

Envisioning Resilience through The Ume Group's Inaugural Online Playback Theatre Event

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First, some context: The Ume Group is a physical theatre company based in New York City. The group was founded by myself and friends from college in 2011. Since then it's grown and morphed, experienced new leadership, and most recently been on a bit of a hiatus. I left the company in 2016 to attend the MFA program at Dell'Arte International which is where I first learned about Playback Theatre from our Community-Based Arts teacher, Sayda Trujillo. We did one Playback show in collaboration with a local organization advocating for families of children with autism. It was amazing. I was hooked. I've since joined Playback North America and the International Playback Theatre Network and have begun teaching Playback as part of my Applied Theatre classes at Virginia Tech. This spring, when COVID-19 struck and so much of our lives began to shift online, I saw an opportunity to reunite past members of The Ume Group for a 6-week experiment in online Playback Theatre.

I want to be clear that, throughout this process, I invented basically nothing. I was using Playback Theatre, an improvised and community-centered storytelling theatre form which was invented in 1975 by Jonathan Fox & Jo Salas and which now exists across the globe.

Furthermore, in designing our online event via Zoom, I was drawing extensively on techniques

tested and documented by Anne & Christopher Ellinger and the amazing folks at Playback North America, which is an organization for people who want to explore developing Playback skills, and which produces numerous publications and monthly teleconferences, including their 20-page guidebook *Playback Theatre Online* which provided all the technical and logistical advice necessary to put together an effective presentation on Zoom.

For those who aren't aware, in traditional Playback Theatre, there are 5 main roles, the Teller(s), the Conductor, the Actors, the Musician, and the Audience (who are each potential Tellers). Throughout the course of a Playback event, the Conductor solicits stories from the Tellers, which are then immediately reflected back to them by the Actors and Musicians, according to a set of ritualized forms.

To speak about how Resilience was envisioned throughout this experience is both simple and complicated. It's simple because midway through our six-week rehearsal process, the theme we chose for the show actually happened to be "Stories of Resilience" and Kaitlyn Samuel Rosin, our Conductor who was - as one audience member said - "so grounded and empathetic" as she held space for the audience and guided the event, managed to elicit an inspiring variety of stories which spoke to the diverse ways that resilience can be expressed. People told stories of being in car accidents, getting locked out of their apartments and cars, helping others in need, and overcoming any number of challenges.

On the other hand the question of resilience is complicated, because on May 25, just 6 days prior to our show, George Floyd was murdered. By the time our March 31 performance came, news of national uprisings and support for Black Lives Matter had filled most of our news feeds. Resilience seemed to take on new meaning; it's a necessity for those in our country who

experience systemic and intersecting oppressions. As a primarily white company, I am now more curious than ever what responsibility we hold to the country at large, and the events of the last months have fueled exciting new conversations about what it might mean for even our scrappy fringe company to come out of its hibernation (and its complicitness with White Supremacy). But that's a topic for another talk. Though racial justice was not an explicit theme in our show, it certainly could have been and might be in the future. Other Playback groups are doing amazing work promoting racial justice through their art.¹ For our small audience of friends and family who attended and participated in our show, the Playback event was an opportunity to give expression to the nameless overflow of intense emotions which that week's news aroused. The experience of having a safe-enough space to share stories, was furthermore novel and important enough for audience members to write numerous unsolicited thank-yous and donate to our company. And because of the low overhead involved in performing online, we were able to compensate our actors in a way that rivals past remuneration for their work with the group, an achievement amplified by the fact that many of them were affected by the economic fallout from COVID-19.

Part of my personal experience of resilience through this project, is - as the title of a recent HowlRound article by Jan Cohen-Cruz has it - "expanding where, why, how, and with whom artists" work. Playback Theatre specifically demands that the artists work in collaboration with the audience of storytellers. While it's possible and common to think of offering your Playback enactments like a gift to each storyteller, after reading more about the successes and failures of other community-engaged projects, I'm inclined to think of this relationship *primarily*

¹ Poetic Justice Theatre Ensemble, True Story Theater, & Nisha Sajani are among some of the companies & individuals that have held Playback performances and workshops explicitly relating to racial justice.

as a collaborative one.² And collaborating with audiences in real-time, rather than trying to guess what they will like beforehand, seems like a key way of expanding “with whom” we make theatre, possibly upping the overall resilience of the form.

Polyvagal theory, which explores the way the vagus nerve connects social and biological phenomena has much to say about how being in community helps us process trauma and boosts our biological resilience (Tisato). So having any sort of theatrical project to work on in ensemble, also may have grounded and supported Kaitlyn, the company, and I in a way that helped us as a collective weather some of the unknowns which came with COVID-19.

As an industry, I think we can learn an immense amount from online Playback Theatre. In many ways, it has changed my very definition of what it means to be Live and to do live theatre.³ The consensual audience interactivity and the connections that blossom from which feel more Live to me than many non-interactive things I’ve seen onstage, let alone an online broadcast of a previously recorded Broadway play as are so common right now.⁴ As Kaitlyn is fond of framing it, the “core of Playback Theatre remains intact” in an online setting, and perhaps much more so than with other theatre forms adapted for online. By “core” she’s referring to people telling stories; people listening; and actors’ reflecting those stories without a lot of production value. She asserts “taking this time in physical isolation to practice skills like deep listening and conversation will only make our theatrical practices stronger once we can return again to in-person.” From my perspective, seeing everyone’s faces on a single Zoom page

² For some accounts of community-based arts projects which have informed this view, see Viharo 2019; Duffy 2016. For thoughts on audiences as collaborators versus consumers, see Wainwright 2020.

³ I’m speaking here of an expansion of my definition of theatre to include not only face-to-face / in-person live events, but also digital live events.

⁴ For a detailed dive into theatrical broadcasts, see Lindsay Brandon Hunter’s award-winning article: “We Are Not Making A Movie”: Constituting Theatre in Live Broadcast.

(assuming you limit participation to 25) is also reminiscent of sitting in a circle together and simultaneously seeing and being seen by everyone present. Through its audio processing “limitations” Zoom further forces people to slow down and to talk one at a time. And the urgent need for each Actor to rediscover, for themselves, the raw elements of theatricality in their very own living room, to employ at the drop of a hat, in response to a story they’ve just heard for the first time, is a tremendously fertile landscape for personal artistic growth. In closing, I believe that online Playback theatre provides an opportunity for us to return to the core of what theatre is so that we can more equitably envision theatre’s future, innovating and diverging; fortified by those experiences of community which boost our social & biological resilience.

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