The Aesthetic Experience

or

What Happened to the Audience at the Sheba Medical Centre?

Einát Mashaal-Nitzan

During your years of performing playback, has an audience ever gotten up to leave in the middle of your show? In this essay, Israeli playback practitioner Einat Mashaal-Nitzan explores one such episode. Drawing on her own experience of performing for the patients at the Sheba Medical Centre, she seeks to understand the event in relation to the concept of Aesthetic Distance.

The Aesthetic Distance

The chances of an artwork making a mark on our souls and impressing us depend on our willingness to be influenced by it. Bullough (1913) proposes that a direct correlation exists between the potential of any artwork to impress us and the degree to which it is in harmony with our intellectual and emotional disposition and our personal experience. The term aesthetic distance could be thought of as a personal attitude, sometimes carrying strong emotional tones, yet with a very unique character. Its uniqueness stems from the fact that the attitude has undergone filtering, meaning that each of us is influenced by our particular perspective and expectations. This reality highlights one of the fundamental paradoxes of art — what Bullough calls “the antinomy of the distance”; that is the ability and readiness to get close to a work of art and experience it in full, while keeping the right emotional distance. In theatre, one might say that the viewer must be able to keep the distance between what is happening in the play and his/her personal feelings for aesthetic distance to occur. Bullough (1913) offers a spectrum stretched from people who “over-distance” to people who “under-distance.” The expert/professional reviewer is an example of an over-distanced audience because their professionalism and expertise obscure their engagement, rather they look at the technicalities and craftwork of a production and miss out on any emotional involvement with what it is about, which constantly inhibits their distance. On the contrary, viewers who get overly involved in the content could be said to be “under-distanced.” Bullough argued for an ideal mid-point between the two suggesting that there should be the least possible distance without its disappearance.

The ability to for aesthetic distance is also required of the artist in the process of creation: the strongest artistic impression will result from the shaping of an intense personal experience, yet the artist will manage to shape this experience artistically only if he/she can detach themselves and find some distance from the experience. Once again Bullough emphasis the optimum distance to maximise the potency of the art: “the desirable thing both in responding to, and in creating a work of art, is maximum reduction of the distance without cancelling it altogether.”

Israeli essayist and novelist Abraham B. Yehoshua (2007) has also written about aesthetic distance, offering a vivid metaphor: the essential aspiration of art is to plant the mental and spiritual experience of the (story’s) protagonists in the soul of the reader or the viewer.
From the Editor

Current thinking about the place of arts in society places arts and health somewhere near the top of the list. Since its earliest days, playback has found relevance in health contexts and has contributed to health-based agendas, with the Original Company performing in hospitals, clinics, and rehabilitation centres. Since then specialist companies like Reflections Playback Theatre directed by Paula Patterson at Shands Hospital (University of Florida) have been set up; and research has been done in this area. Like Fe Day’s recent PhD that examines the use of playback theatre within the health system in New Zealand. In this issue, the application of playback theatre within health and rehabilitation settings is featured through two important discussions. Firstly, from Israeli playbacker Einat Mashal-Nitzan who reflects on the work of her company with patients at Sheba Medical Centre some years ago, raising questions about how the aesthetic framing of traumatic stories must be understood in order for the artistic practice to work. She considers both the participant and the performer in the discussion.

The need for distance was also on the mind of the writer of the second article that looks at the value of playback in a health context. Germany’s Wolfgang Wendlandt shares the experience of his and others’ healing through their participation in a special playback theatre group known as The Tumorists. In a deeply personal account, he speaks about his recovery from cancer, about his passion to share playback with others’ living with cancer and the associated treatments, and his belief in the power of telling stories and of performing.

This issue also continues the celebration and documentation of the 10th International IPTN conference—Social Dialogue in a World of Upheaval—that took place in Frankfurt am Main in November 2011. Leading with a Thank You from the Conference Organising Committee, we also present reflections by co-moderator Sarah Urech, travel notes from Cuban playbacker Susana Gil, a special report on the Queer Playback session from Jane Hoy and Arnet Donkin and the first part of the work by Jan Platander that was the basis of his conference workshop with Pontius Holmgren on the final day in Frankfurt. Also in this issue is a review of the latest writing from Jo Salas and a report from Veronica Needa and Claudia Vau about the spectacular World Playback Week in London.

This issue continues to feature pieces that grapple with notions of aesthetics, inclusion, and evaluation. In the June 2011 issue of Interplay, Hungary’s András Zánkay evaluated the work of his company, alluding to the difficulty of some audience members to remain in the room during the performance for survivors of the 2010 Red Sludge Disaster. Similar situations and others from your own practice could perhaps be better understood through the lens of aesthetic distance. In the Dec 2011 issue of Interplay, Fe Day wrote about the challenge for the international playback community to reflect on and give feedback to one another about the performances we offer within the International Conferences. Perhaps the articles in this issue will stimulate responses. As Einat Mashal-Nitzan concludes, at times our playback practice falls short and perhaps is “limited”, “hurtful”, or “superficial”. Her article attempts to make sense of one experience of this. This dialogue will continue next issue. Submit your responses, comments, reflections for inclusion.

Letters and Stories to: rea.dennis@mc.com

Interplay is the membership publication of the International Playback Theatre Network, targeting the contemporary themes at the centre of the community that practices this complex simple method called playback theatre—a method dependent absolutely on a systematic structure yet which yields complex human interaction and resonates with humanity across all cultures. Conceived in 1990 during the fledgling year of IPTN, and launched in November of that year under editor Jonathan Fox with regional editors in Australia, New Zealand, Europe and North America. Interplay has been instrumental in keeping the ever expanding, diverse playback theatre community connected and has provided essential space for critical and evaluative thinking that has influenced the development of the form and the spread of the method to over 40 countries worldwide. Part journal, part newsletter, Interplay is published twice per year and features articles, practice reports, upcoming events, and membership news. Interplay invites submissions, for submission details contact the Editor.

Rea Dennis rea.dennis@me.com

Translators this Issue

Chinese—Michele Chung
Japanese—Hiroko Yanagawa
Portuguese—Sheila Donio
From German—Lisa Curtis-Wendlandt (Melbourne)
From Hebrew—Sally Walker and Rea Dennis

To volunteer to translate rea.dennis@me.com
The Tumorists are here!

The value of storytelling and improvisation for people affected by cancer

In this article, Wolfgang Wendlandt, writes about the unique Berlin-based playback theatre group called the Tumorists. Embedded in his reflections about improvisation in general, he documents the concept and the development of the Tumorist ensemble and discusses the methods the group use in training to improvise for playback on stage.

Should I, or should I not?

Deep down, I knew: playback theatre will help others affected by cancer, too. I repeatedly experienced this magical power throughout the course of my own illness, when – during the dark days of chemotherapy and stem cell transplantation – I reveled in the memory of those performances that I longed for, and that I physically joined again as soon as I could, equipped with pain killers in my pockets. What a joy to be able to play again!

When I felt strong enough again, I knew exactly what kind of volunteer work I wanted to embark on: I wanted to found my own Impro theatre group, in which I could experiment with a combination of impro and playback methods. Initially, there was a lingering doubt: should I really approach my imagined target group of people affected by cancer? Did I have the necessary distance to handle constant confrontations with the personal crises and dramas of others? Against much well-meaning advice, I took the courage and decided to realise my vision, utilising my wealth of experience as a group therapist, impro actor and musician (from 2003-2009, member in an impro-theatre-ensemble; since 2006, member of Playbackteater-Berlin). I wanted to share my enthusiasm for improvisation as a trainer and conductor, by supporting people interested in acting, who are explicitly confronted with the finite nature of their own lives, and who are searching for joyfulness and a sense of purpose. And: I felt capable and resilient enough to confront cancer in a playful way.

Die Tumoristen (The Tumorists) are here!

The Tumorists now they exist. The actors of this newly-founded theatre ensemble combine Keith Johnstone’s British impro format with the American playback theatre of Jonathan Fox – two different forms of improvisational theatre, for which I am currently still trying to find the “right mixture”.

Founded in September 2010, this impro ensemble originated in an improvisation workshop (ten sessions, three hours each) which I conducted for people affected by cancer, and which formed part of the events calendar of the Onkologisches Patientenseminar (a non-profit association dedicated to supporting people affected by cancer through the organisation, facilitation and funding of events, seminars, and self-help groups) at the Charity, one of Europe’s largest university hospitals based in Berlin. Since then, the group has been rehearsing at the Bühnenrausch, a theatre dedicated exclusively to improvisation, which is located in Berlin’s trendy suburb of Prenzlauer Berg. The players’ shared joy of improvising, and their personal experiences in coping with the illness, have helped create a unique and close-knit group of currently fifteen permanent members. The youngest is 32 years, the oldest 74, and the median age is 55.

The ensemble plays audience-initiated scenes that are full of vitality and exuberance, longing and despair, as well as humour and depth. The stage becomes the epiphany of life, which is just as colourful and unpredictable as the act of improvisation itself. Unprepared and unhearsed, the narrative develops spontaneously, inspired only by the creativity of the present moment, and carried forward by the audience’s input and stories.

The spectators are on the edge of their seats, especially when the action stalls, when failure becomes apparent, only to be diverted at the last minute by an unforeseen dramatic turn, which keeps the actors themselves on tenterhooks. This dynamic is typical of improvising: that fun and gravity, failure and success, lie so closely together. And there is laughter! An infectious laughter that constantly fills the room.

Goals and activities

The Tumorists’ improvisation theatre aims to broaden the range of existing coping strategies for dealing with illness; to activate the self-healing capacities of cancer sufferers; and to counteract the persistent societal taboo that excludes cancer as a topic from public discourse. For this purpose, the group offers a range of different events:

Public Rehearsals: Interested cancer sufferers and their friends and families, as well as experts from the medical and self-help sectors, are invited to witness this independent theatre work, and to get in contact with The Tumorists.

Public Performances: For an interested public, there are regular performances held at various venues. At times, performances may focus on a particular theme.

Improvisation Workshops: The Tumorists organise occasional training workshops for people affected by cancer, who are keen to try out impro theatre for themselves. The workshops offer an in-depth introduction to playing techniques and creative forms of expression.

Special Event Gigs: The Tumorists can also be booked to perform at particular events or conferences in the health, self-help, and oncology sectors.

When attending the performances or the Spieplatz Theater (see below), the audience not only witnesses the action on stage, but also receives information on the different methods of impro and playback theatre, as well as on their therapeutic effect on people affected by cancer.
Impro theatre lifts the spirits

The figures are clear: in Germany alone, the approximate number of new cancer sufferers stands at 430,000 per year. In Germany, too, a total of 216,000 people died of malignant new tumours in 2008. 26% of all deaths are caused by some type of cancer. Over the next few years, the number of cancer patients is expected to increase even further, due partly to improved early detection and diagnosis, and partly to the rapid advancement of medical research, which improves the survival prospects of cancer patients. The diagnosis of cancer is commonly experienced as a traumatic shock to the identity of the affected person, and usually triggers serious existential questions. A withdrawal from public life often seems inevitable, particularly since cancer is still a social taboo. In this situation, impro theatre can revive the spirits: for it demands courage of the actors to show themselves on stage, and it develops their capacity to observe and utilise their own resources with confidence and certainty again. What is strengthened, too, is the players trust in their physical and psychological powers; the loss of vitality is counteracted, and participation in public life improves rapidly. On stage, the actors rediscover their own zest for life, which they can then project onto the other, multiple “stages” of their lives.

Yet it is not only the actors’ spirits that are lifted. Confronted with the joyfulness and positivity of the ensemble, the spectators – themselves affected by cancer – can also sense their own vitality and strength, their hunger for life; and their desire to look after themselves well.

This is supported by the fact that the audience’s own experiences and stories are incorporated in the actions on stage: through the narrative that is reflected back at the spectators, the latter gain new perspectives on, and behavioural impulses for, their current lives, as well as for their own response to illness and crisis. Last but not least, the actors’ group effort helps cancer patients in the audience recognise the value of a supportive group environment for their own healing process, and for their sense of living a meaningful life.

It should be noted, however, that the audience consists not only of cancer patients, but includes family members, friends, as well as people working in the medical and helping professions. And there are others joining in the events, too: people unaffected by cancer, who are interested in impro theatre, and who drop by spontaneously or, in response to advertisements for the events.

PlaygroundTheatre: open stage

Nine months of impro theatre work have lead to an increasing demand from people to be involved: more and more cancer sufferers want to try out impro theatre and gain their own experiences on stage. Since The Tumorists currently cannot take on any further members, an “open stage” was founded specifically for cancer sufferers and their friends and family: the so-called SpielplatzTheater (“PlaygroundTheatre”). Anyone can come and play (or just watch). Apart from people’s playful self-expression on stage, the event serves to foster dialogue among the audience: in the breaks and after the performances, attendees are encouraged to share their experiences with each other.

The open stage requires no prior knowledge of improvisation or acting, and no specific language or pantomime skills; it only draws on the actors’ authentic self-expression, and on their immediate spontaneity. This ensures that everyone can participate and try out impro theatre for themselves. The conductor uses ideas from the audience; he frames the narrative for the volunteer players on stage; he spells out suggested roles, or clarifies a course of action, and he “wraps” the topic into an impro game, or asks members of The Tumorists to briefly play some scenes that can be re-enacted by the others. If appropriate, he may also explain a simple playback theatre form and assist in its implementation. Through this guidance and support, even the most timid of participants are moved to discover the joys of acting and self-expression. Unprepared and unplanned, they begin to play, and sometimes they are completely surprised about the wealth of resources which they suddenly – almost magically – have at their disposal. This process allows the performing cancer sufferers from the audience to experience an unexpected physical presence, exuberance, and delight in playing, despite any physical restraints that may result from their illness.

On the mixture of impro and playback theatre forms

In the beginning of my work with The Tumorists, I focused mainly on the use of impro theatre forms, in order to train the players in the foundations of improvisation, and to teach them the necessary communicative and behavioural skills, as well as the underlying mindset. Over time, I increasingly added playback theatre forms to the group’s repertoire. During our first few performances, both formats were almost in perfect balance. More recently, playback forms have become more dominant. It is likely that The Tumorists will develop into a pure playback theatre group.

In rehearsals with The Tumorists, impro theatre exercises and games have helped to strengthen the participants’ joy of acting, and have improved their perception of their own bodies, their vocal expression, their stage presence, as well as their ability to use the entire space on stage. At the same time, the impro form has fostered a more attentive, concentrated, risk-friendly and responsible performance style among the actors. Their growing awareness of their fellow players has also furthered trust and openness “off stage”. Vivacity and light-heartedness have notably increased. Failure soon began to be accepted as integral to the action on stage (and in life). Increasingly, laughter and vitality determined the atmosphere in the group.

During this phase of the group work, the topic of cancer was mentioned only sporadically by the players during rehearsals, and it was thus enacted only occasionally on stage. At times, the narrative would touch on content such as “waiting rooms”, “experiences with doctors”, “well-meaning comments from friends”, or “cancer-related stress with the family”. While we all knew which group members were facing an operation or undergoing chemo therapy – this was mentioned in passing during rehearsals, or spoken about in supportive phone calls between meetings – it was only after I had familiarised the group with the basics of playback theatre, that I used my conductor role to elicit topics explicitly linked to cancer, and to have them performed on stage. The strong mutual appreciation and cohesion of the group, together with the players' increasingly light-hearted approach to acting, made it possible to share even dramatic content and experiences, and to act them out on stage. In my opinion, this process generated a range of therapeutic effects that assist individuals in dealing with their illness.
In our rehearsals (three times a month, three hours each) I continued to use improv forms alongside the playback forms, in order to deepen the players’ core improvisation competencies, as well as to keep alive their unbounded, childlike exuberance, which has the power to transfer to the audience. Conversations after public performances reveal that some cancer sufferers, who attend The Tumorists for the first time, were concerned that their theatre visit could turn into a tearful “drama”, dragging from one gloomy cancer story to the next. Going to The Tumorists could mean inevitable confrontation with the topic of cancer, especially since the group’s ensemble-name demonstrates the actors’ candid debate about the illness.

In this context, it is very helpful for my role as conductor, when I am not confined to working with the audience’s stories alone, but when I can add some impro theatre forms spontaneously myself. For example, I may focus on an overlooked aspect of a narrative, or on a personal association that has formed inside of me in response to the story, and suggest a particular place or feeling as a starting-point for a free impro scene or impro exercise. This enables me to purposefully create lightness and laughter in the spectators: sometimes, it is the tears of laughter that inspire openness and a willingness to share personal experiences in the audience, washing away the fear of self-disclosure.

Exchanging Experiences

The Tumorists would love to exchange ideas and experiences with other playback or impro theatre groups for people affected by cancer. What methods, formats, and concepts are favoured? What effects on people’s capacity to cope with the illness are observed? We would love to talk about the joy of life, and about the search for a theatre work with meaning and purpose. For questions and comments, please write to the author directly at kontakt@wolfgangwendlandt.de.

Dedicated to the members of the Playback Theatre Berlin

Translated from German in English by Lisa Curtis-Wendlandt (Melbourne).

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Professor Dr Wolfgang Wendlandt initiated the new Berlin-based Playback group, the TUMORISTS (www.tumoristen.de, the first German group of actors with cancer and their friends and families. info@wendlandt-stottertherapie.de

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