

since 1990

interplay



Vol XVIII No. 1
June 2013

Musician as Playback Actor— Exploring the Role and a New Method for Music in Playback Theatre

Paul L. Gareau

SPECIAL ISSUE

Music & Playback

With Introduction by—
Jo Salas 9

FEATURING

Paul L. Gareau	1
Anne Belmont	6
Juan Carlos Valladares	10
Mike Fedel	11
Karen Berger & Ernie Gruner	13
Mariana Occhiuzzi	15
Ani Nguyen	17
Erin Curren	19
Mary Elizabeth Wheeler	20
Tonia Pinheiro	22
Patrick Seyler	24
Mecca Antonia Burns	27

Also Inside

Assell Romanelli	30
IPTN Board News & Survey	35
IPTN CONFERENCE HISTORY	40

FOR SUBMISSION
GUIDELINES

email editor
readennis@me.com

Playback music is enigmatic in that it is understood as being central to Playback Theatre, and yet we find it difficult to describe and define it in terms of approach and method. I am a self-taught musician who has dedicated close to 10 years exploring music in Playback. I have always found Playback music as being deeply gratifying, expansive, and boundlessly creative. Yet it has been a difficult road in finding the proper recognition of the role of musician in Playback as well as communicating the intuitive process of a narrative-based, improvisational music to 'non-musicians'. How can we, therefore, better describe the role of music in Playback and how do we engage with it responsively?

This article seeks to underscore a methodology of Playback music informed by Gabrielle Roth's 5-Rhythms, dance-movement framework in order to give a new language that bridges the gap between actor and musician in Playback Theatre. It is learning to hear the story in a complex intra-engagement of different rhythms so as to recognize the musician more deeply as Playback actor.

Current Methods and Approaches for Music in Playback Theatre

It is important to note at the onset that there is very little literature regarding music in Playback Theatre. There is, however, a panoply of writings on theories and methods of Playback Theatre as well as how it is used in different academic and community contexts. Within the vast literature, music is a nominal if not silent character. Jo Salas is one of the few authors who has spent time performing, thinking, and writing about music in Playback Theatre.

Salas has written two important documents that focus on music in Playback Theatre, an article entitled "Music in Playback Theatre" (1992) and a chapter dedicated to music in her seminal book entitled "Improvising Real Life" (1996). In all of her writings, Salas always underscores the unique and important presence of music in Playback stating: "In a theatre that emphasizes emotional reality, music becomes particularly important because of it's unique power to evoke and depict feelings" (1992: p.14). Playback practitioners have an implicit understanding that music is important to the cohesion and emotional content of Playback Theatre, but it remains difficult to describe and to discuss. Salas does exceptional work in her writings outlining the method and theory of how musicians engage the Playback Theatre performance. The following is a summary of her thoughts on the matter.

Continued pg 8



Photo: Rea Dennis

From the Editor

This issue of *Interplay* places music at its centre. A special issue that, in many respects, has grown out of the North American Playback Network group *Musicians in Playback*. The initial impetus for the issue dates back to the 2012 Playback (North America) Theatre Festival in Washington D.C., where the moderator of Musicians in Playback, Paul Gareau, was inspired by a call to action by fellow musician Tonia Pinheiro. The outcome of this shared moment is this issue in which the place and purpose of music in Playback Theatre is considered through the voices of company musicians. Gareau, from Ottawa Canada and musician with Living Histories Playback and Boston, Massachusetts-based Tonia Pinheiro (True Story Theater, Iseu Theater) teamed up to co-ordinate the contributors to the special issue. Paul's article leads the issue which also features articles, reflections and poems written by 13 Playback musician-authors from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Cuba and United States including Tonia, Anne Belmont, Karen Berger, Ani Nguyen, Mike Fedel, Erin Curran, Mariana Occhiuzzi, Mary Elizabeth Wheeler, Patrick Seyler, and Mecca Antonia Burns. The introduction to the special issue is written by Playback Theatre's co-founder Jo Salas. It is hoped that this tapestry rich with the voices of playbackers who identify as Playback Musicians will stimulate conversations within companies and between musicians around the world.

Alongside the essays and musings of the musician contributors is Assael Romanelli consideration of the *ninja* playback actor, that actor who is not cast as teller's actor.

As the 2013 membership renewal process of the International Playback Theatre Network comes to a close, the Board have been in dialogue with the sister Board at the Centre for Playback Theatre based in USA. The outcome of these discussions has been a joint decision to survey members of both organisations. This survey can be found on pages 36-39 of this issue. The survey asks for feedback about the relevance of the various services provided by their respective organisations. Please take some time to complete the survey and return it before the end of August.

Submit your responses, comments, and reflections for inclusion.

Letters and Stories to: readennis@me.com



Photo: Magda Miranda

Interplay is the membership publication of the International Playback Theatre Network, targeting the contemporary themes at the centre of the community that practices this complex simple method called playback theatre—a method dependent absolutely on a systematic application of a simple ritual structure yet which yields complex human interaction and resonates with humanity across all cultures. Conceived in 1990 during the fledgling year of IPTN, and launched in November of that year under editor Jonathan Fox with regional editors in Australia, New Zealand, Europe and North America. *Interplay* has been instrumental in keeping the ever expanding, diverse playback theatre community connected and has provided essential space for critical and evaluative thinking that has influenced the development of the form and the spread of the method to over 40 countries worldwide. Part journal, part newsletter, *Interplay* is published twice per year and features articles, practice reports, upcoming events, and membership news. *Interplay* invites submissions, for submission details contact the Editor.

Rea Dennis readennis@me.com

INTERPLAY

Published: 2 times a year

By: International Playback Theatre Network.

Editor: Rea Dennis

Design & Distribution: Lembrança

Individual Photo Credits: mentioned throughout

For submission details— readennis@me.com

Translators this Issue

Chinese—Michele Chung

Portuguese—Mario Moura

English to Spanish—Ramiro Salas

Spanish to English—Juan Carlos Valladares
& Teresa Dinaburg Dias

To volunteer to translate readennis@me.com

PRESIDENT' LETTER

Dear Playback Friends,

In the last couple of weeks you should have received an email from your regional representative asking whether you like to renew your IPTN membership. Our regional representatives all work on an honorary capacity. Without their work it would not be possible to keep IPTN alive! Let me use this opportunity to thank them for their work. I would like to ask you to help them with the renewal process as much as possible. So if you have not answered the renewal request so far, please do it as soon as possible. Maybe you have not received the renewal letter. If this is the case, please contact your regional representative.

You can find the contact data on our website: <http://www.playbacknet.org/drupal/iptn/personnel>

In future we would like to provide the Membership Directory from the database of the website. So please check the data of your profile. If you need to make changes and have forgotten your password, it's possible to request a new password on the left side just beneath the user login. If you have other problems changing your profile or creating a new profile, please contact our web master, Anastasya Vorobyova, email-address: Avorobyova6@gmail.com

As the IPTN Board we want to support the worldwide playback theatre community as much as possible. Therefore we need your feedback and your ideas in which direction to develop. One of the topics we are going to discuss this year is the relationship between IPTN and CPT and how we could improve the cooperation of both organisations. Other topics are Interplay, Website and Training. We have prepared a survey, which is published within this issue of Interplay. Please send us your answers and comments, no later than end of August 2013. We would like to discuss all these items during our face to face meeting in Bangalore, India in October 2013. Every second year we try to meet in person, as it seems to be more effective than discussing only via email or Skype. By the way, travel costs for Board members are not covered by IPTN Budget; we all pay for these ourselves. We are happy to make this contribution for the further development of Playback Theatre. And we are looking forward your contributions in the form of your ideas and comments.

With Love,
Juergen Schoo
IPTN-President



Queridos amigos de Playback,

En las últimas semanas deben haber recibido un email de su representante regional preguntando si desean renovar su membresía en IPTN. Todos nuestros representantes regionales trabajan ad-honorem, y no sería posible hacer todo lo que hace IPTN sin su ayuda. Aprovecho esta oportunidad para agradecerles por su trabajo. Les pido a todos que ayuden a sus representantes con el proceso de renovación tanto como puedan, si aun no han contestado por favor háganlo lo antes posible. Si usted aun no ha recibido su carta de renovación, por favor contacte a su representante regional.

Puede encontrar su dirección en la siguiente página: <http://www.playbacknet.org/drupal/iptn/personnel>

En el futuro queremos poder tener el directorio de los miembros en la base de datos del sitio de web de IPTN. Por favor asegúrese de que su perfil es correcto, si necesita hacer cambios a su perfil y ha olvidado su contraseña, se puede pedir una contraseña nueva en el lado izquierdo de la pagina, debajo del login. Si tiene problemas cambiando su perfil o creando un perfil nuevo, puede comunicarse con Anastasya Vorobyova, email: Avorobyova6@gmail.com

En el directorio de IPTN queremos apoyar a la comunidad mundial de Playback lo más posible. Por lo tanto, necesitamos que nos ayuden con ideas y con información acerca de las direcciones en que deberíamos movernos para desarrollar Playback. Uno de los temas que queremos tocar este año es la relación entre IPTN y CPT y cómo se puede mejorar la colaboración entre ambas instituciones. Otros temas de interés son Interplay, el sitio web y el entrenamiento. Hemos preparado un cuestionario que está en este número de Interplay. Por favor mándenos sus respuestas y comentarios no más tarde del 31 de agosto, así podremos discutir estos temas en la conferencia en Bangalore, India, en octubre del 2013. Cada dos años tratamos de vernos en persona, porque suele ser mucho más productivo que comunicarse por email o Skype. Los costos para estos viajes no están cubiertos por IPTN para los miembros del directorio. Nos alegra poder hacer esta contribución para tratar de desarrollar Playback. Esperamos ansiosos todas sus contribuciones, ideas y comentarios.

Con amor,
Juergen Schoo
Presidente- IPTN

Correction and Apology—Conference History

In the last issue of Interplay there were a number of historical errors amidst the *Announcement* for the upcoming International Playback Theatre Network World Conference in Montreal (2015). These errors have appeared over the years and in this issue Playback Theatre co-founder and original IPTN Board Member Jo Salas helps to set the story straight. See Jo's contribution on page 40.

Meanwhile the current President of IPTN Juergen Shoo and current editor of Interplay, Rea Dennis wish to take this opportunity to thank you Jo very much for the clarifications that her piece brings. We wish to acknowledge particularly the oversights that have compounded and led to the erroneous naming of the 2011 Frankfurt conference as 10th International IPTN Conference. IPTN Board is in the process of establishing how we might contribute to safeguarding the legacy of playback and in the near future hopes to spend some energy on research projects. A first step in this direction is the survey (in partnership with the Centre for Playback Theatre) in this issue (see pages 36-39)

Please accept our earnest apology and our commitment to ensure all future references to historical information is verified.

Juergen & Rea

From Jazz



to Playback Theatre

Mike Fedel

In this piece Mike Fedel songwriter and musician of Ann Arbor describes his journey from folk-rock to jazz to Playback as deepening his awareness of the possibilities of improvisation as a way to connect people to deeper truths about themselves and the world around them, Follow his story here:

My first stab at playing jazz was about six or seven years ago. A friend of mine - a bass player I'd worked with for a while - invited me to join a small, brand new jazz combo. I'd been playing guitar for most of my life and was always up for something new, so I said "sure". I walked into our first rehearsal and was handed the charts for Miles Davis groundbreaking "Kind of Blue".

Now, if you know that album, you already know the punchline. If you don't, let me just mention that *there is no guitar anywhere on the album*. None. So there I was, a folk-rocker whose closest foray into jazz was "Moondance", sitting down with drums, keys, bass, and three horns to tackle one of the most influential albums of all time. I asked the bandleader what I should do. He told me to "just improvise something."

This was not unlike the way I felt the first time I sat down a little over a year ago to play music with 6 Figures. I'd been doing improvisation for a few years already and I knew many of the people in the group, but still, it was pretty intimidating. And, to make it even more challenging, there was nothing on our shiny blue cloth but percussion instruments.

Looking back, it was probably for the best. If I'd had a guitar or a mandolin or even a keyboard, I probably would have started straight in with melodies. But with a new and different set of tools, I had to feel the story in a different way. I had to distill it to its essentials. Then, I had to recreate those essentials in a foreign language, the language of pure percussion. The experience taught me volumes about opening up to the stories and hearing the emotional possibilities within them. And about making music. Having a more limited vocabulary, I had to find different ways to make the instruments "talk". I had to establish a more direct connection with them.

This quickly influenced the way I played back in the jazz band. I hadn't really "let go" into my solos, I was still thinking my way into them rather than feeling them. I started trying to create my jazz improvisations with the band the same way I was creating my improvisations with 6 Figures: what's the emotional tone right now? what does this "story" need to move it forward? where is the tension? where is the resolution? Over the last few years, the cycle has continued. What I'm doing in the jazz band is feeding what I do in 6 Figures, and the other way around.

What I hope for in both is to create something that the listener will feel rather than just hear. Something that can connect them to the music at a deeper level, something that can open them up to feeling something that goes beyond what the Playback company or the band is doing. That, I think, is the magic that musical improvisation can bring. That's the connection I think we can help people make. That's why we do it. That's why I love it.

What Do I Listen For?

Making music for Playback is a very satisfying experience. Music is an integral part of the performance. It can do anything from help stress a point to being the glue that holds the whole piece together. Playback music isn't like a movie soundtrack. It isn't like the Special Effects Tech who provides everything from the sound of breaking glass to police sirens to a crying baby. It's all of that and more! The musician in Playback is as much an actor as the people on the boxes.

Making music for Playback presents certain special challenges and opportunities. In this article, I want to look at three specific ones and offer some suggestions by telling you how I handle them. I hope you will find this useful or at least thought-provoking. As I organized my notes, I found that each of these areas lent themselves to a complementary pair of questions: "Melody or Sound Effects?" "Leading or Following?" and "Internal or External Frame?"

Melody or Sound Effects?

The answer is "yes". (Hint, that's the answer to all three of these questions.) Whether you are an accomplished musician or an actor who's volunteered to take over the table - "but just this once" - you both have one thing in common: you're working from your heart, not your brain. You are adding texture to the performance, not showcasing your technical skills. You don't have to know how to write songs - melody, harmony, and counterpoint are not your starting points. Your starting point is "How can I help the actors tell this story? What does it need?"

If a melody will help, by all means play one. Keep it short. A short repeated melody - even four or five notes on a xylophone - can lend cohesiveness to a piece. You might play the same short phrase every time the main character talks to his child. Or use the same chord sequence to indicate another change of seasons.

continued next page

Don't be shy about making sound effects! It might feel a little corny, but audiences respond to them. The honking horn representing a traffic jam. The "tick-tick-tick" of a drumstick on wooden blocks indicating time -- slow for "I waited, bored and nervous", fast for "I ran to catch her in the airport". The same silly sound effect when the character confronts yet another obstinate piece of technology. These all work. So does your voice. You can hum a melody as they walk through the park. Or you might sing a repeated phrase: "Then, I did it again..." or "Another day went by with no word..." Listen to the story and the playback for opportunities like this. They can be golden moments.

Listen

What I listen for: the first things are the obvious sound effects - a car screeching to a halt, the clock ticking, a baby crying (don't be afraid to use your voice!). Next is a sense of big changes in emotions, sad to happy, brave to scared. Also, does the story happen in a particular season - maybe you can use jingle bells for winter and one chord on a ukulele for summer? These can help you decide what type of sounds to use where.

Leading or Following?—As with any other improvisation, the musician must be aware of "who's leading?" Unlike dialog or the physical movements onstage, the musician can feel a bit disconnected. The actors are keying off of each other but are often not paying conscious attention to the music. So, in some ways, the answer to "leading or following?" might seem to be "following."

But, that isn't true. Just because they aren't listening doesn't mean they aren't listening. If you've found yourself in scenes in which the music came to a crescendo then abruptly quit, or in which the musician changed from a major to a minor chord, you know that the actors "feel" that change and respond to it. The dance between us is a bit more intricate and intimate than it might appear.

Like words and actions, the music must be constantly integrated into the scene. If you hear an opportunity to help build the scene, go ahead and push it forward a bit. If the actors get "stuck" (it happens), a musical change can provide them a fresh perspective. A shift from a minor to a major chord might indicate it's time to change scenes (*always* based on the original story, of course!).

Some of the music the scene needs will present itself easily: more obvious emotions like excitement, anger, fear, sadness, lend themselves to supporting music. But don't let the music turn into just background or a soundtrack. Remember that it is a character too. Maybe the music arrives to bring the character out of their sadness or calm their anxiousness.

One thing that you need to watch out for is accidentally signaling scene changes - even the end of the scene! If you do decide to introduce melody or chords, be careful how you use them. Some melodies and chords lend themselves to endless cycle and are hard to get out of (think "blues jam"), others signal "we're done" (the end of a repeated musical phrase). Try to establish themes and patterns that you can gracefully start and stop as needed. This is easier to do with pure percussion but can be done with melody too. One trick is to keep the phrase short.

This is not an easy dance and your group might want to explicitly workshop it. Practice passing the 'leader' and 'follower' roles back and forth between musician and actors.

Listen

What I listen for: listening to the interview is helpful for making some of the basic decisions about "melody or sound effects" and about "framing", but here you need to be listening more to what's going on onstage, second to second. Opportunities to help will come and go. Be ready for them.

Internal or External Frame—When I think about the "musical frame", there are two major components. The first is the *external frame* - the music that signals the beginning and ending of the piece - the other is the *internal frame* - the music that provides a skeleton running through it.

Some (most?) companies support the transition from interview to performance with music. This external frame music sets the tone for the performance. While you are listening to the interview, see if you can identify a theme that can be used for the opening and closing music like tapping a wooden block if "time" or "waiting" is a key component of the story. I love pulling out a blues harp whenever the city of Chicago is mentioned. Or a simple lullaby if the story is about children. You can reprise this rhythm or melody at transition points in the performance, a good way of indicating time passing or some other significant shift.

The internal frame is a bit different. You might think of it the same way you think of the soundtrack of a film. The music can provide an emotional roadmap that supports the actors' words and motions. Films are notorious for manipulating emotion through their soundtracks, and that isn't the point here. But, providing background sounds can help deepen what the audience feels during the performance. If the scene is being portrayed honestly, the music will just be adding another layer, not "tugging at their heart-strings".

Listen

What I listen for: did the interview offer any clues to some sounds that could "set the scene" as the actors are getting ready? Were there obvious emotional high and low points that music can support? Are the transition points clear? Does our group work well enough together that we can dovetail music and action at those points?

Conclusion / Parting Notes

6 Figures is my first experience with Playback Theatre. When I joined, our toolkit was nearly all percussion instruments (the exception being a plastic recorder and an E harmonica!). Initially, this felt limiting, but it made me pay more attention to the performance as a whole. The music had to be another actor, not an "added feature". The categories above came out of a close examination of my own process of trying to figure out where that actor fit. Over the last year, we've added more instruments and just recently began talking about including more voice and songs in our performances. It's an exciting change.

Mike Fedel from 6 Figures Playback Company Michigan comes to Playback with a background as a teacher of Philosophy and Religion, a software developer, and a dad, all of which "somehow" inform his approach to music.