodrama (Fox, 1987). PBT is also identifiable more broadly as a contemporary performance form (Huxley & Witts, 2002) in that there is an emphasis on *body* rather than voice, there is a concern for and *relationship* with the audience that is more than economic, and there is an opening up of possibility for the audience that goes beyond a predetermined outcome decided *a priori* by a producer or director. PBT is also analogous to other forms of Applied Theatre, such as Drama Education in that the experience has a learning dimension (P.R Wright, 2002a), Dramatherapy (Fox, 1982) in that it can be 'healing', and Theatre for Development and Theatre in Education in the way that community are brought together for educational purposes and where both process and product are important (Epskamp, 2006; T. Jackson, 1993). In PBT each of these

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<sup>2</sup> Applied Theatre is the term used to describe theatre and performance where the processes of theatre and drama are used for purposes more than entertainment.

elements interact to produce a learning-healing continuum that occurs within a particular social-aesthetic framework. It is this framework and the processes within it as a source of cultural production and social meaning-making that give PBT its generative power (P.R Wright, 2002a).

PBT is different to traditional forms of Western theatre in that the 'text' for each performance is the personal stories offered by audience members. These stories often encapsulate experience that is pre-reflective and one way that PBT functions as a form of learning is to connect experience with understanding. Schönmann (2000, pp. 160, 163, 166) for example, describes PBT as building a connection between the “analytical, intellectual [and] the emotional” where “bridges of insight” are built that enable participants to “establish meaning for our experience”. This means that PBT processes animate meaning-making or the development of understanding where there is potential for the emergence from experience of a more focused sense of reflective meanings. Importantly, as these meanings are based on the stories that individuals tell, they are experience-referenced or experience-driven, and the very situatedness of experience is highlighted where *human sense*, the beginning point for all human learning (Donaldson, 1978; Walsh, 2002), is developed. Importantly, this process reflects how learning can occur through PBT—as a site where art and life meet—as it functions as a form of social-aesthetic inquiry where personal experience can be affirmed, explored, and reflected upon (P.R Wright, 2002a, 2002b).

PBT is intimately connected to story—the telling of stories, the performing of stories and actively witnessing those stories. It resonates profoundly with contemporary interests in narrative, authentic story, and how we 'story' our lives (Bruner, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). In addition, PBT literally embodies Eco's (1989) notion of 'open work' where there is always an unfinished or incomplete quality thereby inviting further elaboration and

meaning-making. However, it is the particular social-aesthetic nature of PBT that distinguishes it from other narrative forms; social in that the stories that are told occur in the presence of others, and aesthetic in the way that the art form of theatre is used as a process of transformation in participative ways.

McAuley (1999, p. 248) highlights the importance of the social in that “[t]he social experience enhances, or even accentuates the individual’s response to the performance”. This means that when we laugh in the company of others, it is longer and heartier, and shared sadnesses seem more poignant as we become a community through the process of responding (McAuley, 1999). This realm can be more clearly understood when PBT is considered as a 'theatrical event' (J. Martin & Sauter, 1995; Sauter, 2000), where there exists a “dynamic process of communication in which the spectators are vitally implicated, one that forms part of a series of interconnected processes of socially situated signification and communication” (McAuley, 1999, p. 7).

Importantly, the form of inquiry that is possible through PBT powerfully promotes perspective, and transformation of perspective through a deepening understanding of the experience of self and others. In addition, as Diamond and Mullen (1999, p. 17) highlight, “the work of a lifetime is to discover who we are”, and the nature of PBT not only invites us to reflect on experience, but because it is a public event, others are also invited to respond to those inquiries. Furthermore, because of the community present at that time, this process of constructing an understanding of experience has both intra-subjective and inter-subjective dimensions. Put differently, the process of PBT involves both the artistic dimensions of the playback, and the community present, so that the dialogue that occurs is both reflective and reflexive. This dialogue, Lett (1998) has argued, is present in many types of forming and representation and “active reception and living response depend on an effective community of experience” (Williams, 1958, p. 304). Hence, the

personal, social and aesthetic combine in a new way to critique hitherto accepted patterns of understanding. In this sense, PBT can be seen as a socially-engaged arts practice that invites learning through inquiry (Kwon, 2005).

PBT then, can be seen to involve both personal knowing—moving from the not known to the known—and socially constructed meaning, which involves consensual validation. This can be seen to be analogous to William's (1981) description of a 'culture of feeling' in that PBT involves mirroring and constructing that is mediated by an inter-subjective and intra-subjective response. McConachie (2001, p. 35) illuminates this notion in his discussion of grassroots theatre where there is an underlying structure that generates images to which the audience respond via their feelings. Hence the 'structure of feeling' designates the emotional bonding generated by the values and practices shared by a specific group, class, or culture and refers both to general dynamics of culture and to the specific interaction that occurs in theatrical communication (Williams, 1984). This process creates a community culture of that group, at that moment, as participants go on a parallel journey with the teller and/or actors, and thereby release parallel stories that unites them through a shared awareness. This is the 'red thread' (Hoesch, 1999) that runs through so many PBT performances.

### **The process of the inquiry**

The data for this study were drawn from 47 open-ended interviews conducted with participants following nine public performances with Sydney Playback Theatre. These performances were held each month over two separate periods of six months in a performance space with an invitation to participate in the research extended to audience members after each show. The participants in the interview processes included those attending a PBT performance for the first time, and those who loved the form and

attended regularly. I also visited the Sydney Drama Action Centre that was used by the company for weekly rehearsals.

The process of the inquiry was broadly humanistic in nature drawing on approaches and resources contained within Ethnography (Denzin, 2003; Pink, 2009)—in the way that I was both a participant and observer to these performances and rehearsals, Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997)—in the sense that I was interested in the meaning that participants attributed to them, Phenomenography (Bowden & Walsh, 2000; Marton, 1988)—in the way that I was also wanting to better understand the diversity of the audience experience, and Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008)—in that the conceptualisations and theorising contained in the research were grounded in participant’s experiences rather than being determined *a priori*.

### **An emergent model of Playback Theatre**

I propose an emergent model of PBT in ‘action’, and this is analogous to a theory of change. A theory of change maps a pathway through a range of complex practices that can lead towards one or more outcomes (Dart & Davies, 2003; Weiss, 1995). The challenge with any graphic representation is that it takes what is complex and appears to render it simple, hence not revealing the nuanced practices that constitute this performative ecology in action. Box and Draper famously noted that: “essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful” (Box & Draper, 1987). This emergent model then, provides one useful conceptual lens through which to look at an aspect of the PBT experience. It is presented—following a social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—at more of a micro-meso, rather than a macro or grand theory level. It is also the case that as we move to increasing levels of abstraction within the model, we are also constrained by the two dimensions of linear text and forms of representation. Hence, it is easier to see what is left out rather than what is in. Yet while PBT is a highly sophisticated ecology of

practice, and it is always contextually bound, there were common elements across participant's experience that the research revealed. These elements are graphically illustrated in Figure 1.

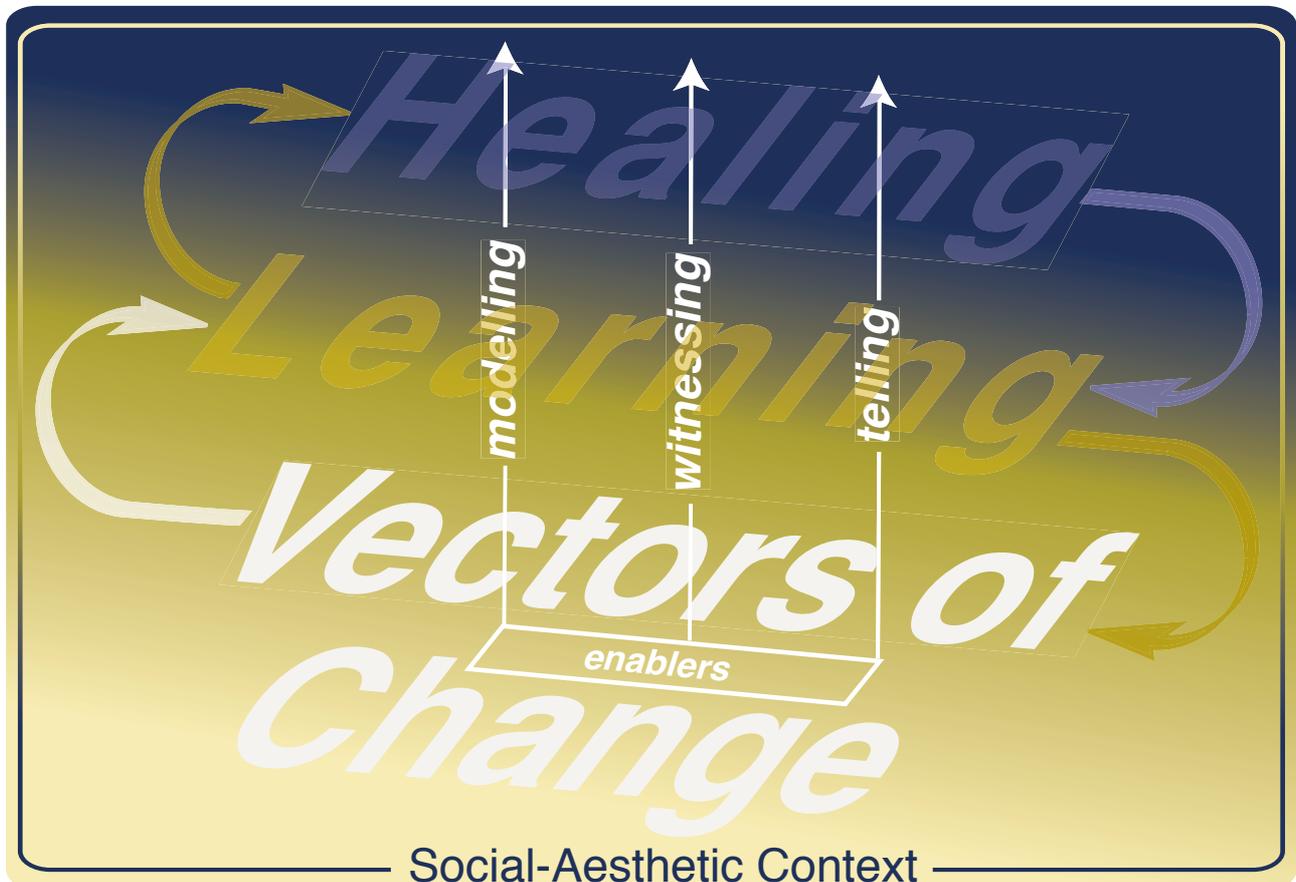


Figure 1: An emergent model of Playback Theatre

The research revealed three planes of 'understanding', the first of which I conceptualise as the *Vectors of Change*; that is, the practices of telling, witnessing and modelling. These practices activate or enable the audience's engagement with PBT processes. This activation increases the audience's ability to attend to the theatrical event, with all of its dimensions, thereby increasing the potential for learning to occur and can be thought of simply as *doing*. The second plane of understanding is *Learning*. Learning represents both potential outcomes of the PBT experience, and a process whereby change occurs. The third plane is *Healing*.

What the model reveals is the interconnected nature of these planes, their iterative nature, and while cognitive, affective and behavioural processes are evident at each plane, one tends to predominate at each. I focus first on the Vectors of Change—vectors, because this describes the two notions of magnitude and direction that characterise these practices, and change, because this is what these enablers lead to.

### **The Vectors of Change: Telling, Witnessing and Modelling**

It is through the practices of telling, witnessing and modelling—and the way that these are processual—that the potential for learning and healing is revealed. I focus primarily on the learning dimension here, though it is important to understand that each potentiality is in an iterative relationship as part of a learning-healing continuum animated by a particular social-aesthetic framework. I further elaborate the way that PBT is healing in a separate manuscript.

First, telling is important as it is through the telling of personal story that the imagination is exercised. This exercise, it can be argued, is becoming increasingly important for both learning and healing as television, radio and virtual environments take over from the traditional stories that have been told among humans face to face—stories, in effect that have served to instruct, heal, entertain and mystify the listener. Gersie and King (1990, p. 23) highlight this point when they described human imagination as a “primal source of vitality, which nourishes our creativity, requires stimulation and use in order for us to experience well-being”.

Second, telling allows an individual to develop sensitivity to his or her own experience and a further opportunity to examine it creatively (Fox, 1982, p. 303). Third, telling implies distance, and hence, opportunity for reflection. Fourth, telling as a form of 'thinking out aloud' may be both educational and cathartic in and of itself. Fifth, as the actors and musician (re)tell the story offered using multi-modal ways of (re)presenting it, they offer a

reframing that would not be possible if the story was not infused with aesthetic properties.

Witnessing, the second enabler of PBT, is important in that it implies a relationship between the teller and the audience (Gohl, 2002; Grainger, 1990), and hence is community building (Bruch, 1990). Furthermore, witnessing both allows a teller to be 'heard' and 'seen' thereby affirming his or her own experience. This not only facilitates learning about self, but also self through others. Grainger (1996, p. 30) describes this as developing an objective subjectivity, that is, “to be a witnessing audience through others to the self”. In addition, witnessing is *doing*, and hence dynamic in nature, thereby activating the inner experiences of the audience. This results in the audience developing empathy for the teller, his or her own story, and releasing parallel stories to what has been played back, thereby building community through learning and shared experience.

Modelling, the third enabler of PBT, is one of the most powerful ways that learning can occur in PBT. It occurs in at least five different ways. First, the actors model such behaviours as risk-taking, spontaneity and creativity through the spontaneous nature of the form. That is, the improvised nature of PBT highlights the processes of improvisation that the actors use when participating in this theatrical event. Importantly, this type of modelling also awakens the artist in those who watch (Diamond, Arnold, & Wearing, 1999), thereby increasing the impetus in many to also be spontaneous and creative—a consequence that shows how modelling facilitates change.

Second, modelling occurs through the presentation of a range of other ways of 'being' embodied by the actors who *show* different behaviours as distinct from telling about them. This means that just as hearing a story can have an educative function, seeing that story activated and embodied can make the learning more profound. This enhanced potential occurs because PBT, as one of the arts, is multi-modal, polymorphous and

draws on a variety of ways of knowing. Third, the playback ensemble models acceptance of a teller and his or her story; an unspoken tenet of any performance is that “any moment can be significant and worthy of sharing” (Fox, 1982, p. 298), and that both the teller and his or her experience are “honoured”.

Importantly, this process reflects a need for trust to be present in order to be able to tell, and in Norris’s (1999, p. 220) words: “Without trust, one is not able to place oneself openly before another, making communion impossible”. This notion is similar to Rogers’ (1961) well-known tenet of unconditional positive regard, where trust, respect and honour provide conditions that facilitate both learning and healing.

Fourth, the teller and the actors model problem solving and inquiry, where the teller seeks understanding of his or her experience. In this process the actors work co-operatively with the teller, his or her story, and with each other to reveal hitherto undisclosed dimensions of that story; this form of collaborative inquiry through the arts being an example of arts-based inquiry (Tom Barone & Eisner, 2011). Fifth, is the modelling of telling itself where participants see other audience members volunteering their stories, thus providing an exemplar to the others; this process being an example of the aphorism ‘story begets story’.

In short, telling, witnessing and modelling are three of the most important enabling processes or practices of PBT. These three enablers are in a symbiotic relationship as they animate story towards the outcomes of learning. In addition, because these occur in a social context, tellers and audience members report the experience of collaboration—of accomplishing something bigger, *together*—an experience that seems to have lost saliency and meaning in the market economy and neo-liberal times, and where the public sphere is contested (from hyper-commerce to security paranoia).

## **Learning in Playback Theatre**

Learning is one of the most important outcomes that participants reported as a result of the lived experience of PBT. This learning has a number of facets, including learning about self, learning about others, and self in relation to others; this intersubjective form of learning having a particular power through an aesthetic frame (P R Wright, 2011). In addition, there is also the potential for instrumental, aesthetic and spiritual learning, where spiritual learning is associated with notions of wholeness (Driver, 1991) and holistic education (C. Martin, 1997).

The potential for learning that is embedded in PBT processes is possible because PBT is both theatre and an interactive social process. This means that it is generative in the way that it is both a site of inquiry, and a way to express the results of that inquiry. Sharon, a regular audience member particularly alluded to the way that the structure of PBT is implicitly educationally in the way it moves from “the known to the unknown”, incorporating different “levels of thinking and questioning”, and was powerfully “reflective”. It was this later notion that characterised the whole experience for her; the performance and its associated sub-forms, and the conversations that emanated from it.

Learning is also embedded in the way that PBT promotes personal learning that comes from self-understanding and awareness. For example Shane, a first time attendee described how the process of PBT facilitated his own creativity in an active way, and this gave him a greater awareness of 'who' he was, and his 'place' in the world.

... to have your story related back in a creative way [and] the fact that you've participated in a creative process. So in other words, you are a creator and the ordinary becomes divine (pause). It leads to all sorts of possibilities as well, if that is possible, which it is because you're actually participating in it, so you're having an actual experience that is both subjective and objective, and it realigns your appreciation of who you are, and how you are, and what you've done in the world.

Evan described his experience of personal learning this way:

I learnt about myself in the story that was acted out. There were a couple of moments there where I looked at these [actors] and thought "Yeah! That's me,

or an aspect of me" and ... I felt I learnt something ... because [the actor] showed that *when* I actually decided to stay [in that difficult situation] I then became stronger for it.

Second, social learning flows from the ways that participants describe better understanding of relational ways of being in the world. Uma, for example, described how PBT incorporates both personal and social learning.

I mean, it's educational just in that you're sitting down and hearing other people's experiences. It's education for the self, seeing how other people, how you appear in other people's eyes, which is what really happens with the performers. They use all their senses really. And feedback, it's educational for the self; it's educational for the audience in terms of expanding their understanding of other people.

Letitia, who was attending for the first time, also articulated relational ways of knowing in the way that she could see elements of herself in others:

The other thing that I really liked was the deeper meaning behind some of the things, like people were telling their stories, and I could see myself in some of those situations, and just recognise some things that I may not have thought of before. So it was a thing that was personal as well.

Next, Sarah foregrounded how the possibility to learn from each other and our common humanity:

This sort of performance, these performances are about everybody's lives every day to day life experiences. And in that we were a community that came together from all different backgrounds, all different age groups, but we're still experiencing the same day to day life experiences and as a result of that, no matter what educational background people come from, and socio-economic background, they still have the opportunity to learn from each other from these experiences which is pretty amazing when you think about it.

Key to each of these exemplars is the notion of reflection, or the enhanced ability to 'see', reflection being well understood in processes of learning, change, and transformation (Fraser, 1995; Meizrow & Associates, 2000).

Third, there are forms of instrumental learning that come from modelling effective interactive/life-skills and ways of being in the world. For example, the actors model an ability to listen deeply, work effectively as an ensemble, be 'present' and in the moment as they playback the story told. In addition, the actors also embody an openness to others, spontaneity, and creative abilities to respond imaginatively to whatever is presented. Evan, a regular attendee encapsulated these notions in the following way:

I really enjoy that thing of [the actors] doing something right at that moment and really being able to go with it. So I certainly have learnt about that. I learnt also about the way in which those people work together. They work as a unit of very different personalities but they work in with each other. Then the [dramatic] offers that they give each other that they take up, you know work in obviously a particular physical sort of a way. The fact that virtually no time last night was anybody talking over the top of anybody else because they were trying to do something at the same time. I mean simply as performers they were teaching me something.

In addition, there is also the possibility of watching what others do as a way of learning from their explicit actions. Kate, for example, talked about her own experience in a PBT performance where watching others talking about their pain, freed her to speak about her own:

Well someone talked about being in pain, that their pain was about separation from people, and I have been in a lot of physical pain lately, so it reminded me of (well I didn't have to be reminded), so I thought I would speak about that.

What this reveals is that this act of telling, where someone tells an authentic story of their life, provides a model or licence for others to follow with story begetting story in a generative way.

Fourth, it is the aesthetic dimension where thoughts, feelings and actions can be expressed in evocative ways that makes learning through this form salient and powerful. For example, when a story is 'played back' or enacted, it is given aesthetic properties that both engage affective ways of knowing but also provides distance from it. What this means is that some tellers are given perspective eliciting new or different readings of their experience for them. In Jackson's words (1995, p. 162): "We distance ourselves in order to see in ways we may perhaps never have seen before". Blake, an audience member described how this added 'layers to his hearing':

The acting I was blown away by ... very perceptive. Yes, just fantastic, just fantastic. The acting was quite exciting to watch because they picked up all the moods you felt and translated them or repeated them. They opened it up for me too, the story in a new way. They opened up the story in ways I wasn't quite conscious of as I listened and that was really interesting. So they enriched it for me as well. So that they added layers to my hearing.

Liselle, attending a different performance revealed how these processes can provide perspective, and the way that looking at an actor embodying your experience can be easier than looking inside yourself.

Well because in the Playback Theatre the performances [were] reflecting [the participants] own experiences and their feelings and they might be able to see it clearer, so it was better to look at the other person [the actor] rather than looking inside. Inside them might be a lot of confusion, but when you see it acted outside out of you, you look at it differently.

And this notion of seeing 'differently', can lead to a change in understanding. For example, Suzanna described her observations on the way that the actors embodied metaphor.

They used a lot of metaphor, and I think that that worked very well ... for the teller, to be at a point where she actually had moved further along in her analysing the whole situation. In the beginning, she wasn't sure of her stance, whether it was all worth it or, or whatever. By the end of that story she was saying, 'It was worth it'. So, there was real movement [in her understanding].

What Suzanna draws attention to is the way that metaphor is part of the artistic process, with experience of this aesthetic dimension facilitating a change of understanding. Suzanna recounted this experience in the following way.

[The playback] brings me so many different levels of understanding because they reflect on my experience. I reflect on their experience about my story and then I say, 'oh this is how you can see this', so I'm gaining so many different levels of assumptions [and] consciousness about it.

This change in understanding occurs through the multi-modal way that story is performatively enunciated—that is the poetic integration of movement, sound, music, word—and the way this 'speaks' to a range of senses. For example, Ned told a story of a difficult family dynamic, and the playback that followed.

What I saw through the playback was what it did to Mum and what it did to the others, and so I think that that's actually the major thing that [the actors] fed back to me. Not so much the particular incidences or the way they actually did it, or if you like the dialogue even. But it was just framing that rigidity in another, other than just a talking way, but in a dramatic way.

More specifically, the aesthetic form draws on, and uses, metaphor and symbolism; in short, it gives form to feeling. Ned further highlights the way that the actors:

... are doing it in action which is a way of externalising. Playback is fascinating because it is not only the externalising of your own, like painting or writing is an externalising, giving form and making tangible your own experience.

Playback then can become an evocation that engages participants at an affective level.

Brad highlights how this communicates across a range of dispositions.

And so the actual physical context is generating the emotion. And because it's non-verbally represented and it's sending you information on so many different levels, that emotion actually hits you before the rational reason does.

What each of these dimensions reveals is the way that PBT brings together both the affective and cognitive dimensions of learning. For example, at one level there is a range of reflective experiences that are both embodied within the form, and the processes and ritualistic structure used to 'contain' the feelings they engender. Consequently, participants experience that community has its memory, and that sharing story is bonding.

That's the value of story, [it] is a bonding exercise for that culture... I remember all the Playback plays. I seem to because of that community feeling. Because I shared it with other people. There might be a community memory, if you like.

PBT then provides opportunities to learn about what it means to be human and connected to some 'universals' of human experience. As Dakota recounts, this brings us to into relationship with others.

That's rare and I think that it's important for us to all feel that we are being heard, that we are being understood. And I think also that thing of being part of the universal or at least a wider experience in us and what your feeling is, is not just you, you know, you are not the only one, that there is other people as well. So if you can see somebody else's experience as being similar to yours, oh yes, I know what that feels like you know, then I think is an equal part of feeling connection with other people. And I think that's a very important thing that we feel connected to other people who in one way or another we live with. I mean we live with millions of other people in Sydney and when you come a little bit closer to them like in that situation in the Theatre, then I feel it's good to be able to feel some closeness with them.

In other words, Art has the capacity both to speak to us and to take us beyond ourselves.

Finally, PBT can be seen as site both for inquiry and meaning-making. Suzanna, in a 'themed' performance that inquired into the theme of reconciliation between black and white Australia, gives voice to this potential in an evocative way.

But I guess what it does is, it from an intellectual point of view it taps me into, it helps me connect with those experiences that I've had, both with Aboriginal communities and with my own family links. But it also takes me deeper as well. I also feel a deepening of maybe a political commitment to both sides having to take the matter in hand, not just one side, and—mm. And, that change is, has occurred [for me], you know, just not just on a head level I suppose but on a heart and, for want of a better word, a spiritual level.

At the same performance a different audience member talked about how some of his prejudices around the theme of reconciliation were challenged.

I wasn't sure what I was in for that night, and it felt a bit risky, as though my own prejudices... and my own ideas were being challenged. And they were, definitely. I think what was challenging about it for me was I had to look at what my idea of reconciliation was, and it was not a passive experience. It wasn't like watching TV, which is what I've been brought up with, and my idea of going to the theatre or my experience of going to theatre and going to movies and things is often quite a passive experience. I know that intellectually, but last Sunday night I found that to be really active. So it was a really confronting night that way, and I realise that I was shocked at how confronting it was for me.

What this further reveals is PBT as a site for inquiry and knowledge generated that is context and content-specific. For example, further to the theme of reconciliation, Suzanna described how she was able to emotionally engage around the issue of the Stolen Generation<sup>3</sup>, an experience previously beyond her:

I feel that, by that process, I'd been able to tap into [the issue] at an emotional level, which I think does give me greater understanding of the loss, that that Stolen Generation have, you know, as opposed to just thinking about it. I actually feel that I can empathise more because I would have a sense of what it would feel like not to have that, that cultural background, whatever my cultural background might be.

This emotional experience, available through PBT processes being at least as illuminating as any intellectual experience she might have had and is consistent with the Boalian notion of metaxis, "the image of reality and the reality of the image" (Boal, 1995 p. 43). In a personal sense, and in relation to the same theme, this was new territory for Suzanna.

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<sup>3</sup> The Stolen Generation is a term used to describe the forcible removal of indigenous children from their families by Government agencies and church groups (Read, 1981).

I don't know that I had feelings about me being white. I don't suppose I've thought about it [slight laugh] in that sense, but through the evening, I actually started, through the stories, and seeing what it was like, started to think about what it was like to be—yeah. To be white, in this situation. So I guess things came up for me that transcended the thinking about it, to the feeling of it.

As PBT is aesthetic and hence sensual, it becomes a place to feel. This means that emotions are both elicited and engaged, and as Boler (1999) notes, emotions are a powerful adjunct to learning, yet so often dismissed in education. Suzanna went further to describe how both feeling and understanding helped her cross a cultural boundary:

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This notion of using the arts as a mode of inquiry, and PBT in this particular case, is consistent with contemporary thinking and practices in arts-based (T Barone & Eisner, 1997; Eisner & Day, 2004) and arts-informed (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008) research.

PBT is not only educational through the aesthetic forms employed in its practices, but also through the social ritual aesthetic practices that surround it. For example, a consistent theme across each of the performances was "learning that we can all be creative, and have a story to tell" (John). This can happen both reflexively through the performance when audience members go on a parallel journey to the teller, and through the reflective practices that are part of the broader experience. For example, as one audience member observed:

At the end of the evening [the conductor] says talk to someone beside you if you had a story, what would it have been? Or what touched you tonight?

So that sort of sense that everyone is a creative being comes out time and time again both inside the drama and within [the] Playback [experience itself].

Interestingly, for some participants the resonance of the performance and opportunities for reflection can continue on well after the event. Ugo noted:

It [the playback] becomes quite a bit thing in your mind and in your experience. And so it stays with you after the show as well. And for the next few days, I'm still thinking about it. So for all those reasons it definitely brings clarity. It certainly brings, promotes reflection. Yeah if you like, integration of the experience. Or understanding of it.

PBT, then, can be understood to be a *quest* and *in-quest* for understanding through engagement and reflection. In short, the learning that is embodied within PBT attributes, processes and outcomes are profoundly concerned with what it means to be human. One participant described it this way.

It's just a sense of commonality of experience. I think that there are things that are common to all of us, and I guess that brings a closeness or an understanding of each other.

In summary, PBT combines the personal, social and aesthetic through story that is both performed and witnessed. When this happens, there is the potential for education, new skills, understanding, and knowledge creation that can be formative in terms of identity, and transformative in terms of personal history, and potentially healing with movement towards wholeness and integration.

### **Conclusion**

Playback Theatre, simply put, can be seen in Wenger's (1998) terms as **doing**, **becoming** and **belonging**, where the **doing** is *telling, witnessing* and *modelling*, the **becoming** reflects the learning-healing continuum and growth of identity, and the **belonging** is the development of community as a result of the PBT experience. As a generative participatory process PBT reflects both cultural and social change where the affective, somatic and cultural possibilities of learning in and through the Arts are embodied. It is a way of inquiring into human experience, representing that experience, and reflecting on it with multiple interpretations, in short moving from absorption or a pre-reflective awareness towards reflective awareness and hence a greater sense of agency in one's life (P R Wright, 2011). In this way, PBT as a site for cultural learning is a powerful form of sense-making or meaning-making potentially taking participants from and through experience, aesthetically imbued, to increasing levels of transformational praxis.

In conclusion, PBT provides a conceptual, metaphorical, and practical space where stories can be told, animated, and heard thereby contributing to the common good in challenging times where these spaces—and our *common* sense—are rapidly diminishing.

In this sense, and in the words of one participant "Playback is indeed a theatre for our times".

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