

# RESEARCH REPORT

*Peter Wright has just completed a PhD into Playback Theatre.  
In this article he summarises his work.*

## The Empirical and the Ephemeral: Learning, Healing and Building Community Through Playback Theatre

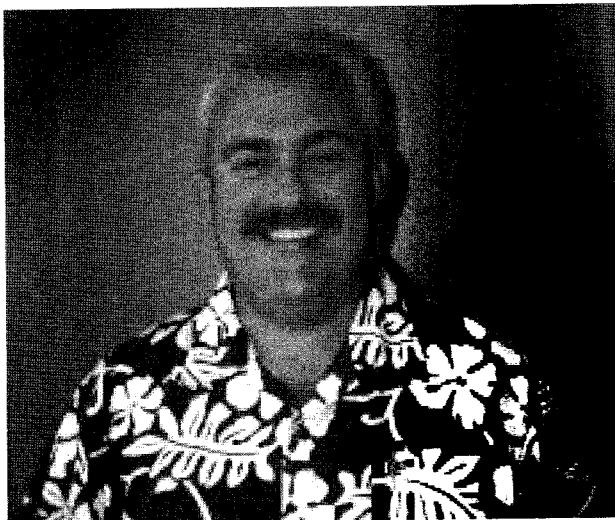
PETER WRIGHT

Playback Theatre has seen amazing growth and development internationally since its first performance in New York State in 1975. There are now somewhere in the order of 75 companies performing in 30 countries around the world. This speaks volumes about the ability of Playback Theatre (PBT) to “touch” people and the commitment of those who practice it.

What is it about PBT that has seen it grow, develop and attract such commitment? The answers to some of these questions are well known by many practitioners within the Playback Community, but not so easily understood by those who well might be the funders of such work, and hence powerful advocates for the efficacy of such a genre. Hence, part of the challenge for PBT is to make what is implicit, explicit, and hence easily understood. I recently undertook a research project that sought to address some of these issues.

My rather ambitious goals were threefold. First, I wanted to map the waters of PBT from the perspective of those whom PBT is designed to serve—its audience—for indeed, if there are any benefits from PBT then the audience as recipients and collaborators in the process should be the ones who could identify them. Second, to consider in an empirical way what characteristics PBT possesses that might facilitate change in its participants. And finally, to document the results and process of this investigation for both practitioners and other scholars who might have an interest in this work, thereby helping to develop the form itself. Towards this end, a number of facets of PBT will be illuminated and revealed in series of separate articles from the project as a whole, while this *Interplay* report is designed to briefly overview the project and share an emergent understanding of PBT.

As part of this investigation I worked intensively with Sydney Playback Theatre over a period of two years attending their public performances on the last Sunday of each month. In addition, I also videoed some rehearsals, and one public and private performance extending the data collection period to three years in total. At the end of each public performance I asked for volunteers from the audience, interviewing them in the week following



the performance. These volunteers, 47 in total, became co-investigators as we thought and reflected around the PBT experience. Methodologically, I used a mixed-method design: Phenomenology because I wanted to get at the *lived* experience of PBT, Phenomenography as I was interested in the breadth of those experiences, and Grounded Theory as there has been little empirical research on PBT itself.

As part of the process of inquiry I developed an analytic heuristic to guide the process. What this means is that the literature available on PBT was systematically considered and a series of propositions—47 in total—were developed that could act as a guide to the process. I then organised these into a graphic that reflected three major aspects of PBT. These propositions were conceptualised as being attributes, processes, or outcomes of PBT (numbering 13, 20 and 14 respectively) with some propositions necessarily sitting across these boundaries. For example, PBT takes the personal stories that are told and transforms them into theatre, this being both an attribute and process of PBT. These propositions were then used to search for evidence from the participants—that is, the interview data—that either supported or denied them, or alternatively threw the propositions into a new light.

What the investigation revealed was that PBT does indeed facilitate change in many who attend. I characterised this as *learning* rather than education as it reveals the active way that people make-

meaning in PBT performances. This learning has three dimensions: Personal learning, where there is a growth in knowledge of the self and enhanced self-awareness; Social learning that focuses on an individual's place in the world where the social is a mediating influence; and Instrumental learning, where the focus is on developing effective, interactive life skills. This process of learning also profoundly impacts on the second major outcome of PBT, that is, healing.

Healing—a term that I use in place of therapy—also has a number of different dimensions. These include being affirmed, endowed with status, feelings of catharsis, and understanding that comes from learning. Hence,

I describe a learning-healing dynamic that is an important part of the PBT experience. This dynamic is characterised by the particular social-aesthetic context of PBT itself. It is important to understand that the interaction between both learning and healing is iterative or dynamic, that is, the learning can activate the healing and the healing activates the learning with each potentially influencing the other.

It is the particular social-aesthetic dynamic that characterises PBT and facilitates the learning-healing dynamic previously described. This dynamic, because it is art, provides perspective(s) to emotion, engages emotional responses and sensory awareness, and provides opportunities for reflection using multiple and multi-modal levels of (re)presentation. This interaction can also be described as community-building where the learning-healing dynamic enhances awareness of the interconnection between self, others, and experience(s) thereby constructing bonds between participants and acknowledging and illustrating the universality of experience and feeling.

As part of the research I drew a number of these threads together and presented an emergent theory of PBT where there are three planes of understanding. The first plane was conceptualised as the *Vectors of Change* where vector indicates both force and direction and change is a potential outcome. This plane comprises of three enablers: Telling, Witnessing and Modelling. It is these three

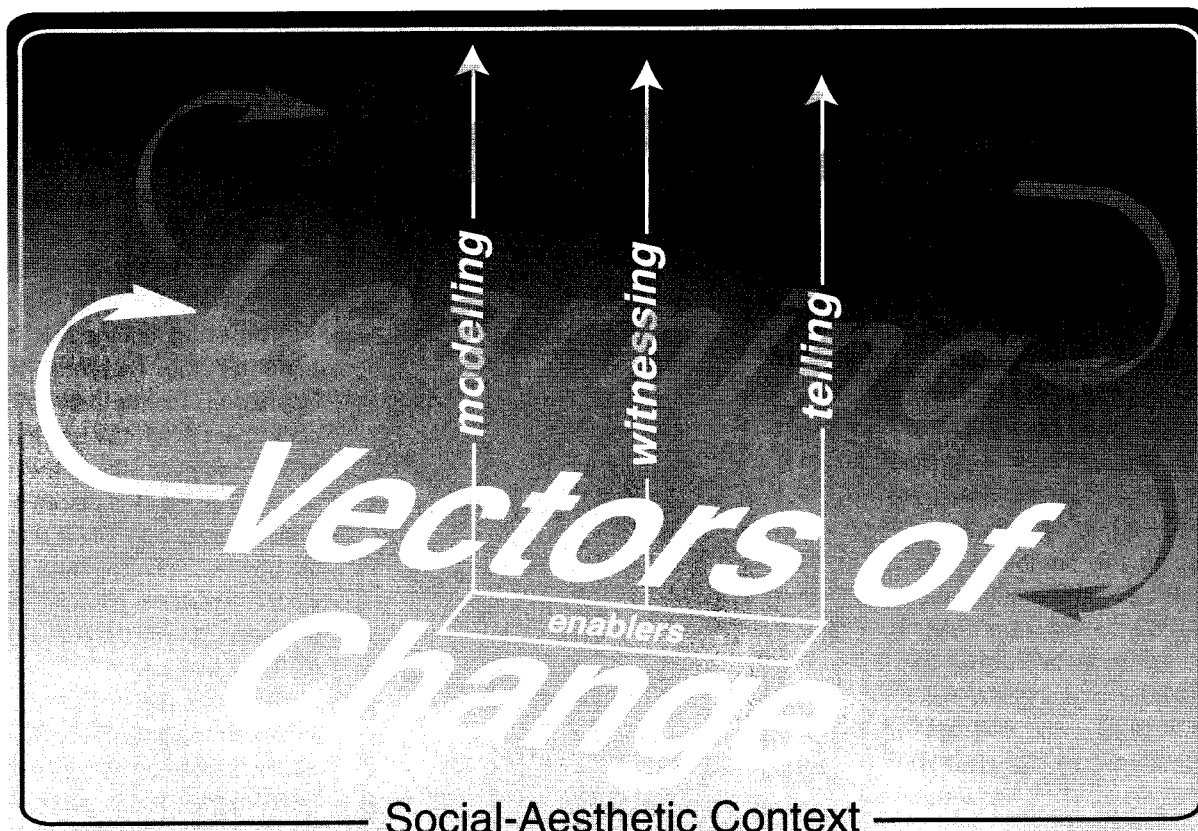


Figure 1. An emergent theory of PBT.

enablers or practices of PBT that activate or enable the audiences' engagement with the PBT process and thereby increases their ability to attend to the theatrical event with all of its dimensions. The second plane is that of Learning that represents both potential outcomes of the PBT experience, and a process whereby change can occur. The third plane is Healing, which is mainly, but not entirely contingent on learning occurring. The gradation in colour reveals that the boundaries between these planes are soft and fluid rather than hard and discrete, therefore what is classified as learning or healing varies according to context and the individuals involved. Finally, each of these planes is enclosed by the particular social-aesthetic frame or context of PBT. This reflects that PBT always occurs in the presence of others, and that the aesthetic nature of the event is one of its defining characteristics that profoundly shapes and frames the experience itself. This emergent theory is represented graphically in Figure 1.

It is important to understand the interconnected and bi-directional nature of each of the three planes. It is also important to understand that each plane is only *one moment* in PBT that is a spectrum of associations, features and processes. A further feature of the theory is that it can be used to provide both a structural and process account of PBT, where one plane can be quickened into action or frozen to explain or help reveal another.

Finally, I characterise PBT as doing, becoming and belonging; where the doing reflects the active processes of PBT, becoming reflects the changes that may accrue as a result of the experience, and belonging is the feeling that participants report as a result of their PBT experience. These results enable me to characterise PBT as a "*Community of Meaning*" where the practices of doing, becoming and belonging reflect: the inquiry into, and the making, breaking and (re)making of meaning that are characteristics of art and the processes of transformation, learning and healing implicit in PBT itself.

A final outcome of the project was the revelation of a number of new interesting notions that were either not present or well illuminated within the literature. These include the importance of: audience size, the prior experiences of the audience, the way space is used, the use of humour, the audiences' experience of creativity as manifested by the company, the strength of the ensemble, the reasons people have for telling, the particular skills developed in the audience, and five dimensions of when PBT goes "wrong". The last of these "new" notions describes the paradoxical nature of PBT that is both individualistic *and* universal.

In conclusion, this project clearly shows that PBT is indeed a theatre for our times when there is a greater than ever need for creativity, where boundaries between disciplines are becoming in-

creasingly blurred, and when we need powerful and profound resources to gain meaning in troubled times.

"A person's license to create is irrevocable, and it opens to every corner of daily life".

Shaun McNiff (1998: 1)

#### References

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