

To Give Everything (With No Script)

An interview with six members of
Toronto Playback Theatre Project

Shara Claire

Playback Theatre is an original form of improvisational theatre created through a unique collaboration between performers and audience. Its purpose is to create a ritual space where every voice and any story—however ordinary, extraordinary, hidden or difficult—might be heard and told. Someone tells a story or moment from their life, chooses actors to play the different roles, and watches as their story is immediately recreated and given artistic shape by a trained ensemble of performers. The original Playback Theatre Company came together in 1975 with Jonathan Fox as its director. Other inspirations include the rich oral tradition of storytelling, traditional community rituals, and the psychodrama of J. L. Moreno.



After years of dipping in and out of the world of Playback Theatre on the West Coast, I was delighted to discover in Spring 2003 that a new Toronto company was emerging: Toronto Playback Theatre Project. The company is now seven members strong and their monthly events are amazingly well-attended, dynamic, and fun. Director Chris von Baeyer, actors Brian Barker, Cindy Block, Sherri McFarlane, Mike Spasevski and musician Lisa Patterson met with me at TPTP's rehearsal and performance space, crowded around a tape recorder, and proceeded to explore their experience of this lively art form's capacity to build community. —Shara Claire

Shara: How did this all begin?

Sherri: The first meeting happened in Chris' living room. That evening, we actually had an experience of Playback Theatre: somebody sharing an experience and the rest of us representing that through movement and sounds. I loved it. It felt like such freedom for an actor who had come from scripted theatre: I had always felt a separation from the audience. There we were, just people gathering, but by separating into the roles of performer and listener, we made an enjoyable thing. Playback Theatre in its simplest form—someone's living room, a couple of people—



works. It doesn't need to be a large audience for it to be valuable or meaningful.

Shara: What was it in your own lives that first tuned you into Playback Theatre as a discipline and a way of working?

Chris: This particular company really came out of my desire for community, living in a town that I had only been in for a year or two. I didn't feel very grounded in Toronto itself, and especially not in my community, my actor family, in Toronto. So I started this because I wanted a community of people who shared my values. I knew that Playback would allow that to happen, and it has. I feel very close personally to the company now.

Cindy: That reminds me of the very first time I heard about Playback. I was new in Toronto, had been an actor for many years and was out looking for acting work, auditioning here and there. I was feeling frustrated, wondering "Why am I doing this?" There was a time in my life when to be on stage was not enough, to have the applause was not enough, and during the run of the show I would think, "Okay, I've got to find something important so that I can get on stage and do the show again." Yet I would continually say, "Yes, I want to be an actor; yes, I want to continue my career," and then look up auditions and think, "But I'm not interested in doing that." So, when I read Chris' initial email about wanting to be integrated in the community, and thought "Why did



I choose acting; what was my passion when I was eighteen years old?” I realized that the passion was always about connections.

Sherri: I always found that my most meaningful times as an actor happened either in rehearsal or in the dressing room. I love people and their stories; that’s what really turns me on. It was in connection that theatre had value and meaning for me, getting to know the people I was working with.

Brian: I knew nothing of Playback at first. What I was doing in theatre was comedic improv at that time. When I went, I was hooked right away. This form is here not to make people laugh—although if that happens, it’s enjoyable—but to connect with someone at an incredibly personal level as a performer. Knowing that, looking over at the teller or other audience members, you can see an impact being made. I’ve never felt anything like this in any other type of acting work.

Lisa: It’s coming up to about a year that I’ve been involved. I never would have anticipated joining the company, but was always drawn to creative improvisation—I studied that at the music program at York—and so what’s magical for me is my personal connection to Playback Theatre. I was hungry for something outside of formatted song. I wanted to get back into improvising, which I think was a hunger to feel alive. When I’m making things up on the spot I feel really alive. And also, to be witnessed is a rare thing. I feel like I was craving that on a personal level, and I really connected to the work because in my own life I

wasn't being witnessed. I had a huge emotional response to Playback because of that. Now, though, I'm getting more academic about it—developing tools, learning more about the methods and forms.

Brian: My wife had died just a year before I joined the company, and I explored a lot of that through our Playback rehearsals. It was a way to combine the most deeply-felt parts of my own life with my artistic expression, and to bring those two things together was incredibly powerful.

Mike: I was drawn to Playback for a tonne of reasons, one being because it's improv. I had often been stuck in not feeling ready to get onstage and perform until I had everything figured out. In this form, I had no opportunity to do so: I just had to step in. I think that's great practice, not only as an actor, but as a person: just stepping into something. I think that all types of theatre attempt to create on the spot: even in a scripted show, you want to get on stage every night and create your role and lines new and fresh every time, but I feel that gets lost sometimes. Maybe it has something to do with the physical space: the big theatre, the dim lights, the audience.

Shara: Maybe it's the feeling of community, or connection, that gets lost.

Cindy: I remember auditioning for the company, and got a call from Chris, saying, "Well, we'd really like to have you join us." I wanted to back out for weeks. "Oh, I can't commit to this," I thought, "Oh, God, I can't get into this." I really had to question what I was

saying "yes" to, because I knew that it was going to require a lot more of me than what I had given in the past. In a scripted show, I can rehearse to a certain point and use my skills one at a time until I've got it. But here, I'm required to give everything.

Shara: I came to your first show and there were just twenty people there, and now you pack this room. I'm interested to know what that evolution has been like for you, watching this community grow and grow.

Brian: It's so heartening. I know that we're serving something, providing something that has meaning to people. People talk with each other at intermission, and after the show they stay and talk about the stories that were told. People get to know each other.

Shara: Yes, I've witnessed this at Playback events. And do you think that's another way that Playback actually builds community right there in the moment—not just through the story-telling itself, but through the larger picture?

Brian: Yes, definitely. It works on so many levels. People talk about it, encourage their friends and family to come: it's taken on a life of its own. The community is growing and feeding on its own richness.

Sherri: I want to add another piece to this. I also feel that it's heartening and magical in terms of its evolution, but as with any relationship, it's sweet, romantic, and new in its early days. But what does community actually mean? It means being absolutely open and



inclusive. I've had to check myself because there have been times in the evolution of this community where I've had some resistance to its growth, and that's probably why I've got those romantic notions of the first time we met in Chris' living room and this little group of people (*laughter*). Being open to change is a big piece of community building.

Chris: The roots of the form, when Jonathan Fox developed it originally, really came out of the oral tradition, so I feel like we're doing a modern-day version of the way theatre started—a bunch of people around a campfire telling their stories. The form existed inside of us; we were, in a sense, already a community. Those are the roots of theatre. A village needed a way to express its stories, a place to focus the stories. The DNA of the community comes through the stories of the community. That's the function of theatre. It emerged out of human experience, and in a sense what we're trying to do is recreate that in the modern community. One of the things that's been surprising to me is that a community of audience members has formed, and now we're at a phase where we're beginning to owe something or have some responsibility to that community. I'm starting to hear audience members say, "Some of us want to get to know each other in a different kind of way—it would be great if you could do a show just for people who have seen Playback

before, because we have a lot to say to each other.”

Shara: They want the advanced version (*laughter*), a deeper level of community.

Brian: So it brings up questions about what one’s responsibility is in terms of community building.

Shara: I want to get back to what you were saying, Sherri, about resistance. I read about the grant from the National Crime Prevention Centre Community Mobilization Program to create a Playback Theatre company with South Riverdale youth who have experienced or witnessed violence, and I imagine that resistance could come up in work with this particular population. This also makes me wonder what happens when you get a tough crowd at a public event—not everybody is ready to open themselves to a community experience, whether here at your shows or in the larger neighbourhood context of South Riverdale.

Chris: This theme often comes up. We often hear from audience members, “Well, you know, I really didn’t want to come tonight because I’m really scared of improv and I’m scared that I’ll have to do something.” Then they tell a story about the evening being very different than their expectations, and they see that they don’t *have* to do something, but they *want* to do something. They want to listen, to be involved, to say something, to be heard. I think this turning point has to do with them observing and being witnessed. We witness the resistance, and we respond to

them with authenticity.

Shara: So to have the resistance itself spoken about, witnessed and shaped into a story form, can turn it around, somehow.

Chris: Certainly as a conductor, my position on resistance is that it’s an expression. If it’s expressed by one person, it’s probably an expression of what the group is experiencing, so we can honour it as a real event. And we take it for what it is; we don’t make it bad or wrong. Certainly if there’s any expression of resistance either in our rehearsal, or with a teller sharing a story, or with an audience member sharing a moment, our job is to honour that, to play it back, and that’s what we try to do. Somewhere inside of the resistance is perhaps the opportunity for the opposite of resistance, which is embracing or connection. Maybe resistance is a sign that there are high-enough stakes for that to happen. We know, then, that there is something important enough to resist, something that we really care about. Also, at our monthly public shows, there are different socio-economic communities and cultural communities, and this brings to mind the people whose stories do not get told, who have been repressed or silenced in some way. When I recognize that I’m with a group of people I am not accustomed to interacting with, because that’s not my experience, and I feel resistance or discomfort there, the resistance itself informs me about where I really need, and want, to take the work.

Sherri: I’ve had my own personal resistance



to being a part of this experience in that very vulnerable way Chris spoke of. I remember one day I was going on a country drive with my partner, and I started telling stories from the performance the night before. Through the telling, I realized that I was carrying all these stories, and that I had broadened my sense of the community and of myself just by being there and witnessing. I realized that I had actually had my own journey. And that's when the resistance started to fade. I think this may be a frequent experience of being an audience member.

Shara: It's interesting—the interconnectedness or oneness principle that you're learning about through this work—people in the audience are affected by the stories they hear being told; as the story is told, other people besides the teller experience it at the same time. Including the group of you. That makes me think about what you are doing together: rehearsing, producing monthly events, working intensely as a team, and creating a little community among you. I'm curious about what it's like to work and play in this community.

Lisa: I sense a community among the company because of who these people are and the choice that they make to strive for presence in their lives, since presence is absolutely essential in order to do this work. If we question, or doubt or hold back, we're not going to make an authen-

tic offering. Everyone in this company is on a personal journey, too, and we really connect on that level. I feel safe sharing stuff that I only share with my therapist because I know that no one will take it and use it or think it's strange. It's a really beautiful place, because then in performance, that trust and safety plays out and I have absolutely no doubts—I don't second-guess anyone's commitment.

Shara: I can imagine that that, in itself, makes any potential conflicts in the group easier to deal with as well: there's a certain trust that everyone's doing their own work. Is that true?

Brian: Yes, but certainly the conflicts that we've had have been because of the passion that we have for what we're doing here. There's been conflict about different ideas about where to take this work, and artistic conflict about our different styles. But we communicate well with each other, so conflict leads to our growth.

Shara: I've been thinking about bridging lately. I'm in my third year at ISIS-Canada's expressive arts therapy training program, and in class we have these intense three-hour experiences together and then walk back out into our ordinary world. That being said, my ordinary world is rather extraordinary in that I have a lot of other things going on, work-wise and otherwise, that are pretty magical—but I am aware that not everybody has this, and I'm thinking particularly of people who might come to the shows. People come to an auditorium, have a possibly extraordinary

experience, and then return to their ordinary lives. There is a profound source of connectedness and community at a Playback Theatre event. I wonder how people can carry that sense of community out the door and back into their worlds?

Sherri: I think that what we model to people is authentic expression. For many reasons, people feel limited in how much of themselves they can share in any exchange. I feel that our message to people is authenticity—that in practicing authenticity, we give permission to the people around us to do the same.

Brian: We light a little spark, and in a sense that's all we have. The stories that are shared touch on the universal, so even the most isolated person in the world could come to a Playback show, sit there and just listen, and afterward might think, "Maybe I'm not so alone, maybe I'm not so different; maybe my problems are the problems that other people have." And that's huge.

Sherri: The stories here are not made up, so there's no way to pull back.

Chris: I often struggle with this. One could argue that where people really transform is with ongoing contact—say in a therapeutic situation over a long time. In that scenario, we can really pursue and sustain a dialogue about an issue: unwrap it with a lot of care and support, versus these one-time events. In my other profession I do two-day trainings, and we often dialogue about how much you



can do in one day on your first meeting with someone. I think that the theatrical event itself can serve as kind of a peak experience. I know that there's been times when I've taken one workshop, or watched one movie, or had one conversation with somebody and it's changed and impacted me more than sitting with my therapist week after week after week. Certain things transform and shift spontaneously in one moment—maybe after years of preparation—and that's my justification for spending so much of my time doing things that are delivered in that one-event kind of format.

Shara: Does anybody want to give a synopsis about of what's happening with the South Riverdale youth Playback project? Is that actually in the works now?

Chris: It is; it's just forming. We applied to the Toronto Arts Council and said "We'd like to bring our work into the community, and can you support us reaching out to some of Toronto's community housing projects like Don Mills Court and Regent Park?" They came back and said "No, thank you very much; we don't want to fund you," so we sat down with a representative and he said, "What the committee would probably respond to more is a project where the community themselves were doing the work—if it wasn't you acting, but the community acting." So we re-applied, and this time we said, "Okay, we won't perform, but we'll teach people from these communities how to perform. We'll create a Playback company out of the community members themselves." And they accepted our proposal. So, we're devel-

oping a youth Playback Theatre company from some of the city housing projects and low-income areas. Once the company is formed, they'll take that company back into their communities so that they can be the conduits for their own community's stories. In a way, I think our original proposal would have limited us: if you see your own people telling your story there may be more credibility, certainly among youth. Most of us are over forty, with the exception of Mike, who's got a long way to go before he gets there (*laughter*).

Shara: That's a fantastic story in itself. Maybe that's another way of bridging: if you can get really good at what you do and then go and train another group of people to do it, perhaps it ripples outward, into places you're not even aware of.

Chris: Well, that's the history of Playback. Jonathan Fox started the original company in upstate New York, and now there's another forty places all over the world doing this work.

Shara: Somebody said earlier that if someone is open in a particular moment, something great can come in and grab you. This is a particular belief that you guys have to hold about human beings in order for Playback to actually take effect. I'm wondering what some of the other beliefs might be.

Chris: That's a great question. Another belief is that people are ready to share whenever they're ready, that there is some kind of magical energy in the air when you hold a space in the right way, and the person who is supposed to speak in that moment is ready to speak, and raises their hand. The other belief for me goes back to Jonathan Fox, who has done some deep thinking and experiencing around this form. He has this notion of the red thread: the connection between the stories over the course of the evening. So, to take that to the next level, there's a belief in the fundamental unity of human experience, a belief in a wholeness. Our lives are an integrated story. The world is not chaos, but structured. At the beginning of our events we say, "We've got no script," but by the end we say, "Look, there was a script." There's a blueprint here; there's something—call it fate or god or whatever you want—but something is guiding our process here that we can trust.

Sherri: I have to stand there on the stage and somehow have faith that what I am internally responding to has a place. As I take a step into Playback, I have to believe that it somehow belongs. But, at a macrocosmic level, I'm just being written. We offer ourselves to be written.

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For more information on Toronto Playback Theatre Project, visit www.torontoplayback.com

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