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THEATER

'Tell us your tale'

EMU's Playback Theatre takes its scripts from the audience



Group therapy: College kids act out their issues.

BY ANGELA GAGNEUR-SALAMEY
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On four dark-brown boxes sit four poised performers. On the floor to their right sit two additional performers surrounded by small instruments: handheld drums, shakers, jingle bells, harmonicas, kazoos and the like. An engaging "conductor" leads a jittery audience member to a special seat left of the eager cast. This is the beginning of an evening of storytelling, performance art, improvisation, music and, undoubtedly, laughter. This is the 6 Figures Playback Theatre Company at Eastern Michigan University, offering live performances that promote dialogue, listening, speaking out, taking action and uncovering the stories that have never been told.

Playback theater is improvised on the basis of personal stories shared by audience members. The international network of playback companies has grown to include hundreds of groups from Japan to California — and the sole

Michigan group at EMU — since its creation in 1975. Founder Jonathan Fox, a student of improv and storytelling from New York's Hudson River Valley region, came up with the idea of theater that values everybody's stories. Theatergoers move from silent observers to active participants in a dialogue.

Anita Rich, associate professor of interpretation and performance studies, currently heads 6 Figures, which in three years has grown to a company of more than a dozen active members who perform locally, putting on shows everywhere from weddings to senior center gatherings, from hospital workshops to high school assemblies.

"Playback can be used in such a wide range of educational, social, artistic and corporate settings," Rich explains. "It can be used to tackle the tough issues we face as human beings and to share our triumphs." She lists such issues as sexual harassment, bullying, racism,

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illness and the joys of life, marriage, birth and personal achievement. Rich also points out that playback isn't about creating a mirror image of a person's story. "What playback creates is a metaphoric performance, an interpretation. We look to uncover the story behind the story. We try to capture the essence of a person's experience, to respect and validate it, not exploit it."

Player Helen Keefe drives to her weekly 6 Figures rehearsals in Ypsilanti from East Lansing. Through her training with Rich, she hopes to start a Playback company at Michigan State University.

"I went to a playback conference in Windsor and got hooked," Keefe says. "This style of performance provides a safe space for people to tell their stories in a supportive environment."

A typical performance begins with warm-ups. Audience members are asked to share feelings about a variety of subjects. A group of four actors creates "fluid sculptures" using their bodies and repetitive vocals. Designed to dramatize feelings, the "sculptures" are accompanied by live music from two additional actors (hence the name "6 Figures"). The evening's "conductor" invites an audience member to come on stage and tell a longer personal story, and engages that person in a series of questions to uncover the essence of the narrative. Actors and musicians listen intently and await their assigned roles and performance cue. Spontaneous theater begins.

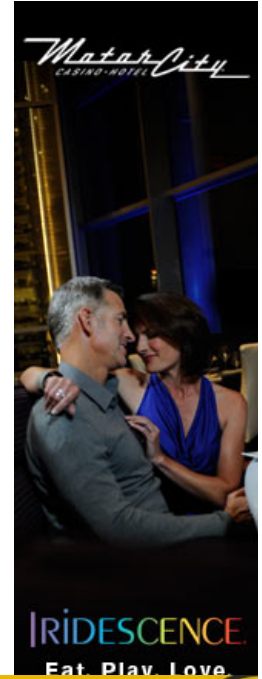
"Playback adds insight to what's being shared. It brings people's lives to the stage," says Karen Czarnick, professional storyteller and returning 6 Figures member. "There is so much value in sharing stories, in being given permission to re-create someone's personal experience. It provides healing and connectedness."

When asked why playback isn't alive at every college and university, Rich replies, "Perhaps it's something people just have to experience to understand the value of it."

And through playback, members at EMU are committed to bringing hope, inspiration and social change to a troubled world, one story at a time.

6 Figures participates in the 3rd Annual Global Playback Day, as groups across the globe perform Stories That Uncover Our Hearts, 6-8 p.m., Sunday, Nov. 18, at the new Student Center auditorium, 900 Oakwood Blvd., on Eastern Michigan University's campus in Ypsilanti; call 734-487-0797 for more information.

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