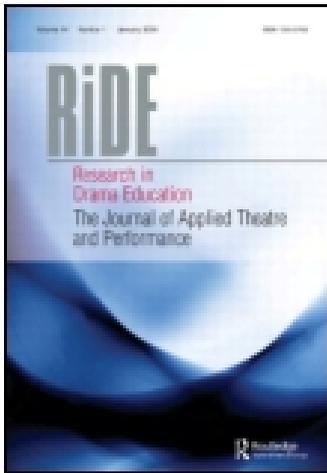


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Narrative power: Playback Theatre as cultural resistance in Occupied Palestine

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This paper describes The Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus initiative and its use of Playback Theatre for community mobilisation and cultural activism within Occupied Palestine. Utilising a conflict transformation perspective, conventional dialogue-oriented initiatives are contrasted against interventions that pursue conscientisation and alliance building through participatory theatre and narrative-based processes. Playback Theatre is thus presented as one strategy that can be used within a broader framework of political action that seeks to address the asymmetrical power relations that characterise the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

November 2012: Israel is dropping bombs on Gaza – again. Riots are breaking out across the West Bank. Checkpoints are closed. Army jeeps are parked at every major intersection. Half of our theatre troupe is stopped from reaching the performance site. Those who can make it are gathered in Al Hadidiya, a small community located in the Jordan Valley, Occupied Palestine.

The event has attracted local and international activists, Palestinian university students, a theatre director from London, a young Israeli activist and the former Vice President of the European Union, Luisa Morgantini. The majority of participants, however, are subsistence farmers and traditional herders from Al Hadidiya and neighbouring communities.

The audience gains shade under a makeshift shelter of curved iron poles covered by sackcloth. The actors have levelled a space on the red, dusty ground. A small 'stage' is instantly prepared. Today, only two women are performing. Normally, four actors would be present. A 'Conductor' facilitates the event and two musicians sit to the side.

The performance, 90 minutes in length, begins with a song but after that there is no script. All enactments will be improvised and based on real-life stories that are voluntarily shared by audience members. Nobody knows who will tell, or what stories will be shared.

Uhm Zati¹ gets up to tell her story:

My son, Quais was with the sheep – over there, having his breakfast – when suddenly a military jeep drove up from the settlement. A group of soldiers got out and handcuffed and blindfolded him. I was far away at that point but could see that they'd removed his

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clothes and thrown him on the ground, totally naked. It was winter and very cold. When I saw what was happening I came running and tried to reach my son. The soldiers pushed me back though. They loaded their guns and pointed them at me. I shouted at them: 'Why are you doing this to my son? He did nothing wrong! Why are you doing this?' But they didn't answer. Instead, they threatened to shoot, and so I moved back. They still had Quais on the ground. Then they started commanding him to turn left, and then right, and then North, and then South, and he was screaming, 'Mom, go away!' He didn't want me to see him in that situation ...

After narrating her story, Uhm Zati chooses one of the actors to play herself. The musicians begin to play, the actors enter the stage and the first scene of her story comes to life through an enactment that incorporates improvised movement, gesture and dialogue. The aesthetic style is sparse and non-naturalistic. The content, however, remains loyal to her account.

After the enactment concludes, the Conductor checks in with Uhm Zati. 'Did you see your story?' He asks. 'Yes'. She says. 'It was exactly like that'. Her story moves others in the audience, reminding them of similar experiences. A moment later another person raises their hand and is invited to the stage. The next story begins.

The process described is known as Playback Theatre – an approach where audience members share personal stories that are subsequently transformed into improvised enactments by a team of trained actors and musicians. The process is audience inclusive, but unlike Boal's Forum Theatre (Boal 1979), 'spect-actor' interventions do not occur. In Playback Theatre, the dialectic process occurs through the relationship between one story and another. Indeed, over the course of an event, a network of interrelated stories inevitably emerges – a multifaceted narrative that describes and dialogues about the struggles, resources and predicaments of a community.

Although Playback Theatre was developed in the mid-1970s and is currently used in over 60 countries, The Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus initiative – commencing in 2011 – was the first Middle Eastern initiative to involve an ensemble of all-Arab Playback Theatre practitioners.²

The Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus

Since its establishment in 2006, The Freedom Theatre has provided cultural programming to children, youth and young adults living in Jenin Refugee Camp. The theatre has also devised a number of productions that critique the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority's role in repressing their own subjects. These plays are typically performed to residents of Jenin District or to audiences in Europe and the USA.

In October 2011, The Freedom Theatre began a Playback Theatre programme that later evolved into the Freedom Bus initiative. Freedom Bus performances occur in towns, villages, refugee camps and Bedouin communities throughout the West Bank. These events are typically organised in partnership with popular struggle committees, village councils, women's cooperatives and local activists. The development of these partnerships has allowed The Freedom Theatre to integrate Playback Theatre within a broader framework of political activities, thus magnifying the strategic impact of its work.

At the time of writing, the Freedom Bus ensemble consists of three Palestinian men and three Palestinian women. All troupe members are freelance performers with varying levels of prior experience in theatre arts. I am an Australian Playback Theatre practitioner and co-founder of the Freedom Bus initiative. Since its inception in December 2011, I have remained involved as a researcher, facilitator and theatre trainer.

This article documents the scope and guiding principals of the Freedom Bus initiative and its use of community-based, cultural activism. In particular, I will utilise theory from the field of conflict transformation and peace building to investigate the limits and potentials of Playback Theatre as a strategic intervention within an asymmetrical conflict. My arguments will be informed by data gathered from over 30 in-depth interviews conducted with Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank who participated in one or more Playback Theatre process.

The limits of empathy

In October 2013 I was asked to speak about the Freedom Bus to an audience of theatre practitioners in Oslo, Norway. In Oslo, as in many other places, audience members asked if I were bringing Palestinians and Israelis together in the same events. This question often assumes that such encounters would be the goal of any initiative that addresses the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. This line of thinking arises from a belief that ‘conflict’ between Israelis and Palestinians is caused by a crisis of opposing narratives fuelled by decades of mutual aggressions and propaganda carried out by both sides.

Playback Theatre, with its emphasis upon the creation of a communal, empathic and non-judgemental space, is therefore viewed as a potentially positive vehicle for the transformation of intergroup hostilities. Indeed, some Playback practitioners propose that the voluntary exchange of stories within a respectful environment can encourage audience members to suspend reified definitions of self and other, in favour of a more accommodating stance (Salas 2011; Hutt and Hosking 2004; Volkas 2009). Jo Salas comments on her experience of this phenomenon:

I’ve noted, as a teller myself, that when my experience is reflected accurately in the spontaneous, artistic, and physical expression of others, I have the *kinesthetic* conviction that I have been understood. Others speak of a similar experience. That sense of certainty creates a kind of softening and relaxation, and an increased openness to another point of view. Listeners, hearing the human voice of the teller and seeing her story brought to life, find a little more space within themselves to accommodate the humanity of that person and her perspective. (Salas 2011, 98)

Such experiences are considered central within reconciliation approaches that emphasise the importance of tasks such as ‘appreciating each other’s humanity’, ‘empathising with each other’s suffering’ and ‘telling and listening to each other’s stories and developing more complex narratives’ (Cohen 2005, 6). Proponents of these approaches often subscribe to some version of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport 1954), i.e. the belief that interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to dismantle prejudice and discrimination between rival groups.

There is no doubt that Playback Theatre contains unique mechanisms for the facilitation of humanising encounters between current or former adversaries. Hutt

and Hosking (2004), Volkas (2009) and Salas (2011), for example, describe various initiatives where Playback Theatre has been applied for such purposes. However, in the Palestinian–Israeli context, where vast asymmetries of power persist, the endorsement of Playback Theatre as a ‘contact-remedy’ would place it amongst a plethora of other ‘peace’ projects that tend to psychologise the current dynamic whilst ignoring its political and structural roots.

Normalisation

Encounter-based initiatives that seek to ameliorate the Palestinian–Israeli conflict are widely criticised for their role in ‘normalising’ existing relations.

The term ‘normalisation’ refers to the activity of making something ‘abnormal’ appear ‘normal’. In the case of Palestine and Israel, this refers to endeavours that project the notion that both sides are on an equal footing. As Rahman (2012) states:

Joint sports teams and theatre groups, hosting an Israeli orchestra in Ramallah or Nablus, all these things create a false sense of normality, like the issue is only a problem of recognizing each other as human beings. This, however, ignores the ongoing oppression, colonization, and denial of rights, committed by one side against the other. (para 6)

White (2008) argues that Israel’s position as a dominant, occupying power is exhibited through large-scale military assaults on civilian populations, together with systematic practices of land confiscation, settlement construction, house and infrastructure demolitions, forced displacement, administrative detention, political imprisonment, targeted assassinations and a comprehensive military closure regime inhibiting access to social networks, health services, education and employment opportunities. In addition, Israel protects the privileged status of its Jewish citizens through the violation of various international laws including the denial of Palestinian refugee rights and its implementation of discriminatory practices that have been equated to apartheid.³

The objection to ‘normalisation’ initiatives is therefore based on the premise that such programmes ignore the structural realities of military occupation, settler colonialism and institutional racism in favour of a ‘kissing cousins cure’ – an approach defined by the belief that peace will ensue when both sides simply recognise each other’s mutual suffering and common interests.

Israeli participation

It is important to distinguish the difference between normalisation processes and Israeli participation in activities that propose a political response to the current status quo. As Rahman (2012) states:

As long as an Israeli is working for Palestinian rights and the end to occupation, the cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians is perfectly legitimate and justified. This is the concept of ‘co-resistance’ as opposed to ‘co-existence’. (11)

Within the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS 2005) movement, for example, it can be noted that several Israeli partners support the BDS campaign

including the *Coalition of Women for Peace and Boycott! Supporting the Palestinian BDS Call from Within* (PACBI 2012). The BDS movement makes an 'explicit call on conscientious Israelis to join the movement for freedom, justice and equal rights for all' and proposes that we seek to define 'normalisation' not merely as 'collaboration with Israelis' but rather, according to 'the substance and premise of this collaboration' (PACBI 2012, para 2).

In this regard, Israeli activists have been welcome guests at Playback Theatre events in the occupied West Bank. These participants are invariably connected to Israeli activist or human rights groups, such as Anarchists Against the Wall, B'tselem, Rabbis for Human Rights, Taayush or Machsom Watch. Israeli activists have also participated in other Freedom Bus events such as solidarity walks, protective presence activity and informational seminars.

No peace without justice

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will. (Frederick Douglass, 1857, vi)

'No peace without justice!' is a common slogan one hears in Palestine. It suggests a view, that the recognition of Palestinian rights according to international law is a necessary precondition for any reasonable conflict settlement. As Dudouet (2006) suggests, this view also implies that a liberation, or equal rights, struggle must take precedence over 'negative peace' solutions that de-escalate conflict whilst maintaining an oppressive status quo.

Indeed, as with normalisation initiatives, 'conflict resolution' approaches have been criticised for their tendency to ignore or minimise the structural dimensions of unbalanced power relations. In contrast, a 'conflict transformation' paradigm recognise that sustainable, dynamic peace can only be built on a foundation of equality and justice.⁴

Curle's progression

Adam Curle (1971), a Quaker peace activist and pioneer of peace studies, presented an analysis of conflict dynamics in situations where unbalanced power relations exist. He illustrated this state of unbalance/balance in a matrix comparing levels of power with levels of awareness (see Figure 1).

In Curle's diagram, four stages are identified in the progression of conflict towards peace.

Latent conflict: Structural imbalance exists but the parties are largely unaware of the injustice or inequality.

Overt conflict: Asymmetry persists but the hidden conflict has become visible. Both parties now hold a high awareness regarding their conflicting interests and needs. During this stage, the oppressed party also seeks to raise their level of power by waging a liberation or equal rights struggle.

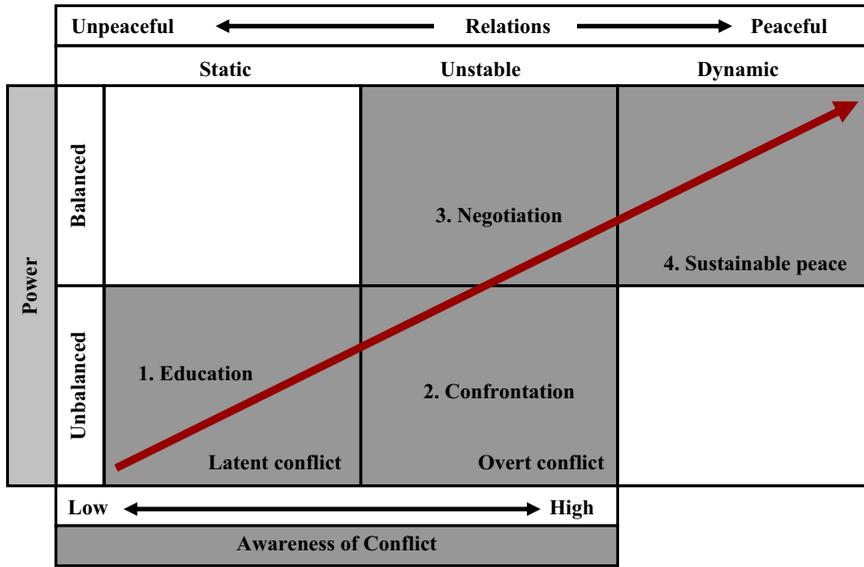


Figure 1. Curle's progression of conflict.
Source: Lederach (1997).

Settlement: Increasing conflict intensification results in a shift of power towards greater balance. When the costs of maintaining the status quo become too high, the situation reaches a state of 'ripeness' where structural change can be negotiated and where adversarial relations can be transformed.

Sustainable peace: Both parties establish and maintain healthy power relations that are both peaceful and dynamic.

According to Curle, conflict is transformed as parties move towards high awareness and power symmetry.

Formulations that address issues of symmetry hold significant implications for the type of arts-based interventions that might be applied in conflict zones. Shank and Schirch (2008) propose that an understanding of conflict progression and associated tasks is particularly relevant for community theatre practitioners who wish to embrace a more strategic approach to peacebuilding.

From a conflict transformation perspective, therefore, The Freedom Theatre's exercise of 'cultural resistance' can be viewed as an attempt to alter the root structural conditions that perpetuate the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Identity and resistance

Since its inception, the State of Israel has engaged in systematic efforts to extinguish Palestinian history and culture. This campaign has featured the destruction of Palestinian schools, libraries, archives and personal collections. As Masalha (2011) has documented, tens of thousands of books, documents and manuscripts have been lost in the process. More recently, Israel has passed legislation that prohibits the transfer of state funds to any public institution, including schools and libraries, that refer to the *Nakba*⁵ (Shalan 2011). Israel's Education Ministry has also been criticised for its attempts to remove Palestinian history from school curricula in favour of a

nationalistic agenda that presents Israel as the exclusive homeland of the Jewish people (Cook 2013).

The Freedom Theatre, with its allegiance to cultural resistance, is one of several Palestinian cultural organisations that recognise the significance of art in the unarmed struggle for civil rights and equality. The late Juliano Mer Khamis,⁶ a co-founder of The Freedom Theatre, is renowned for his endorsement of a 'third intifada' – an intifada that he believed would achieve emancipation through primarily cultural means.

Mer Khamis asserted that, 'art, in our case, can combine and generate and mobilise other aspects of resistance' (Gharavi 2011, para 27). He also felt that cultural activity could play a pivotal role in establishing the foundations for a 'healthy, equal society' (Explore 2013, para 13) based on a respect for fundamental human rights.

The impulses and convictions that inspired Mer Khamis are in fact emblematic of the desires that propel artists living in other places impacted by political violence. For example, arts practitioners interviewed for the 'In Place of War' project (Thompson, Hughes, and Balfour 2009) felt that artistic activities 'reinforce a sense of being "human" at a time of dehumanisation' (2009, 37), and that theatre and the arts are 'essential life-preserving activities that express a profound resistance to the wider context of threat, destruction, senselessness, chaos and loss within which people exist' (2009, 28).

At-tuwani is one of many West Bank villages that The Freedom Theatre works with. The village is situated in the South Hebron Hills, a region where most people still lead a traditional lifestyle based on subsistence agriculture and shepherding. Like other Palestinian communities situated in Area C,⁷ At-tuwani exists under full Israeli civil and military control.⁸

The Freedom Bus troupe has visited and performed in At-tuwani and other South Hebron Hills communities many times since early 2012. We have also partnered with the local popular struggle committee in the coordination of various protests and direct actions.

During the 13-day Freedom Ride of March 2013, Sawsan, a young woman from the South Hebron Hills shared a story about the demolition of her home:

It was November 24th, 2011, at 10:00 a.m. That's when it happened. The army demolished the mosque and then they came to demolish my house also. I objected and said 'How can you just tear down a house over our heads?' I asked if they had a demolition order. But the soldiers didn't answer. Instead they started trying to push me out of their way. I pushed back and shouted at them saying that there should be some kind of warning before they come and demolish. The soldiers appeared surprised by my strong opposition. But what do they think? That they're going to come and demolish my house and I will give them a cup of coffee too?

In the remainder of her story, Sawsan described how she was subsequently pepper sprayed, detained, handcuffed, blindfolded and then transferred to a detention facility where she was interrogated for many hours. After being held for five days she was put before a military court that issued her with a 5000 NIS fine.

Sawsan's story spoke not only about the violations to which her community is subjected. Her account also emphasises agency and defiance, effectively dismissing any notion of victimhood. As one audience member – a fellow resident of the South Hebron Hills – commented:

Sawsan's story was about the brutality of occupation and Israel's policy to expel us from our land. At the same time, her story was about our steadfastness – that no matter what is being done to us we will struggle and resist. We will stay here and nothing will shake us!

In fact, as Sawsan's story illustrates, tellers rarely share for the sole purpose of 'informing' an audience. The teller, whose story describes or questions an unjust situation, is also urging those present to engage in collective action against the injustice. The motivation driving the teller can therefore be described as a wish to arouse 'conscientisation' – a term coined by Paulo Freire (1970) to describe the development of critical consciousness leading towards action against oppressive structures.

The urge to promote conscientisation is evident in the following reflection, shared by Zati, a young man residing in the Jordan Valley, another Area C region located within the occupied West Bank:

It was important for me to share my story with other Palestinians, for we too need to know what's happening in other parts of Palestine. We are not all facing the same reality at the same time⁹ ... I hoped that those listening would feel inspired to put pressure on the Palestinian Authority Government to end their useless negotiations with Israel. Or maybe they would join in efforts to remove the PA Government so that we can decide our own destiny.

After attending a Freedom Bus event in the Jordan Valley, another participant from the South Hebron Hills made the following remark:

When we went to the Jordan Valley I realized that the people there are like us and that they have similar stories. At the same time, I learned that the problems facing people there are different to ours. For example, here in the South Hebron Hills, we are threatened more by settlers than by the army, whereas there, it is the soldiers that cause more suffering ... It was important to be with the people in the Jordan Valley and to learn about their lives. It gave me a push - more of a push towards resistance.

As these statements suggest, Playback Theatre offers one avenue for an amplified form of grassroots 'truth telling', alliance building and community mobilisation – especially in regions that feel alienated by top-down political processes.

Alliance building

A desire to build alliances between Palestinian communities is reflected in efforts that seek to mend the geopolitical fragmentation imposed by Israel upon Palestinians. In the West Bank, this fragmentation is most apparent in a vast array of mechanisms that control and restrict movement between various regions. The Separation Wall, roadblocks, checkpoints, military zones, settlements and settler-only roads all operate to separate one community from another. In addition to these architectural features, Israel utilises a complex permit system and various legal mechanisms to prohibit or restrict contact between members of the dispersed Palestinian population.

In this context, jointly organised political actions and cultural activities can play a role in countering the divisions that characterise the Palestinian landscape (Rivers 2014). Where possible, Playback Theatre performances and other Freedom Bus events therefore aim to engage representatives from multiple Palestinian communities. For

example, on World Water Day, 2013, the Freedom Bus co-organised a daylong solidarity walk including talks, performances and community visits in the Jordan Valley. The event was organised in partnership with Palestinian activist groups from across the West Bank and was attended by hundreds of people. One Jordan Valley resident who shared his story, referred explicitly to the significance of an event that brought together Palestinians from various parts of historic Palestine: 'Through my story, I wanted to tell Palestinians who are living in Area C and other parts of the West Bank, that we need to be in solidarity with *ourselves*. We need this more than international support.' On other occasions, participants have commented explicitly on the ability of inter-communal storytelling to bridge social distance. For example, in one interview with me, one Palestinian resident of Tubas stated that 'Playback Theatre opens a space for people to share their stories and to communicate with each other. In this way theatre is helping to break down the barriers between us' (Khudiri 2013).

Although the Playback process is used to inform and mobilise local and regional audiences, many tellers are also eager to transmit their stories to the outside world:

I was motivated to tell my story when I saw that the audience contained people from many different countries. I thought this would be a good chance for them to learn about the reality of our life under occupation. I hoped they would in turn pressure Israel to change its policy toward Palestinians. (Omar 2013)

As Thompson, Hughes and Balfour propose, 'representations of "reality" , claims on the "real" and valid explanation of cases are what is contested and attacked in places of war; sometimes as much as bodies and buildings' (2009, 62). The opportunity to have one's story heard is therefore viewed as one way to counter external and hostile representations of the Palestinian reality.

The hopes of these tellers do raise certain questions though. As Thompson asks, 'By asking to hear, must we retell?' He goes on to suggest that, 'our presence as witnesses ensures that we have an ethical relationship with the material' (2004, 151–152). In some communities, this same question has arisen as a criticism towards the Playback Theatre process. Participants have voiced their consternation about a testimonial process that contains no guarantee of subsequent action.

In the case of the Freedom Bus team, organisers attempted to address this issue by working with local, regional and international writers, journalists, photographers, film-makers and activists to ensure that event content is documented and distributed. Organisers also facilitated post-performance meetings where event participants are able to discuss concrete actions that can be taken in response to the predicaments of the community and the broader Palestinian body politic.

Inflammatory narratives

This paper suggests that Playback Theatre – as a story-based strategy – can be integrated within the broader popular struggle movement for justice and equality in Palestine/Israel. One might ask though, whether Playback Theatre can also be used to reinforce certain harmful or non-constructive narratives. For example, in his discussion about the role of story-based projects in Sri Lanka, Thompson proposes that stories can be used to end conflict, as well as to sustain them:

Because many war situations are maintained by a complex pattern of narrative creation, myth-making and assertions of the truth, the act of telling a story in these contexts – whether for therapeutic, social or cultural purposes – exists within these networks of competing and often *war-sustaining* accounts, (Emphasis added, 2004, 151).

While this concern may hold validity in some situations, I would argue that it holds limited currency in the Palestinian context. Thompson implies that acts of ‘narrative creation’ help to sustain the dogmatic pursuits of adversarial parties. I propose, however, that Palestinians are *not* engaged in an ideological battle. Although opposing narratives certainly predominate, the core of the struggle is not one of conflicting mythologies. Like other historical struggles against colonialism and structural racism, significant sections of the Palestinian liberation movement are characterised by a call for civil rights and the recognition of self-determination.¹⁰ In this context, a story-based strategy aims to raise awareness and further claims for justice in accordance with international law, rather than to inflame ethno-religious divisions.

Narrative power

Nonetheless, Thompson’s observation that stories can sustain conflict does bear relevance. As Canning and Reinsborough (2009, 13) state, ‘Narratives can often function as a glue to hold the legitimacy of power structures in place and maintain the status quo’ (2009, 13). For example, Israel’s ubiquitous ‘security narrative’ justifies the illegal practice of land confiscation, home demolitions, administrative detention and construction of the Separation Wall. As mentioned above, Israel has also conducted a campaign of ‘memoricide’ with the objective of repressing and appropriating Palestinian history, culture and identity.

Storytelling practices that operate in opposition to these efforts *can* therefore be defined as a form of ‘antagonistic’ activity – one that ensures memory and the desire for emancipation are not extinguished.

Indeed, as Canning and Reinsborough remind us, ‘narrative power’ has always played an essential role within movements for justice and equality:

Historically, the power of stories and storytelling has been at the centre of social change efforts ... Movements have won public support with powerful stories like Rosa Parks’ refusal to change seats. (2009, 10)

Why theatre?

There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt. (Audre Lorde, 1984, 39)

Sharing stories about life and struggle under occupation is not a novel experience for most Palestinians. Those living in areas impacted by high levels of political violence become accustomed to the act of narrating their accounts to journalists, writers, researchers and human rights advocates. One might ask therefore whether Playback Theatre holds any advantage over more conventional modes of story-collection and circulation.

I propose that Playback Theatre does contain a combination of features that add value to traditional forms of story-based advocacy, campaigning and community building. These features are described by Jo Salas (1999) as the 'artistic' and 'social interactive' domains, and by Jonathan Fox (1999) as the 'ritual' dimension of Playback Theatre.

The artistic domain

Salas notes that, 'we need art in order to integrate and comprehend our experience' (1999, 3). The Playback Theatre enactment with its use of staging, dynamics, metaphor and improvisation helps to fulfil this artistic task by providing form to the teller's story and its central meanings. The Playback performer who is able to transform real-life stories into enactments that are rich in artistry, is particularly effective at generating 'resonance for the audience as well as for the teller' (1999, 6).

In contrast to more cerebral approaches, Playback Theatre, with its artistic dimension, invites a direct and visceral relationship to the teller and their story. As Fox suggests, 'since playback theatre engages many aspects of our intelligence, it penetrates our consciousness in a particularly profound manner' (1999, 6). An understanding of Playback's unique mechanisms is reflected in the intentions of many Palestinians who choose to share their story:

When I speak, maybe some people will not understand me or maybe I cannot express well. However, when others see my experience being acted out in front of them, it helps to reinforce my story and people will therefore understand it better. (Zati, Jordan Valley, 2012)

Sometimes we talk and talk until we get to a point where we can't hear anymore. But with theater we actually see the story that is being told. There is sound, there is image and there is action. When people see the story they end up feeling more. They are more connected to it. This might give them motivation to take action at a later date. (Jamila, South Hebron Hills, 2013)

I'm used to reading reports and reading newspapers and reading, reading, reading! In Playback Theatre there aren't a lot of words. Instead you get to see the story and this can affect the state of the spectator much more ... It touched me strongly when I saw the actors and their faces filled with anger, fear and other emotions. I could feel those emotions for real - much more than when I read. I felt the emotions. I felt them in my body. (Intisar, South Hebron Hills, 2013).

These quotations suggest that theatre engages the totality of our senses, thus enabling a greater receptivity to the material at hand. This might hold particular relevance for activists and campaign organisers who wish to enhance the accessibility of their communication efforts. Indeed, there is nothing new about the understanding that art can be used to serve educational or political objectives. This is the realm of didactic theatre or agitprop. And although the benefits of these forms should not be dismissed, we should also remember that 'art by becoming propaganda loses its aesthetic and human dimensions and fails to move the audience' (Ganguly 2010, 21).

On the one hand, I suggest that the Playback process, with its prioritisation of the unplanned emergence of stories, contains certain safeguards that protect it against becoming a tool for the narrow interests of political groups or NGOs. On the other hand, if the Playback performers are opportunistic or insensitive to the particularities of a teller's account, it is possible that the story will be interpreted and enacted solely

within the framework of the actor's motivations or ideology. In this sense, the actor 'colonises' the story and uses it to serve their own desires. Of course, the actor can never escape from their own subjective association to the teller's account. Nor is this necessarily desirable. As Rowe (2007) has pointed out, the implicit negotiation of a story's meaning can help to open up new perspectives. The telling and its enactment thus becomes a dialogue rather than a monologue. Nonetheless, it is important that the Playback practitioner strives to serve the teller rather than their own political or artistic agenda.

The social interactive domain

Playback Theatre is social and interactive in nature. Without the participation of an audience who share their thoughts, feelings and real-life stories, there would be no event. The establishment of an environment that enables maximal participation is therefore crucial to the success of a Playback Theatre process. Salas proposes several factors that help to foster this 'social interactive' domain. These include:

Planning and organization according to the purpose of the gathering; a congenial and appropriate physical environment; an opportunity early in the proceedings for each person to be seen and heard; an atmosphere of respect; some form of participation or engagement from all present; the acknowledgment and inclusion of diverse concerns, points of view, and feelings; time management; a sense of achievement in relation to the meeting's intent; and an adequate closure at the end. (1999, 5)

The Freedom Bus troupe also prioritises the establishment of long-term relationships with partnering communities. In-depth consultations, joint planning, multiple performances and post-event evaluations all help to build trust and deepen rapport. Long-term contact and a participatory approach to event planning also allows for a more organic interface with other activities associated with the popular struggle movement. For example, once a relationship of trust has been established, it is not uncommon for us to receive invitations and requests to perform at village protests, solidarity marches or other actions. (On one occasion, the village of Nabi Saleh invited the troupe to perform at a memorial event for Mustafa Tamimi and Rushdi Tamimi, two community activists who were shot dead by the Israeli army during a non-violent demonstration. Nabi Saleh subsequently requested that we create a scripted play based on stories from their community. This proposal manifested as *Our Sign is the Stone*, a highly successful production that toured to villages, refugee camps and remote farmer communities throughout the West Bank.)

Freedom Bus events are uniquely characterised by multi-day, immersion experiences that provide community members and non-local participants with an extended opportunity for interaction and relationship building. These events typically include olive harvesting, construction work or the facilitation of educational and arts-based activities for children and youth. Participants in these multi-day events are also invited to engage in protective presence activity and other forms of human rights monitoring and reporting. Evening times usually include Playback Theatre performances and various forms of locally organised cultural programming.

Sharing and receiving stories within the framework of an extended, immersive experience, takes on special relevance. Community members are no longer delivering stories within the context of a short-lived meeting. Non-local audience members are

now able to receive a story and associate its contents to people, places and situations they have been able to encounter first-hand. Performers are also able to hear and enact a story with greater awareness regarding the social, cultural, historical and political 'back story' of the host community. In particular, the opportunity to reside within a community and receive their hospitality, allows for a reconstitution of the typical roles that define relations between performers and community members. Actors lose their role as benevolent artists engaged in charitable solidarity work. Instead, they develop humility as 'guest' and 'student' – learning first-hand from veterans of the popular struggle movement. Likewise, community members are no longer positioned as a 'voiceless victims'. Instead, as Maurya Wickstrom argues, their integrity as political subjects is recognised and maintained (Wickstrom 2012). In this way, a form of comradeship and reciprocity emerges – one where learning, growth and transformation can occur on all sides.

As I have proposed, an expanded conception of the 'interactive social' domain can lead to the formulation of multidimensional events that hold rich potential for all who participate. I do acknowledge that the ability of Playback Theatre troupes to plan and facilitate extended gatherings might be limited in many cases. Nonetheless, a commitment to building long-term, genuine partnerships should be central to any Playback endeavour that prioritises social and political change.

The ritual domain

A Playback Theatre performance is characterised by a certain sequence of events or 'ritual markers':

The teller must come to the chair; the teller must stay in the chair during the enactment; the teller must tell a personal story. The actors stand when picked for a role; the actors do not talk during the interview. The conductor does not interrupt the enactment; the conductor checks in with the teller after the enactment; the conductor dismisses the teller from the chair. (Fox 1999, 14)

The Playback ritual, as it has evolved in our case, is also characterised by performance opening and closing choreographies that include well-known popular songs. These sections of the event inevitably rouse spontaneous participation from the entire audience. It is also not uncommon for the closure of a Playback event to be followed by unprompted *dubke* (a form of traditional Palestinian dance).

In addition to the structure of an event, the Playback ritual is defined by pattern, time, tempo and emotional safety (Salas 2011). These factors in combination help to generate a distinctive container – a space where participants can transition from their everyday reality into a liminal zone where the usual customs and conventions of society are suspended (Davidheiser 2006; Fox 1999). Within this space, experiences that are difficult to face or comprehend 'are condensed, given dimension, and framed so that they can be recognised and re-viewed' (Cohen, Varea, and Walker 2011, 162). As Schirch (2001) notes, the ritual container can also hold 'ambiguities, complexities, and paradoxes in a way rational, logical thought cannot' (cited in Hutt and Hosking 2004, 9).

In societies subjected to external threat, Volkan (2006) proposes that a need for cohesive, large-group identity can exclude the expression of divergent narratives. On

the other hand, as suggested above, the ritual container of performance can provide a community with valuable opportunities for the identification and exploration of themes and emotions that might normally be suppressed.

In Playback performances, for example, tellers and audience will sometimes share stories of grief and vulnerability thus challenging prevailing norms that emphasise a need to remain 'strong' and 'steadfast'.

For example, after hearing a story about the death of Mustafa Tamimi, one member of the audience shared the following reflection (Rivers 2013a):

At most events – where we remember the death of a Martyr – we experience anger, or we turn the person into a hero. Alternatively, we watch from a distance and then we try to forget. But seeing this enactment helped us to connect with other feelings ... People made Mustafa into a hero – but they didn't hear his family.

A member of Mustafa's family also commented:

When Bahaa told the story about Mustafa Tamimi, he reminded us that Mustafa died fighting for our freedom. But his story also gave us an opportunity to mourn. Everyone in the audience cried. Sometimes it is important to release the pressure otherwise we would burst.

As these quotations suggest, participants place value on the provision of an 'aesthetic space that welcomes diverse emotions and complex narratives – an opportunity so often denied in the prevailing quest for order, sense and survival' (Rivers 2013a, 167). As should be clear from this paper though, Playback Theatre, with its ability to facilitate emotional release, cannot be conflated with forms of theatre that promote catharsis at the expense of conscientisation and political mobilisation (Boal 1979).

Nor in my experience are Playback performances solemn affairs, even in cases where stories of hardship and sorrow are shared. Inevitably, an implicit dialogue between stories occurs (Hoesch 1999) reminding the audience of their capacity for grief *and* resilience (Rivers 2013b, 2014). As I have argued elsewhere, the expression of these diverse emotions can ignite 'a creative moment where the participant regains power and spontaneity, and is freed to view and respond to their situation with clarity and renewed energy' (Rivers 2013a, 167).

The ritual container provided by Playback, therefore, connects participants to a communal source of sustenance and rejuvenation – a resource whose importance cannot be overlooked in the context of a daily routine characterised by immense hardship and oppression.

Limitations

Playback Theatre with its dependence upon unscripted stories and improvised enactments can lack the finesse, or aesthetic impact, of devised theatre. Furthermore, Playback Theatre is generally unsuitable for large crowds or outdoor venues. It is by nature a minimalistic form that functions best in more intimate settings. For those using Playback in the context of popular struggle, this places significant constraints upon its application during public protests or other political gatherings.

Playback also fails to engage the audience in an explicit process of discussion, debate or creative exploration regarding issues of concern. Unlike Forum Theatre,

Playback is therefore unsuited for situations where a community may need to find concrete solutions to the predicaments that face them.

Financial issues also pose a considerable challenge to the sustainability of initiatives such as the Freedom Bus. Our performers make a living from their art and must therefore receive a professional fee. Transport, accommodation, administration and a range of other production costs also necessitate that a good amount of funds be found to keep the initiative running. The Freedom Bus has received funding from a range of international donors (including the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, Medico International, the Swiss Consulate, the British Council and UNESCO). However, the amounts received have been relatively minimal and at the best of times, we have not been able to plan more than one year in advance.

On the other hand, this dependence upon international donors does raise questions, especially for an initiative that engages in Palestinian 'cultural resistance'. One might ask whether a 'citizen actor' model (Fox 1994; Salas [1993] 2013) might be more congruent with the values and intentions of a theatre initiative dedicated to political action. As in many other parts of the world, this model would involve a company of unpaid community members who would meet frequently to plan, train and perform.

Of course, this model too would face certain obstacles. In many cases, even amateur actors and musicians are hesitant to 'work for free' – especially in this neoliberal, post-Oslo era where the spirit of volunteerism within Palestinian society has been significantly diminished, and where the traditional functions of civil society have been professionalised and usurped by internationally funded, non-government organisations.

Nonetheless, the pursuit of a truly radical, sustainable and 'people-based' theatre movement must continue if the proponents of 'cultural resistance' wish to remain faithful to their ethics and ideals.

Conclusion

Playback Theatre privileges the stories of community members. Tellers are not preselected. Rather, stories emerge spontaneously during the event itself. This inclusive framework has provided Palestinian communities with an effective route through which to transmit relatively unmediated accounts of life under colonisation, occupation and apartheid. Playback in this context has also helped to provoke critical consciousness and the will for action amongst audience members – be they internationals or other Palestinians. In contrast to didactic, information-driven campaigns, however, Playback Theatre – as an art form – engages participants on a multi-sensorial level, thus enabling a more complete connection to the teller and their situation. In this sense, Playback holds certain utilitarian advantages. As a type of advocacy it provides a unique, community-centred forum for the identification and communication of important issues. At the same time, Playback allows participants to view their stories from a place of distance and perspective. This in turn enables people to attribute new (or renewed) coherence and meaning to their experiences. Performers also gain the opportunity to discard their 'charitable' instincts in favour of a comradeship that recognises the shared political imperatives of those present. Indeed, the network of stories and relationships that emerge over time can help to fortify a movement against de-politicisation and despondency. Perhaps the heartbeat

of our work could therefore be described as the formation and development of relationships that facilitate growth, reciprocity and action on our very human journey towards peace and equality.

Keywords: cultural resistance; Palestine; Playback Theatre

Notes

1. The names of participants have been anonymised.
2. Since the establishment of the Freedom Bus troupe, several other Arab Playback troupes have come into existence, including groups in Amman, Beirut and Cairo.
3. According to the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (UN General Assembly 1973), Apartheid can be defined as 'Inhuman acts committed for the purpose of *establishing and maintaining domination of one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them ...*' (emphasis added).
4. For greater analysis regarding differences between a conflict resolution and conflict transformation perspective, see Dudouet (2006); Dugan (2003); Galtung (2004); Lederach (1995, 1997, 2003).
5. The term 'Nakba' (meaning 'Catastrophe' or 'Disaster' in English) refers to the mass expulsion of Palestinians that preceded and followed the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. During this period, it is estimated that 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homeland, and over 500 Palestinian villages were depopulated and destroyed.
6. Mer Khamis was assassinated outside The Freedom Theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp, by an as-yet, unidentified gunman on 4 April 2011.
7. Under the Oslo II Accord of 1995, the West Bank was divided into three administrative regions known as Area A, B and C. Area C includes 61% of the West Bank and falls under complete Israeli civil and military control.
8. Under international law, Israel, as an occupying power, bears legal responsibility for the wellbeing of the occupied population. However, Palestinian residents of the South Hebron Hills are routinely denied access to land, water, electricity, building permits, health care and educational opportunities. By contrast, equivalent services and amenities are automatically granted to Jewish-settlers in the same region.
9. Like other Palestinian residents of the Jordan Valley, Zati's applications to build a home have been routinely denied by the Israeli Civil Administration. His family is therefore forced to live in makeshift dwellings that have been demolished on numerous occasions. Meanwhile, as the Palestinian Authority continues its decades-long 'peace negotiations' with Israel, residents of the Jordan Valley have witnessed the construction of thousands of illegal settler homes. In fact, 50% of the Jordan Valley's Area C territory has disappeared into the hands of Israeli settlers. A further 45% of land has been seized and converted into Israeli military bases, firing zones and State-controlled 'nature reserves' – all of which remain off-limits for Palestinians (Ma'an Development Centre 2013).
10. In 2005, the Boycott National Committee (the largest coalition of Palestinian civil society organisations) launched a campaign for civil rights and equality based on the recognition of international law. For more information, see www.bds.com.

Note on contributor

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