

Safety, Danger, and Playback Theatre: A survey

Essay for Leadership Course, June 2017

Steve Nash

'No great art has ever been made without the artist having known danger'

Rainer Maria Rilke

"We can actually hurt or even insult someone ... let us also acknowledge our shortcomings. Often our personal fear and our ignorance will sabotage our playback work. We will make big mistakes. It is not unusual. In fact it will happen every time"

Jonathan Fox¹

Introduction

Some years back, I co-wrote an article called *'Safety, Danger and Playback Theatre'* (Nash, Rowe 2000). It was written as a response to a series of questions and criticisms raised by therapist colleagues who had seen performances by Playback Theatre York.

Their main concern was their perception that the playback form invites vulnerability, but lacks adequate therapeutic boundaries, and is therefore unsafe, and potentially dangerous. In our response we argued that self expression and self discovery are rooted as much in the creative process as the therapeutic, and we questioned the implication that personal story and emotional disclosure only legitimately belong in the consulting room, where there tends to be a very specialised understanding of containment and safety. We also explained that Playback Theatre does recognise the importance of providing containment, for the audience, tellers and performers alike. It does this by providing a carefully crafted structure that includes a) the trust that is embodied and conveyed by the performers' ensemble; b) the consciously and conspicuously repeated ritual elements of the performance itself; and c) the critical role of the conductor in steering and holding the overall process.

This essay

When I began thinking about writing an essay as part of my leadership study, a friend suggested that I revisit the topic of safety and danger. He also suggested that the most interesting issues of safety and danger for contemporary Playback Theatre practice are less about psychotherapeutic concerns, and more about risks connected to its increasing use with vulnerable communities and oppressed groups, for example those who experience discrimination, intolerance, social injustice, military conflict, and trauma. I recalled an incident at the Playback Camp in Serbia in 2016, when deep rooted historical

¹ Fox J (2011) Closing reflections and responses (*re Frankfurt Conference*) Interplay Vol XVI No. 2, November 2011

tensions meant that participants from one country did not feel safe to be seen in photographs on social media with participants from a neighbouring country. Simply being at this playback event was dangerous for them. I thought also about the brief but intense eruptions of conflict between playbackers holding different political views that have occurred at recent international conferences, a dynamic that Jonathan Fox has addressed in an open letter to the International Playback Theatre Network (Fox, 2016). Initial conversations with other playback practitioners confirmed that there is considerable interest in thinking again about the twin topics of safety and danger, and how they relate to the application of Playback Theatre in different contexts.

Terminology

In order to maintain the connection with our earlier article, I chose to stay with the terms 'safety' and 'danger'. But I wondered about the suitability of these words. Our understanding of safety or danger is largely socially determined. What is considered 'risky' or best to be avoided in one setting, might be seen as normal or acceptable in a different cultural context or political environment. In my own practice, I am attached to having a certain kind of room in which to stage a performance or run a workshop; for me it is a key element of ensuring containment and therefore safety. In contrast I am aware that for some playback colleagues working in different countries or settings, financial or other limitations might mean that access to any kind of room could be a challenge. Depending on custom and circumstance, a room may not be deemed necessary at all.

I had other doubts. Danger of what? Does Playback Theatre ever actually cause harm or injury? Perhaps danger is too extreme a term. But then I found similar language cropping in recent articles. Dirnstofer (2016) admits her fear that actors and audiences would be *traumatised* by the use of playback in a recent war zone in Nepal; whilst Erdos (2017) explores the *harm* that could be caused to third parties referred to in a negative light by the teller. I was also aware of the growing volume of literature about using playback in communities where there is (or has been) military conflict (Shoshan 2002; Rivers 2014, 2015; Alexander 2013), natural disaster (Layman 2000, Rogers 2005) and social oppression (Glover et al 2016). There is similarly an evolving body of work describing the use of Playback Theatre with those who have experienced trauma, including with women who have experienced violence and abuse (Fox H et al 2007), in occupied Palestine (Rivers 2013), and broader reviews of theory and practice (Legum 2013, Tasker 2016).² Whilst the word '*danger*' occurs rarely in these articles, terms such as '*conflict*', '*re-traumatised*', and '*risk*' are commonly found, and so I felt it was legitimate to stick with using '*danger*' and by association its corollary, '*safety*'.

² This is a small and highly selective list of the wide range of authors that have written on these subjects; many more could have been employed to illustrate my point. Apologies to all colleagues not mentioned.

Methodology

This essay is based on qualitative research I undertook in the form of a survey. In my invitation to participate, I encouraged colleagues to think about issues of safety and danger in relation to any Playback Theatre setting - performances, training, workshops, conferences, and practice development. I devised the following set of questions:

1. *What aspects of Playback Theatre can be dangerous in your view?*
2. *Can you describe something that happened in a playback setting (eg a performance or training event) that you thought was dangerous, or could have been?*
3. *What dangers are there that are unique to Playback Theatre?*
4. *What can playback practitioners do to ensure that their practice is safe?*
5. *Can you give specific examples from your own practice or experience, where attention to safety was clearly demonstrated?*
6. *What unique aspects of Playback Theatre help to create safety?*

I included the following dictionary definitions:

- *Danger = the possibility of suffering harm or injury*
- *Safety = the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury*

But I also encouraged potential participants to interpret my questions in whatever way made sense to them, and indicated that there were no wrong answers.

I wrote to 27 people, most of whom are established and experienced playback practitioners. I received 16 written responses, including two partial ones. In addition three colleagues gave telephone interviews and two more contributed via audio messages. Information about the cohort of participants can be seen in the table below:

	USA	UK	Europe	Russia	South America	India	Far East	Middle East	Africa	Total
Written responses		3f 1m	4f	1f	1f	2m	1f 1m	1m	1m	10f 6m
Telephone or audio	1f	1m		1f				2f		4f 1m
Total	1	5	4	2	1	2	2	3	1	21

Geographical location and gender of respondents (f= female, m = male)

Whilst I gathered perspectives from several geographical regions, the total sample size (21) is small, and many parts of the world are not represented. For the main part, the people I contacted were already playback colleagues of mine. This was a pragmatic necessity, given the limitations of this essay in both time and scope - but there is a risk that this approach captured only a limited subset of the full range thoughts and concerns about safety and danger that are likely to exist within the wider Playback Theatre community.

The rich set of information, stories and anecdotes I did receive was carefully analysed, sifted and sorted into commonly occurring themes and issues relating to each question. Summarising the material I was given, without losing the original spirit or intention, was a challenging and time consuming aspect of this exercise. I took my role as author and editor very seriously, especially the act of grouping together points that I thought were similar to each other, and creating hierarchies of the most commonly mentioned themes. It is important to acknowledge that in undertaking such a task there is a risk of research or experimenter bias.³

The key themes and issues revealed by my survey are now summarised and discussed below. A detailed listing, with many relevant quotes from participants, can be found in Appendix 2.

Survey results: Answers to questions about danger

Individual answers to each question were grouped into commonly occurring themes, and ordered according to how often they were mentioned, with the most frequently occurring points listed first. These are now briefly summarised below, along with discussion of some of the points raised.

Question 1. What aspects of Playback Theatre can be dangerous in your view?

The issues raised in relation to this question revolved around the dangers of using playback in areas where there is (or has recently been) political conflict and oppression, or with groups or communities that are vulnerable. The way that conductors and actors play their roles is critical; any presumptuousness, bias or prejudice on their part increases

³ Norris (1997) describes a range of potential sources of bias in qualitative research, for example 'selection biases including the sampling of times, places, events, people, issues, questions and the balance between the dramatic and the mundane'

the danger that they do not fully hear and portray the story as the teller intended, and in this way could cause them harm. The following potential dangers were identified:

- 1.1 Using PT where there is or has recently been political conflict, or oppression towards a particular group
- 1.2 That what the teller is telling you is not heard
- 1.3 The risk that the teller (or members of the audience) may be re-traumatised
- 1.4 Inadequate training and 'playback in the wrong hands'
- 1.5 The act of public disclosure

'The dangerous aspect of Playback theatre is the social setting where the performance is conducted. This plays a major role on how the performance is conducted. Settings which have had experiences of conflict or extreme difference pose danger to all those who are involved in the performance.'

Respondents said that the risk of danger is increased by the following factors: poor training; offering performances to very vulnerable audiences; settings where the social, political and cultural context is multifaceted and complex; and not having the required level of competence, awareness or understanding. It is all too easy to impose our own meaning onto a teller's story:

'A teller mentioned having a serious illness. The conductor quickly became attached to the idea that this story was entirely about loss and pain. There was a sense of joy and meaning present for the teller that was not heard or affirmed'

Paradoxically, oversensitivity on the part of the conductor and actors can also be a problem, or as one person put it, the danger of '*not having the guts to honour a story*'. The idea that playback actors should be prepared to take risks to add something new to the story is described elsewhere (Rowe 2007 p 181).

Several respondents stated that danger is an inherent part of Playback Theatre - the act of making personal disclosure in a public setting inevitably contains a degree of risk, depending on the nature of the disclosure, and depending on the attitudes of the community. Even the relatively simple (and standard) question '*what happened next?*' might make a teller feel pressurised to reveal or share material that could be re-traumatising. Whilst the impact on a teller may at least be relatively visible, distress triggered in audience members may be much less obvious. The lack of '*confidentiality*', and the absence of any '*follow up*' after a public performance was also cited.⁴

⁴ The concept of '*confidentiality*', and concerns about its absence in the context of a playback performance, were mentioned a number of times. As a former therapist with a clinical understanding of confidentiality, I can see how agreeing a social contract makes good sense in a workshop scenario, but I struggle to see how conventional notions of confidentiality can be meaningfully applied to public or open performances. I would

The degree of social or political heat around a given subject increases the danger level, especially if there is an attempt to hear voices from different sides; for example one respondent gave as an example the challenge of using Playback Theatre to explore attitudes to homosexuality in a country where gay rights are very limited.

An issue of a different order was raised - two respondents felt that the Playback Theatre community is in danger of becoming overly politicised and cult like, observing that the ethos of '*hearing both sides of the story*' (Fox 2011) seems to be giving way to '*a commitment to hearing from the voice with less access, less traditional power ... a demand for equal time will only perpetuate the presence of the dominant voice*' (Fox 2016).

Question 2. Can you describe something that happened in a playback setting (eg a performance or training event) that you thought was dangerous, or could have been?

This question attracted significantly more comment than the others. Clearly there is a lot of energy and concern around this area, and the answers included examples from respondents' own practice, and that of their colleagues, in equal measure. The following key themes emerged:

- 2.1 Using Playback Theatre where there is political conflict, oppression and intolerance
- 2.2 Dangerous acting
- 2.3 Dangerous conducting
- 2.4 Danger at conferences
- 2.5 The dangers of the setting or milieu

As with the first question, the most frequently mentioned issues relate to using Playback Theatre where there is conflict, oppression and intolerance. Examples from Egypt, India, Ukraine, and Cuba all showed how the political climate can mean that the slightest expression of dissent, or sometimes simply the act of assembling together in public, brings risks of exposure and possibly dangerous repercussions for everyone involved, including performers, but especially the teller. From my perspective as author, I felt that the concept of danger, in its truest meaning of risk of harm or injury, was entirely and appropriately applicable to the scenarios shared here:

'Tellers criticised state authorities. Later actors expressed concern about a backlash should news get out'

refer readers to the Code of Ethics for Playback Theatre Trainers and Practitioners: '*We acknowledge that stories told in a performance are not subject to confidentiality. However, we undertake to repeat or write about stories only in a respectful and discreet way*'.

'Strong emotions related to the killing were expressed ... and the need for independent states. The police presence posed danger'

An example from South Africa highlighted the risks associated with ignoring the prevailing social culture; making a disclosure of abuse in the supportive setting of a performance could lead to being stigmatised when the performance (or workshop) is over. In the UK, a playback company working in a care setting realised that their belief systems about the expression of emotion differed from those of the staff who worked in that setting. The power relationships between staff and clients (or managers and staff) can have a significant effect on what kinds of stories can be told and how they are heard; such factors should be carefully considered in the preparation for a performance or workshop.

Several respondents said the danger of harm being caused is increased by actors being overly dramatic and literal, especially where there are issues of trauma. Stereotyping, displaying political prejudice or lack of social awareness, over-identifying with the teller's story, or forcing a happy ending are also ways that actors can increase the risk of causing emotional or psychological harm:

'A refugee told about his friend drowning in the river. The actors replayed the trauma in an exaggerated way including high pitch screaming, opened the scars of the past'

'A performance about World War 2, with heavy stories, one actor took his own view on the Germans'

For the conductor, the risks mentioned included being overly psychological or too therapeutically focused, not sticking with established structures, and not managing the audience or the flow of different kinds of story:

'After many fun stories a woman told about sexism at work. The actors didn't know how to play it, the energy went down. Someone in the audience said out loud: now let's have a fun story, not dramatic! The conductor didn't respond. The teller was hurt. It blocked the possibility to hear other serious stories'

A lack of subtlety and sensitivity in the language used by the conductor can create expectations or assumptions that increase the sense of uncertainty or danger:

'I told a romantic story and the conductor immediately asked what is his name. It gave me a dangerous choice ... should I say it's her or not say anything at all?'

Issues relating to danger at Playback Theatre conferences formed the next most common theme. Challenges of this type have been addressed elsewhere (Fox 2011, 2016), and prompted the following comment (Tasker 2016):

'Well, the myth that we all agree was busted during the closing ceremony at the conference in Montreal in 2015 which felt like a breath of fresh air! It's not that I relish conflict, just that I value honesty at those rare occasions when we are all together'

In writing this essay, it occurred to me that impromptu performances at conferences often don't adhere to the conventions we usually rely on in Playback Theatre; for example the actors and musicians may be relatively unknown to each other, and they may have different ideas about the structure and details of the rituals involved. Such occasions are not quite a workshop, and not quite a typical performance. Perhaps this explains some of the tension that often seems to be a feature (Fox 2011, 2016).

Another source of potential danger that was identified is the setting of the performance. One person spoke about an extremely unsatisfying and distressing experience of doing playback in a prison. The conditions meant that the company had very little (if any) control of either *milieu* or *atmosphere* (see Fox, 2016, 2). Similar frustrations were expressed about the initially well intentioned experience of doing playback in a refugee centre:

'It was hard to create the minimum level of trust. The crazy environment - kids screaming, adults out of control and people constantly coming in announcing transfers and relocations. I was not prepared; I was scared not to honour the stories shared'

Question 3. What dangers are there that are unique to Playback Theatre?

This question was an attempt to try and capture ideas about dangers that are unique to Playback Theatre. As researcher/editor I found myself questioning the examples I was given; it seemed to me that many would be recognisable to anyone familiar with almost any form of interactive group work or applied drama. Again, several themes were discernible, and the material that was shared was clustered around the following headings:

- 3.1 Unique dangers for teller and audience
- 3.2 Unique dangers within the form itself
- 3.3 Unique dangers in the actors' role (see also 2.2 above)
- 3.4 Unique dangers in the conductor's role (see also 2.3 above)
- 3.5 Dangers that are unique to company life and ethos

The most commonly mentioned concerns focused on risks of danger for the teller and the audience, and spring from the way Playback Theatre uniquely depends on personal story being told and then enacted in a public place. Several respondents felt that the risks involved are magnified where cultural and political differences exist in the audience, and where individuals have experienced trauma:

'The unplanned and unpredictable nature of a Playback event is a deeply attractive part of the process. However, in situations of extreme social and political repression, this feature can place actors and teller at risk'

The multiple layers of uncertainty inherent in the form were also frequently referred to as a source of danger; the way that playback disrupts *'the usual contract the audience has with actors'* and the degree to which it depends on participation from unknowable and unpredictable audience members:

'As conductor It felt very dangerous when a teller refused to talk about himself and only wanted to comment unsympathetically on the previous (very vulnerable) teller's story'

As with the previous question, the roles undertaken by actors and conductor were felt to contain dangers associated with inadequate training or lack experience with a particular audience or group. More uniquely perhaps, there are dangers that *blind spots* and *team dynamics* find their way into the performance:

'A male actor seemed intent on touching a young female actor; it was obvious and embarrassing for the audience'

The centrality of the conductor's role, with its responsibility for directing the overall process and choosing individual forms, is unique to Playback Theatre. The quality of the conductors engagement with the teller and the audience harbours specific dangers:

'I felt myself smiling at a teller and noticed the audience was laughing. It felt risky, disrespectful'

Finally, one respondent focused on the subject of company life, especially the risks associated with the way that it is led, for example: *'rigid over reliance on rules; failure to deal with group dynamics or the dominance of individuals; becoming closed and exclusive; only rehearsing; not being willing to 'polish forms and tighten performances ... with no clear vision of where the group is headed, because there is no clear vision of why it was created'*

Summary: Danger and Playback Theatre

Dangers associated with public performances were mentioned most frequently, although rehearsals, workshops and ongoing work were also included. Perhaps not surprisingly, examples of dangers to tellers and audiences, and actors and conductors were much more common than dangers involving the company as a whole or the musician (and music).

All respondents apart from two accepted my terminology without question:

'I cannot think of instances where myself or members of my group or my playback classes faced any form of danger. I am privileged to live and work in a country with a functioning democracy and freedom of expression'

'No, not dangerous. Tense because of different political statements like EPTG Amsterdam as you possibly remember'

In terms of the danger and potential dangers described, my observation is that mostly these concerned feelings of anger, tension, disagreement, insensitivity, disrespect or offence. Sometimes I wondered how it was possible to be certain that the teller or audience was experiencing this feeling or that reaction; my respondents were describing a fear that something dangerous or harmful had happened, rather than providing clear evidence that it had occurred. This is not to diminish the importance of such feelings or to deny the value of noticing that they may be present. If we are to minimise the potential for actual danger in Playback Theatre practice we need to be receptive to such dynamics, and to have strategies in place to help manage them sensitively, respectfully and fairly, so that the risk of creating hurtful or distressing experiences is reduced.

However, doing this effectively in practice can be extremely complicated. One person shared a story that brilliantly captures the layers of difficulty that are involved in trying to conduct a Playback Theatre performance in a way that truly enables everyone involved to feel included and respected:

'It happened in a public show. A teacher who worked in a public school came to the chair to tell a story that revealed she was gay. While on the chair, she kept asking the audience to keep this fact to themselves. She was flustered, I could tell it took a lot to tell this story. Hers was one of the later stories, and I felt that the audience was with her. So in this sense, I felt that the space was safe, even if she was still apprehensive'

'This is one of the contradictions of our work. We want people to feel safe, and yet at the same time, we ask them to risk to share something sacred and personal'

'Ironically, in the feedback form, there was this one comment, "Thank you. I was very entertained. I would appreciate if you'd be sensitive to people who aren't comfortable with LGBT. Some of us are really not ready and will probably never be.'

'When I read this, I started reflecting if I created an unsafe space for “the others” (in this case, those who were not comfortable with LGBT issues) to voice out and have an open dialogue about the issue? Perhaps in this space, I was too caught up with such a personal story (and coming out is still a very sensitive issue in our society), and “enjoying it too much”, to even think about the impact the story was having on others. Perhaps, I narrowed the parameters of the conversation by my “unseeing”.'

The diligence of this practitioner is laudable; but is the level of neutrality they are aiming for ever really achievable, let alone predictable, or desirable?

A small number of situations were described where I think it is reasonable to apply the term danger in a more literal sense. In these examples there was a very real risk that being involved in Playback Theatre could result in psychological harm or physical injury.

This set of dangers concerned audiences and tellers from communities and groups where on a day to day basis, issues of armed conflict, social oppression, political or religious intolerance, were present, or where other forms of trauma (such as violence, abuse or natural disaster) had been experienced.

In these examples three types of danger exist:

- The danger that the teller discloses something that leads to them being ostracised or stigmatised within their own community;
- The danger that in societies where dissent and social activism are not tolerated, simply attending a Playback Theatre performance means that the person or group is identified as being part of a political or community movement and is in some way in opposition to the state;
- The danger that someone who is very vulnerable is involved in Playback Theatre that is insensitive or incompetent in some way, and is re-traumatised by the experience.

Survey results: Answers to questions about safety

As with the section above on danger, individual answers to each question were grouped into commonly occurring themes, and ordered according to how often they were mentioned, with the most frequently occurring points listed first. These themes are now briefly summarised below, along with discussion of some of the points raised.

Question 4. What can playback practitioners do to ensure that their practice is safe?

The responses to this question were grouped around these key themes:

- 4.1 Train and develop as a company
- 4.2 Work with the audience (or the group) in the moment
- 4.3 Know your limitations
- 4.4 Prepare for performances
- 4.5 Trust the playback form
- 4.6 Evaluate and reflect

The encouragement of safe practice via training and developing together as a company or team was mentioned more than any other factor. The tried and tested method of working with each other's stories in rehearsal was emphasised, but the importance of bringing in external facilitation (as distinct from training) was also recommended, as a way of exploring values, dynamics and processes in the group, and in order to ensure *'that there is nothing funky going on between the actors'*. Several respondents felt that there is a strong connection between the maturity of the company, and the quality of the offer to the audience:

'The group needs to mature, becoming individual containers and thereby larger containers. The danger of not growing into a container leads to a transactional Playback Theatre performance, and not a transformative one'

The need for individual training and development was also seen as very significant, with several people recommending supervision for conductors and one recommending that all practitioners could develop a culture of peer supervision (see Tasker 2016 2). Awareness of, and adherence to the Code of Ethics was also cited.⁵

A significant amount of material was received around the interconnected themes of doing as much preparation as possible prior to performing for or working with a particular audience or group, working effectively with the audience in the moment, and knowing your limitations as individuals and as a company.

Various techniques for increasing a sense of safety were described in relation to each of these factors:

'I do research into the topics we play and the organisations and people we are playing for, all of this I suppose contributes to a somewhat safe framework'

⁵ Code of Ethics for Playback Theatre Trainers and Practitioners, Centre for Playback Theatre, Accreditation for Trainers

'Make sure you know who you are performing to, and their issues'

'Give time to make a verbal contract with the audience to say that all stories are welcome and invite people to listen and to not judge'

'Often people get anxious when someone who is vulnerable cries. Other audience members get uncomfortable and protective. If the conductor says and actors show that they are comfortable with tears it allows the audience to settle into a deeper space'

'Know that we are all culturally limited, and that we carry assumptions which may lead us to miss what is being told or misinterpret it on the stage'

To admit that it is not always working ... is also important and creates safety in a maybe paradoxical way. We can't change the world with playback, but we do the best we can in sharing and enacting feelings, thoughts and opinions'

'Study the Theory of Narrative Reticulation, because that gives valid info about responsibilities you have as performers'⁶

A number of respondents stressed that safety can best be maintained by keeping to the well established structures of a traditional Playback Theatre performance:⁷

'The arc of the performance is part of the ritual - it creates a frame, a container; I know what I am doing even if I don't know what I am doing. There is reassurance for actors and audience alike in this'

The term ritual cropped up again and again. The idea that the repeated steps and sequences of a performance can provide reassurance and holding for the audience and performers is a core theoretical concept within Playback Theatre:

'In Playback Theatre, ritual means the repeated structures in space and time that provide familiarity, within which can be contained the unpredictable' (Salas 1999, chapter 7)

The final theme in relation to this question concerned the practice of undertaking evaluation and reflection after every performance and workshop, and always working to ensure that the company (or individual practitioner) is developing a good feedback culture.

Question 5. Can you give specific examples from your own practice or experience, where attention to safety was clearly demonstrated?

The answers to this question were clustered into three key themes:

5.1 Safety, sensitivity and community building

⁶ See Fox 2016, 2

⁷ See Needa, 2015, for a concise description, and Salas, 1999, for a more in depth account

5.2 Working safely with trauma

5.3 The conductor's contribution to safety

A large number of responses directly or indirectly touched on the creativity, embodiment, inclusivity and social justice that lie at the heart of Playback Theatre's practice, and which mean that it can often be used effectively despite the presence of tensions or conflicts:

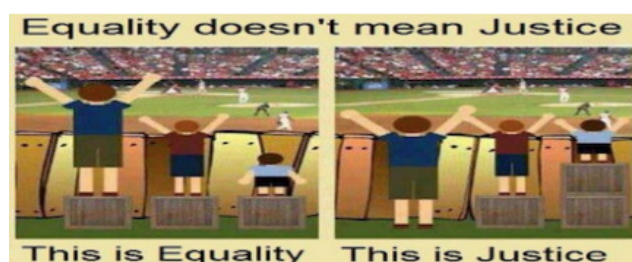
'In Japan, actors heard from a teller on the other side of an historic conflict. They played it truthfully and afterwards they came and embraced the teller'

'At the time of the attacks in Paris (2015), we were working with Muslim women refugees and French social work students who were supporting them. One student was very angry. We supported her so this didn't spill out but the refugees sensed a tension. We had a meaningful conversation - it was healing and moving to witness their shared sorrow'

Where the work is ongoing, Playback Theatre can also provide a focus for relationship building and community development at a number of levels:

'In Palestine, we made long term relationships with several remote villages. At first, Playback was central, but other initiatives emerged through friendships and solidarity. The actors (from other parts of Palestine) raised funds to renovate and equip a local kindergarten'

One respondent described developing a ritual around translation, when working with refugees from communities who were in conflict with each other, so that no-one felt at a disadvantage. Another talked about the complex choices involved in being sensitive to different voices in the room; it can sometimes mean allowing a story from a minority voice to stand, and to not automatically feel obliged to follow it with a story from the prevailing discourse or more dominant voice within that community or society. This statement echoes an issue raised under Question 1 above, where two respondents shared their concerns that there is an increasing trend towards making such judgements within the Playback Theatre community. It is beyond the scope of this essay to do justice to this important debate, but I will take the opportunity to include here an image that powerfully represents one perspective on the issues involved. It illustrates how an approach that is neutral and equal may not be the same as one that is socially just:



Using Playback Theatre safely when working with people who have experienced trauma was the next most popular theme in response to this question, and a list of techniques that have been observed or used by respondents is included below:

- never play the trauma itself on stage - find a metaphor instead;
- never put the perpetrator and victim in contact on stage, make sure there is always space between them;
- include the victim to the violence, even if the story is not directly about them;
- be aware of the *deepest note* of the story, it may not be the traumatic incident itself;⁸
- make sure actors do not show or tell too much, and not more than the teller asked;
- if an actor is overwhelmed, honour the story by standing aside and be present with posture and attention;
- the conductor can choose not to play the story;
- create aesthetic distance using slow motion, sound and music, still images, props, bring a musical instrument on stage;⁹
- pay attention to the audience, get feedback, '*feeling the volume*';
- musician plays, everyone reflects, breathes, including the audience.

Finally, a number of participants commented on the specific contribution of the conductor in helping to ensure safety:

The conductor holds the boundaries, when there are interruptions or disruptions they clarify zones of discomfort and danger, and request a participatory respect from everyone.

Question 6. What unique aspects of Playback Theatre help to create safety?

As with Question 3 above, this question was an attempt to search for factors that are unique to Playback Theatre, and that in this case help to create and reinforce a sense of safety.

The most frequently mentioned safety factor was keeping to the ritual frame or arc, and the various structures that help to form it; especially the components of a performance (or workshop) and the precision with which these different elements are portrayed, whether it is about clear beginnings and endings, or repetition of key words and actions:

'Playback Theatre is characterised by cleverly thought out group bonding rituals and practices. These contribute to the creation of the safe environment. We do all the usual rituals to make sure members of the company are fine before and after playing'

⁸ Hearing the deepest note of the story is a concept developed by Jo Salas

⁹ Aesthetic distance refers to the gap between a viewer's conscious reality and the fictional reality presented in a work of art. When a reader becomes fully engrossed in the illusory narrative world of a book, the author has achieved a close aesthetic distance (Wikipedia). Landy (1983) has cogently applied the concept of aesthetic distance in dramatherapy, arguing that any given technique can be used throughout the spectrum of distancing.

Schechner's 'axiom of frames' is relevant here. He proposes '*... an axiom of frames which generally applies in the theatre: the looser an outer frame, the tighter the inner, and conversely, the looser the inner, the more important the outer*' (Schechner, 1994). The regularity with which attention to the rules, rituals and boundaries of Playback Theatre has cropped up in this survey suggests that many practitioners are engaged in an attempt to tighten the outer frame (for example the overall arc of the performance, or the precise choreography of a short form) so that the inner one is loose enough for the improvisation and openness of the enactment that Playback Theatre demands.

Several respondents referred to the unique significance of certain social concepts and shared values that they feel are at the heart of Playback Theatre:

'Playback workshops – with their combination of embodied play and shared stories – promote an intimacy and connection that transcends most conventional modes of interaction'

'Transparency as to the values of playback and the good intentions of playbackers, the spirit of openness, tolerance, and generosity of playbackers, that is transmitted to the audience - all of these can be nurtured through devoted practice'

'Playback to me is like 修炼 (xiu lian) a Chinese phrase that literally means self-cultivation (of values, or morals, towards a higher state)'

Summary: Safety and Playback Theatre

Responses to my survey indicated that Playback Theatre practitioners are very aware of the significance of safety factors in their work, and that they invest a great deal of energy and attention into practising Playback Theatre as safely and professionally as possible. Several prominent themes emerged:

- The importance of ongoing training and development, as individuals, and together as a company. This includes a commitment to regularly working on each other's stories, and accessing external training and facilitation as a matter of routine;
- Putting the audience (or group) at the centre - researching and preparing beforehand, and using the rehearsal process to identify and address likely issues for that cultural group or community (and for the actors); and when the performance or workshop is happening, taking time to know who is in the room;
- Trusting and sticking to the ritual arc, the established stages and structures of a Playback Theatre performance, and the distinct roles played by actors, musicians and conductors in ensuring that this happens;

- Reflecting, debriefing and evaluating after a performance or workshop.

Two interconnected areas that were mentioned most frequently were:

1. Ensuring safety when using Playback Theatre with audiences (or groups) where members have experienced different forms of trauma.
2. Ensuring safety when working with groups, communities and audiences where there is (or has been) social or political injustice.

Freeman, (2013) supports the idea that playback can be usefully applied to traumatic experiences, and stresses safety factors that chime well with thoughts expressed by several survey participants:

'The latest research on trauma shows that creativity is vital for the ability of people to work through their trauma and PTSD. Good Playback provides an excellent way for individuals to bear witness and process the trauma ... Playback, while not therapy, provides public witnessing and support which can aid in healing'

'Playback can be an excellent tool in helping individuals heal when actors are well trained and there is safety. Safety, among other things, requires actors to have done their own work during rehearsals ... Using Playback Theatre in dealing with actors' own trauma can also help in developing the necessary skills and creativity that actors will need to reflect trauma-related stories in ways that will not re-traumatize the teller or traumatize the audience'

One positive safety factor that can reduce the risk of re-traumatisation, was referred to many times (directly and indirectly), the concept of *aesthetic distance*. Specifically, dramatic techniques that increase aesthetic distance are felt to make it safer for experiences of violence, tragedy or abuse (for example) to be honoured and addressed within a Playback Theatre enactment. A variety of such non-confrontational, non-literal, stylised and symbolic methods were recommended by respondents (p 16). As Rogers (2005) writes:

'How does Playback work for rebuilding and recovery in the post-disaster period? The answer lies in the facilitation of an aesthetically distanced process whereby an individual and a community can access both subjective and objective experiences through the content of their stories, its artistic portrayal, the ritual of the theatre-audience interaction and the social contextual meaning which it carries'

The desire to ensure that Playback Theatre practice does not reinforce social injustice or political intolerance and oppression was also a common theme, with support for the idea that safety is increased when playback practitioners are socially, culturally and politically informed, and when practitioners take pains to recognise which voices in a given community are dominant, and which voices are heard less.

At one level this safety factor might seem relatively easy to enforce. For example, in a mixed audience, if most of the moments and stories are being offered by men, the conductor can make a point of inviting stories from women. But even an apparently uncontentious illustration such as this contains within it a certain worldview and set of assumptions. I am reminded of a colleague's anecdote about using forum theatre with refugee audiences in the Middle East. On one occasion, the act of giving a voice to the women in the audience created a lot of anger amongst their male counterparts, and the environment became very hostile.

A recently published blog helpfully attempts to provide some much needed clarity and guidance for safe practice in this area (Rivers, Chung 2017):

'Conductors should be mindful of how the Playback form, without scrutiny, can lend its power towards the extroverted, the confident, the privileged, the educated, the articulate, the entitled: the dominant majority and its hegemonic ideology. The conductor therefore needs to listen to, and sense the space acutely – gravitating towards the quiet, whispered, silenced truths in the room'

'We must train to identify and bracket our own personal biases, prejudices, and psychological projections especially where these reflect a privileged status'

Conclusion

In our original paper, Safety, Danger and Playback Theatre (Nash, Rowe 2000) we disputed the criticism that Playback Theatre was dangerous because it lacks adequate mechanisms for audience members, and tellers in particular, to be safe.

In conducting this survey, it is clear from the volume of material received, that Playback Theatre practitioners continue to have a high level of interest in this subject. It is also clear that whilst colleagues have concerns about numerous potential dangers that they feel are present in everyday practice, they are equally able to identify and implement safety factors, as part of their preparation, during a performance or workshop, and in their ongoing practice.

In addition, the small amount of reading I have undertaken to complete this essay suggests that for any potentially dangerous issue or circumstance, there is a probably a corresponding article or chapter, somewhere in the growing body of Playback Theatre literature, that addresses just that risk, and offers practical advice and practice based evidence for dealing with it. Unearthing and cataloguing this learning and expertise would be a worthwhile project.

Using Playback Theatre safely when working with people who have experienced trauma, or who are vulnerable for different reasons, was the most commonly raised issue in response to my survey, and alongside the concerns that were shared, a list of proactive techniques and positive steps that are adopted by respondents in order to reduce risk of harm has been included above.

References to the role of Playback Theatre in promoting social justice were also common. Whilst the concerns raised might appear to be less about safety and danger and more about neutrality and bias, there is arguably a place where these different sets of issues can and do intersect. At a basic level, a performance or workshop may not feel like a safe space for me if I perceive that my experience is not welcome, or that my story cannot be heard, irrespective of whether I generally feel disenfranchised and disempowered, or privileged and powerful. This essay has only been able to address this theme in a limited way.

The concept of '*safe uncertainty*' (Mason 1993) could be relevant and helpful in our thinking about safety and danger and Playback Theatre.

Safe uncertainty is a framework from the systemic family therapy world that is designed to help people think about, position themselves, and act upon issues of certainty and uncertainty. Such a position is not fixed. There is always a state of flow, consistent with the notion of a respectful, collaborative, evolving narrative, one which allows a context to emerge.. Safe uncertainty is not intended to be a technique but more of an always evolving state of being (see diagram below):

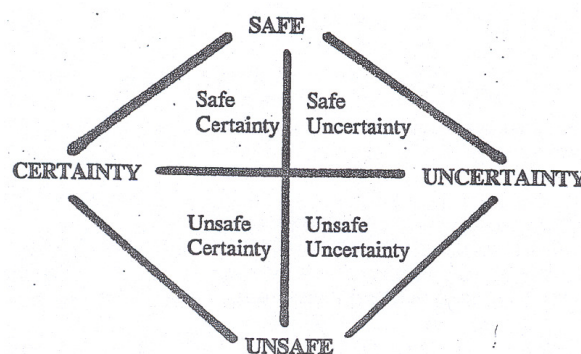


Fig 1

Keeley (2009) characterises the four different quadrants of this framework in a way that could be helpfully applied to the issues of safety and danger that exist in Playback Theatre, and how we attempt to understand and manage them:

- *Unsafe uncertainty* is vulnerable and rudderless;

- *Unsafe certainty* is dangerous and damaging;
- *Safe certainty* is appealing, but ultimately it is an unrealistic position, blocked and characterised by feelings of control and denial;
- *Safe uncertainty* is seen as an edgy, energetic, learning and empowering position.

Mason states that it is possible to '*aim to hold a belief of authoritative doubt, one that encompasses both expertise and uncertainty*'. Perhaps ultimately, in relation to issues of safety and danger, this is the best kind of position we can aspire to as practitioners of Playback Theatre, a form that is predicated on such a high degree of improvisation, spontaneity and unpredictability.

Finally, whilst writing up the responses to my survey I found myself intrigued by possibilities for further exploration of themes of safety and danger in Playback Theatre:

- Compare and contrast the views of experienced, established practitioners with those relatively new to the form;
- Focus on two or three groups of playbackers from quite different cultures or communities, and explore any similarities or differences;
- Seek the views of a variety of audience members;
- Explore references to safety and danger (and similar concerns) in the literature about Playback Theatre;
- Increase the sample size and introduce a more quantitative approach.

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Appendix 1: Detailed summary of survey results

Part 1: Danger - key themes

Individual answers to each question have been grouped into commonly occurring themes, and order according to how often they were mentioned, with the most frequent listed first. Quotes¹⁰ from respondents have been used to illustrate key points. Where it was given, the setting has been included.

Question 1. What aspects of Playback Theatre can be dangerous in your view?

Specific issues	Quotes and examples
Key theme 1.1 Using PT where there is or has recently been political conflict, or oppression towards a particular group	
When the teller says something that goes against the political or cultural status quo, where dissent is not tolerated. When conductor or actors are not fully aware of the socio-political context of the performance. The conscious, or unconscious political views/bias of the playback company or its members; the risk of coercion.	<i>The danger is it becomes politicised ... giving precedent to one voice ... then it becomes a cult</i> <i>Neglecting voices in the audience</i>
Key theme 1.2 That what the teller is telling you is not heard	
Conductor (or actors) do not hear or portray the teller's intended meaning: not listening, being disrespectful or insensitive, imposing a new meaning. Risk is increased where the company or trainer is perceived to be in position of relative authority and power. Paradoxically, two responses referred to the danger of playing it too safe, of 'not having the guts to honour a story'	<i>A teller mentioned having a serious illness. The conductor quickly became attached to the idea that this story was entirely about loss and pain. There was a sense of joy and meaning present for the teller that was not heard or affirmed</i>
Key theme 1.3 The risk that the teller (or members of the audience) may be re-traumatised	
Conductor's insensitivity - even 'what happened next?' can cause a vulnerable teller to re-open wounds. Actors may not be able to contain the trauma competently, portraying characters and relationships stereotypically, minimising the teller's experience. Audience members may also be deeply affected and they could leave without sharing.	<i>The act of talking about something traumatic can be dangerous (in some communities/settings)</i>
Key theme 1.4 Inadequate training and 'playback in the wrong hands'	
Lack of training and supervision, offering performances after attending only a few workshops, seeing playback as just having fun, trying to fix things so there is always a happy ending, and missing the pain at the heart of some stories Promoting playback as a therapy is dangerous; although the absence of both a therapeutic and an artistic understanding was also identified as risky.	<i>Actors who are not able to separate their own stuff from a teller can do some dangerous cathartic outpouring on stage</i>

¹⁰ In some instances quotes have been edited to save space

Specific issues	Quotes and examples
Key theme 1.5 The act of public disclosure	
The lack of confidentiality, especially in public performances, where we don't know who is in the audience and what they will do with a person's story. for example. The lack of follow up with tellers is for some a related issue.	<i>They could share it and comment about it on social media</i>

Question 2. Can you describe something that happened in a playback setting (eg a performance or training event) that you thought was dangerous, or could have been?¹¹

Specific issues of danger	Quotes and examples
Key theme 2.1 Using Playback Theatre where there is political conflict, oppression and intolerance	
<p>Telling stories in playback performances in places where there is socio-political conflict and unrest:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – criticising the ruling regime (where dissent is not tolerated); – children's voices suppressed by adults (where child marriages/labour exist); <p>Institutional power dynamics, or victims are ostracised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – anxious staff removing a child from a performance; – creating a false sense of safety, leaving tellers vulnerable 	<p><i>Tellers criticised state authorities. Later actors expressed concern about a backlash should news get out (Egypt).</i></p> <p><i>Strong emotions related to the killing were expressed ... and the need for independent (Tamil) states. The police presence posed danger (India). Someone shared her story of being abused for the first time. A process like that leaves the teller vulnerable to stigma (South Africa).</i></p> <p><i>In Cuba some actors said they are being watched by the secret service.</i></p> <p><i>In Donetsk (warzone in Ukraine) it was not easy to find a room for a performance because the people didn't know what to expect and didn't want to upset the rulers.</i></p>
Key theme 2.2 Dangerous acting	
<p>Includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – being overly dramatic or too literal when playing trauma (illness, death, abuse or violence); – stereotyping when playing people from unfamiliar social groups); – showing political prejudices, or lack of awareness; – over-identifying with a story (not separating 'mine' and 'yours'); – trying too hard to make a happy ending when a story is difficult or upsetting. 	<p><i>A refugee told about his friend drowning in the river. The actors replayed the trauma in an exaggerated way including high pitch screaming, opened the scars of the past (Lebanon).</i></p> <p><i>The actors showed stereotypical behaviour of gay people. It reduced the audience safety for the whole show (Russia).</i></p> <p><i>A performance about World War 2, with heavy stories, one actor took his own view on the Germans (Netherlands).</i></p> <p><i>A black woman wondered how it would be if Jesus was black. The actors did not explore it at the level she told it - didn't even say 'black'. An audience member called them out. People started to leave, they were offended. (USA)</i></p>

¹¹ This question invited significantly more interest and comment than the others, and I received a huge amount of relevant material.

Specific issues of danger	Quotes and examples
Key theme 2.3 Dangerous conducting	
<p>A number of issues were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – conducting with too much emphasis on the therapeutic aspect - trying too hard to help or fix something for the teller. This is counterproductive; – the conductor does not adhere to the established structures in the playback form eg stepping down to be the teller; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – not managing the flow of different kinds of story during a performance: 	<p><i>The conductor asked questions like a psychologist, that cannot be asked in public. The teller was embarrassed (Lebanon).</i></p> <p><i>The conductor was digging too deeply; there was a risk of re-traumatising (South America).</i></p> <p><i>After many fun stories a woman told about sexism at work. The actors didn't know how to play it, the energy went down. Someone in the audience said out loud: now let's have a fun story, not dramatic! The conductor didn't respond. The teller was hurt. It blocked the possibility to hear other serious stories (Russia).</i></p>
Key theme 2.4 Danger at Conferences (see also Fox 2016)	
<p>The familiar invitation for volunteers to perform together eg at plenary or after dinner sessions; The social and political conflicts that often flare up at conferences. Others questioned how realistic it is to expect there to be a strong sense of unity in the wider playback community - surely conflict is natural and even refreshing.</p>	<p><i>It felt unsafe - the actors didn't know each other - they don't have the benefit of company life together.</i></p> <p><i>Two audience members were actually shouting at each other about the issue ... the lack of addressing the tension seemed to come up in every workshop that followed.</i></p>
Key theme 2.5 The dangers of the setting or milieu (see also Fox 2015)	
<p>The organisational culture of the venue and the influence of the physical setting can present risks and 'should never be ignored, it can trump the skills and abilities of even the most competent companies'. Examples given included prisons, refugee centres, and health or care settings.</p>	<p><i>I decided not to do any more PT in prisons unless it was part of a longer project. A one-off performance may not be a safe environment for the audience. It was hard to create the minimum level of trust. The crazy environment - kids screaming, adults out of control and people constantly coming in announcing transfers and relocations. I was not prepared; I was scared not to honour the stories shared.</i></p>

Question 3. What dangers are there that are unique to Playback Theatre?

Specific issues of danger	Quotes and examples
Key theme 3.1 Unique dangers for teller and audience	
<p>Polarisation of political or religious views in multicultural settings where the subtext may not be clear; Harm for people with traumatic experiences. Poor public re-enactments could be re-traumatising eg if actors are not trained in this work, or there is no closure; Vulnerable teller could feel unable to question the re-enactment and end up feeling 'shamed, exposed, that they have revealed too much', or even 'humiliated'</p>	<p><i>The unplanned and unpredictable nature of a Playback event is a deeply attractive part of the process. However, in situations of extreme social and political repression, this feature can place actors and teller at risk.</i></p> <p><i>Different cultures in the room might be ignored, misunderstandings arise, giving the possibility of hurting people.</i></p> <p><i>Misuse of the form for what sounds like very dangerous ground with the re-writing of abuse and trauma. I only see this working in a closed and safe group held by a highly skilled practitioner.</i></p>

Specific issues of danger	Quotes and examples
Key theme 3.2 Unique dangers within the form itself	
<p>The way a playback performance differs from what usually occurs when you go to the theatre, brings an inherent sense of danger or risk, for everyone involved.</p> <p>The degree to which it depends on input from unknown and unpredictable audience members - tellers could have an agenda to hijack the proceedings for their own ends: <i>In some sense the actors and conductor are always putting themselves in danger.</i></p>	<p><i>It's a disruption of the usual contract the audience has with actors.</i></p> <p><i>The way you open up the space for anyone to say anything in front of an audience. Who is there? Strangers? Colleagues? We may not know.</i></p> <p><i>As conductor It felt very dangerous when a teller refused to talk about himself and only wanted to comment unsympathetically on the previous (very vulnerable) teller's story.</i></p>
Key theme 3.3 Unique dangers in the actors' role (see also 2.2 above)	
<p>Having a blind spot around a social or cultural issue can 'distort, minimise, stereotype, hurt or offend', or 'transform the session into a cheap group therapy or entreating comedy'.</p> <p>When dynamics within the team are played out on stage.</p> <p>The actor knows the teller and uses prior information.</p> <p>The actor feels they cannot play the story as it relates to the their own traumatic experiences.</p>	<p><i>Unresolved/live issues between actors can be dangerous on stage together as the field may be clouded and unclear.</i></p> <p><i>A male actor seemed intent on touching a young female actor, it was obvious and embarrassing for the audience.</i></p> <p><i>The focus should be on what the teller has said - so they are in charge of what has been shared. The actors should just work in the moment.</i></p> <p><i>Not everybody is ready, actors can have unresolved problems.</i></p>
Key theme 3.4 Unique dangers in the conductor's role (see also 2.3 above)	
<p>Risks mentioned related to the responsibilities of this central role in managing and directing the overall process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of confidence and competence in the role - choosing the right form, with the right level of distance - not being aware how much you are a leader <i>'I felt myself smiling at a teller and noticed the audience was laughing. It felt risky, disrespectful'.</i> - not paying enough attention to the audience 	<p><i>I wish it becomes a rule that obliges the practitioner to follow a certain training or course before conducting any performance.</i></p> <p><i>The Teller has freedom and space to tell their experiences, It might open up past wounds in the audience. If it is not handled well by the conductor, it might lead to the escalation of the issues.</i></p>
Key theme 3.5 Dangers that are unique to company life and ethos	
<p>The company as a collective, and in the way that it is led, eg rigid over reliance on rules; failure to deal with group dynamics or the dominance of individuals; becoming closed and exclusive; only rehearsing; not being willing to 'polish forms and tighten performances'.</p>	<p><i>No clear vision of where the group is headed, because no clear vision of why it was created.</i></p>

Part 2: Safety - key themes

Question 4. What can playback practitioners do to ensure that their practice is safe?

Specific issues of safety	Quotes and examples
Key theme 4.1 Train and develop as a company	
<p>Training and development as a company - should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – performing each other's stories – developing a culture of reflection and feedback – being clear about core values – dealing with personal and interpersonal issues – looking at frequency of meetings – follow the Code of Ethics ¹² – get external facilitation/training <p>Not doing this affects performance quality, and the service offered. Subjects include: sociometry, non violent communication, intersectionality, working with trauma.</p> <p>Individual training - courses and workshops in playback and related subjects, studying theory in articles and books, and speaking with other playbackers. Conductors should organise regular process supervision; peer supervision could be cultivated for all practitioners.</p> <p>Maintaining sensitivity and a respectful, non-judgemental attitude towards audiences and tellers is another key factor.</p>	<p><i>The group needs to mature, becoming individual containers and thereby larger containers. The danger of not growing into a container leads to a transactional Playback Theatre performance, and not a transformative one.</i></p> <p><i>Make sure you do not play out intra and inter psychic stuff on stage; Spend time working on company issues so that in performance there is nothing funky going on between actors.</i></p> <p><i>If you choose the way of playback you should develop yourself as an actor and as a person. It's about learning to accept each other in the team and other people as well. We should notice when we 'put marks 'on people. I always interfere a musician or actor or dancer is saying afterwards that was a boring story, or a good story. There are no bad, boring or good stories in my view.</i></p> <p><i>Follow the Code of Ethics written by Jonathan Fox and CPT (it's our bible)</i></p>
Key theme 4.2 Work with the audience (or the group) in the moment	
<p>Recommendations included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – use warm ups (such as social mapping, inviting audience members to talk to each other) at the beginning; – give time to 'make a verbal contract with the audience to say that all stories are welcome and invite people to listen and to not judge; – holding (or managing) the space, creating a safe environment where 'every story, every thought, every life fragment which comes to the open is honoured'; – making sure audience members (or workshop participants) are respectful to the teller and don't shout out judgements or start having debates. – paying good attention to the overall context, for example, not allowing external observers. – setting the emotional tone 'tears should always be welcome even before they happen' 	<p><i>In relation to my interpretation of danger, it's important that a playback practitioner defines the ethics of the performance to the audience before they become a teller.</i></p> <p><i>Often people get anxious when someone who is vulnerable cries. Other audience members get uncomfortable and protective. If the conductor says and actors show that they are comfortable with tears it allows the audience to settle into a deeper space.</i></p>

¹² Code of Ethics for Playback Theatre Trainers and Practitioners, Centre for Playback Theatre, 2015

Specific issues of safety	Quotes and examples
Key theme 4.3 Know your limitations	
<p>Know your own limitations, as an individual, as a team, and accepting that our perspective is always <i>'culturally limited, and that we carry assumptions which may lead us to miss what is being told or misinterpret it on the stage'</i>; Be truthful to yourself when deciding if you are ready to perform/work for a specific community or not. '<i>Leave the ego at home when entering the PBT space'</i> Accept the limitations of what Playback Theatre can realistically achieve: <i>'the audience of male prisoners (and we were an all-female group) could not afford to let vulnerability show in any way;</i> One person referred to the theory of narrative reticulation¹³ <i>'because that gives valid info about responsibilities you have as performers'</i></p>	<p><i>Everything is in a perpetual state of transformation, what worked yesterday might not work today. Be open to follow, be open to lead, be open to stay steady. Develop all their senses, trust their intuition and others' intuition.</i></p> <p><i>Am I tolerant enough, do I have enough knowledge?'</i></p> <p><i>No matter how 'safe' we consider ourselves to be, however 'respectful' we consider the PT process to be with its rituals and containment, whatever the quality of the rapport we manage to create, the context of the audience is of massive importance.</i></p>
Key theme 4.4 Prepare for performances	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Make sure that there is good knowledge of the audience (including the community or city it is part of). – Research is easier if the performance is for a closed group, eg an organisation or a conference, or for a specific topic – Look at this theme in rehearsal, sharing stories about personal connections and understandings of the issues involved – Role-play possible scenarios or dynamics in advance – Anticipate the different agendas in the room – Think about possible disagreement or sabotage – Will there be power issues eg staff and managers, staff and clients? Can you do anything to ensure those in authority know what you expect from them? – Prepare - there may not be time on the day – 	<p><i>We should care about the people who are not here too, not just those who are in the audience. So we discuss, we share, try to find new ways to play people from special groups respectfully</i></p> <p><i>It is important to explain staff what you are about to do and enlist their support, otherwise they get anxious for those in their care and might try to interfere with the process. We ask them not to remove a child unless it comes directly from the child or is really necessary.</i></p>
Key theme 4.5 Trust the playback form	
<p>The need to adhere to the playback form and its well established structures, especially the <i>'arc of a performance'</i> was mentioned several times. This can also be used in workshops and rehearsals.</p> <p>There is a recognised need for conductor, actors and musicians alike to use and trust the repeated ritual elements of the playback form, as these can convey and provide stability and containment.</p>	<p><i>The arc of the performance is part of the ritual - it creates a frame, a container; I know what I am doing even if I don't know what I am doing. There is reassurance for actors and audience alike in this.</i></p> <p><i>Having a balance between ritual, art and social interaction</i></p>
Key theme 4.6 Evaluate and reflect	
<p>Recommendations include automatic evaluation after each show; talking with each other, pausing to reflect on</p>	

¹³ See Fox J, 2015

Specific issues of safety	Quotes and examples
emotional over-involvement and the potential to create a blind spot; have a good feedback culture.	

Question 5. Can you give specific examples from your own practice or experience, where attention to safety was clearly demonstrated?

Specific issues of safety	Quotes and examples
Key theme 5.1 Safety, sensitivity and community building	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The processes involved in PT workshops and performances can support working with audiences or groups flexibly, respectfully and with tolerance of diversity; – PT encourages dialogue within and across different communities, even where there are very difficult and painful tensions between different groups; – The quality of relationship that results can lead to other kinds of community building initiatives <i>'It's a great but difficult job to create a space for sharing (deep) stories without being insulted or threatened by telling. An important ingredient for building communities of understanding'</i> – Working with different voices in the room requires complex decisions to be taken. EG when an immigrant told their story the decision to follow with a contrasting view was bypassed. The teller's story reflected the voice of a seldom heard minority and the conductor thought it inappropriate to follow with the familiar, dominant, voice in that community; – One respondent described developing a ritual around translation, when performing for refugees from conflicting communities, so that proper attention could be paid to this for everyone involved. – 	<p><i>A man in the audience told me he was autistic and could not stand the clapping after every scene. I directly adapted to his need - from that point we waved hands instead of clapping; to make it safe for everybody</i></p> <p><i>In Japan, actors heard from a teller on the other side of an historic conflict. They played it truthfully and afterwards they came and embraced the teller.</i></p> <p><i>At the time of the attacks in Paris (2015), we were working with Muslim women refugees and French social work students who were supporting them. One student was very angry. We supported her so this didn't spill out but the refugees sensed a tension. We had a meaningful conversation - it was healing and moving to witness their shared sorrow.</i></p> <p><i>In Palestine, we made long term relationships with several remote villages. At first, Playback was central, but other initiatives emerged through friendships and solidarity. The actors (from other parts of Palestine) raised funds to renovate and equip a local kindergarten. When non-Palestinians travelled with us, we were invited to provide a non-violent protective presence during times where the Israeli army was present.</i></p>
Key theme 5.2 Working safely with trauma	
<p>Respondents described specific techniques and ways that performers can use to honour traumatic stories whilst minimising the risk of re-traumatising the teller, or the audience - how to <i>'couple high risk with high safety'</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – never play the trauma itself on stage - find a metaphor instead; – never put the perpetrator and victim in contact on stage, make sure there is always space between them; – include the victim to the violence, even if the story is not directly about them; 	<p><i>In a young people's behavioural unit, a teenage boy disclosed abuse when he was 5 years old. I asked if this was the first time (it wasn't) and checked with staff it was safe for him to continue. Afterwards other kids gave support and said they understood why he sometimes got angry. In these situations often the teller has a sense of space and separation from the perpetrator which is entirely new.</i></p> <p><i>When stories are so delicate, the listening becomes very fine and careful; we progress slowly to ensure</i></p>

Specific issues of safety	Quotes and examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – be aware of the <i>deepest note</i>¹⁴ of the story, it may not be the traumatic incident itself; – make sure actors do not show or tell too much, and not more than the teller asked; – if an actor is overwhelmed, honour the story by standing aside and be present with posture and attention; – create aesthetic distance¹⁵ using slow motion, sound and music, still images, props, bring a musical instrument on stage; – pay attention to the audience, get feedback, 'feeling the volume'; – musician plays, everyone reflects, breathes, including the audience. 	<p><i>the best possible outcome of replaying a traumatic story. When this happens, the transformation in the teller's internal world can be very big.</i></p> <p><i>In these performances we will only take actors who can handle such complex and painful stories.</i></p>
Key theme 5.3 The conductor's contribution to safety	
<p>Conductors can demonstrate good safe practice by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – creating a social contract - it elicits buy-in especially in workshops with vulnerable groups – continually sensing the changing dynamics and energy – Avoiding unsafe topics in certain environments, be sensitive with questions – Linking between teller and the rest of the audience, looking for shared experience – Being clear and decisive with a difficult teller - not playing a story if not appropriate (thank the teller and get them back to their chair) 	<p><i>The conductor holds the boundaries, when there are interruptions or disruptions they clarify zones of discomfort and danger, and request a participatory respect from everyone.</i></p>

Question 6. What unique aspects of Playback Theatre help to create safety?

Specific issues of safety	Quotes and examples
Key theme 6.1 The unique nature of Playback and its ethos	
<p>The following aspects were highlighted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the ritual frame, or arc and the emphasis on clear structure, established forms, and repeated steps; – the time invested in reminding ourselves of the structures and rehearsing them, it is our way of entering the ritual world; – the role of conductor; – understanding what is needed in the room active listening, a process of co-creation; – transforming the personal to the universal; 	<p><i>Playback Theatre is characterised by cleverly thought out group bonding rituals and practices. These contribute to the creation of the safe environment. We do all the usual ritual to make sure members of the company are fine before and after playing.</i></p> <p><i>Playback workshops – with their combination of embodied play and shared stories – promote an intimacy and connection that transcends most conventional modes of interaction. I have</i></p>

¹⁴ Hearing the deepest note of the story is a concept developed by Jo Salas

¹⁵ Aesthetic distance refers to the gap between a viewer's conscious reality and the fictional reality presented in a work of art. When a reader becomes fully engrossed in the illusory narrative world of a book, the author has achieved a close aesthetic distance (Wikipedia). Landy (1983) has cogently applied the concept of aesthetic distance in dramatherapy, arguing that any given technique can be used throughout the spectrum of distancing

Specific issues of safety	Quotes and examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - creating unique dialogue among souls; - allowing people to take creative risks; - inviting agreement to confidentiality and always encouraging people to take responsibility for their own safety (in workshops). <p>Unique practical aspects include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conductor (and actors) can get to know the audience, by mingling before a show, by social mapping at the beginning; - Conductor creates rapport and provides reassurance by talking to the audience; - Being exacting about the shape of the performance; its clarity and structure; - Conductor can introduce a short form to relieve tension in a difficult moment; - Trained actors who are willing to play their part enhances the safety net; - Long term ensemble work that helps to develop artistic competence, trust and safety; there is all that experience of doing your own stories together. - Trusting the concept of the 'red thread';¹⁶ - Admitting it is not always working is also important and creates safety in a paradoxical way. 	<p><i>observed how Palestinian and non-Palestinian participants formed relationships that have persisted over time. Researchers of resiliency suggest that social networks are an important factor for protecting people against trauma.</i></p> <p><i>Transparency as to the values of playback and the good intentions of playbackers, the spirit of openness, tolerance, and generosity of playbackers, that is transmitted to the audience - all of these can be nurtured through devoted practice;</i></p> <p><i>Playback to me is like 修炼 (xiu lian) a Chinese phrase that literally means self-cultivation (of values, or morals, towards a higher state)</i></p>

¹⁶ The *red thread* is a concept that argues that there is common link to the way stories unfold and are connected to each other. It is a metaphor from weaving, in which the red thread allows the weaver to follow the pattern and is a common phrase in German for 'the connecting element' (See Hoesch F, *Storytelling as a Healing Process*, in *Gathering Voices: Essays on Playback Theatre*, Eds Fox J and Dauber H, Tusitala, 1999)