

Together and Different. Building a culture of peace in schools through Playback Theatre.

ITAC THINK TANK: August 2019

Hosted by Rasia Friedler (Uruguay)

This is the transcript of one of ITAC Collaborative's monthly Think Tank sessions. Each session focuses on a new theme and is hosted by someone from a different country.

In August of 2019, Rasia Friedler (Uruguay) led a highly interactive session with members of the ITAC community about the value of playback theatre in schools to help students tackle questions of identity, compassion, and violence typically portrayed through bullying. While the discussion sections are not featured in this archive, Rasia deftly captures the values of the playback theatre movement and graciously explores her work with SaludArte.

Instances in which the text is in [brackets] indicates when the transcriber was not certain of the speaker's original word choice. Ellipses in parentheses (...) indicate when the sound was indecipherable for transcription.

Rasia 0:10

Well, I'm very grateful for this opportunity to share with you our experience of our program: Together and Different. We have a foundation, which is called SaludArte, which means health and art together. And we promote health through art and humor. And we - and we work with all kinds of populations contributing to build a culture of peace. Now, how many of you know playback theater? Have you heard of it? Or have you seen it? Watch it?

Guest 1 1:00

I've heard of it. I'm not sure if I've seen it. I did have an experience that I think might have been played by theater theater at the throne many years ago. It was experimented with, I think in Scotland, if it's the same thing that I'm thinking of, which is

Rasia 1:18

Well, I'll tell you. Well, playback theatre, it's an interactive and participatory spontaneous form of theater. It is a method and it has been envisioned by Jonathan Fox. Although in Psychodrama and Mareno... in 1921, he created the spontaneous theatre that is an very important background. Jonathan Fox had many influences and he was living in Nepal and he was investigating the importance of oral history to strengthen the communities and well he with other influences as well - psychodrama and experimental theater, he created this methodology. There is an important ritual which enables to create a climate and safe emotionally - safely emotional climate to so that the audience members - the audience participants can feel that they can tell their personal stories to see them enacted on the spot.

Guest 1 2:59

Yeah, is the same thing that I saw.

Rasia 3:02

Yeah, okay. Okay. So, you have got a conductor, actors, specially trained, there is a specially trained company, right. And you have actors, you have a musician or more than one musician and you have a conductor and there is a whole ritual. So that you are creating a gradual rapport with the audience. And first with short forms, such as with sculptures and other kinds of pairs, there are many forms of enacting what people are feeling, first, they are just sensations or emotions. And then you get when the record is already established. We invite people to tell a personal story related to the theme of the session of the workshop. Well, in our case, we work on the values and the values of playback theatre are strongly related with human values and a two piece culture building. That's why they go so well together.

Rasia 4:42

Today, playback theater is a method that is being used in more than 50 countries in the world. And it is very use very frequently used for social change. The division is that spontaneity and creativity allows deeper encounters among people, that we are not only rational, but we have, we are full of emotions. And we need to communicate in other ways, in order that we can listen to other people's more deeply. So active listening is one of the important parts of it the empathy, to see what we have in common, and to see our difference as enrichment and not as something that pull us apart are the values of diversity, respect for human rights, to understand everything that leads to be more open minded, and to see that there is not only one truth, but there are different subjective truths is part of it.

Rasia 6:17

So, playback theater is a very strong tool to work at this with this in schools. But it isn't enough to work with the students, there is a whole system that has to be in the same track, let's say to be able to produce some changes, you know. We know that going to a culture of non violence is not easy. It takes many generations to reach that, but we must work for it. Our education must attempt more currently, the social emotional education. We have been very cognitive, and many times the social emotional education has been neglected. So, with these programs, we try to reinforce an aspect that had been not so well worked in education.

Rasia 7:46

One important aspect is that people who hadn't been heard before are having the opportunity to be recognized and heard. So they can tell their story. And not only that gives us the possibility of examining in a new light, his or her story, but also to see efficient other possibilities of solutions. And many times we ask for the members of the audience who are the students or the parents of the teachers to give solutions to the problems. And this is very important because we stimulate them to stand stand up for peace, culture, or non violence. We strengthen the role of the bystander, the witnesses, to take action, to stop aggressiveness. Although we make prevention of bullying in school, the most frequent situation, not that violence that goes on and on at any time as it is bullying. But the small violence - the small harassment, it might make happen once, it doesn't need to become a bullying, but we have to we focus that because that is the seed of what can become bullying. So -

Guest 1 9:41

Microaggressions, we call them.

Rasia 9:45

How do you call them?

Guest 1 9:46

Microaggressions.

Rasia 9:49

Okay. Okay. Do you want to - you want to ask questions, please feel free to say! Sorry my English is not quite brushed up, but

Guest 1 10:04

It's a lot better than ours! (Laughter)

Rasia 10:07

Well, and people, the students, for instance, they get empowered. Because they, they feel recognized, they are listened to without being judged, which is very important. And they, they very often they tell their story, they see the story enacted on the scene. And then the conductor, which is me in this case, I asked him or her - the teller - how he sees the scene, we call them stories, but they are scenes.

Rasia 10:53

And I also ask if he wants to add something, to say something now that he has seen that story. Because many times, after having seen the story, they have a new insight about it. And they say, well, from now on, I'll do something or I want you to, and I asked them also if they want to say something to the other students. And when the students - when I asked the students to give solutions, and they, they say those solutions, and many times we enact the solutions in this theme. And then I asked them to if they would compromise to implement those solutions in real life. And I asked them to ask - to raise their hands. Those who are really assuming a

compromise in front of this teller that this won't happen again. So they they assume a compromise with witnesses.

Rasia 12:18

And another thing that's very interesting is that there is always a bystander, a victim and a perpetrator of aggression. We try not to use the term bully because bully is not a - it's not an identity. And you we know that negative labels are very difficult to shift. So we try to speak of the perpetrator or of violence, or the aggressor, but not bully.

Rasia 13:01

Also, because it happens that people who have been bullied might change to bystanders and might change to bullies. So people can oscillate among those roles. And playback theater allows to examine those roles and to change roles. So they can experiment, how is it to feel bullied. One of the students told us after doing that, after, he was generally very aggressive and he was a perpetrator of bullying. And when he had to dramatize the other role of being bullied, he really had a shock. He can't imagine that the person being bullied would feel that way. Until that moment, he interacted with the other children. So because we asked him to come on stage and enact with us those situations, so they get completely involved. And their motivation is so intense, that many, many stories arise.

Rasia 14:29

So sometimes what I do is what I tell them, well tell me just the title of your story. And because workshop we can do three or four stories or five stories at the most, because otherwise, they would be very superficial. You know, to go deep into the into the story, you need time. And when they understand that they have this opportunity of being deeply heard, recognized, and helped, they all want to tell stories. So sometimes what I do is, I ask them to say a title, just that as if it were a resume, and a title, and then to say, one phrase, just one phrase. And then the the other is how to choose which stories they want to be enacted. Because we don't have time to make them all. And so it's very, very prohibitive. And we also sensitize with, we have some special songs.

Unknown Speaker 15:55
(Discussion Break)

Guest 1 15:56

As he ran and fell, we pounded him like clay, every punch, every insult, every slip, every fall made us a little older and stronger, honorable. And yes, we were great, powerful. We were the heroes of the world, we were men. That was until the next day, when they pulled their small, cold blue body out of the canal. We were men. Jack Foxx.

Madeleine 16:27
Thank you.

Rasia 16:29

There is always an imbalance of power involved in bullying. And also that idea that that becoming a man becoming violent. That machismo was said here, I don't know in English. So there are many gender questions related to you. And also, what happens mostly is that it's easier for students to tell stories about being bullied, but nobody wants to say, tell a story of bullying, you know, of being ever greater. So we have to work with them, to encourage them to tell those stories, which are more difficult to arise, because nobody wants to be convinced that he's ever greater and they don't see them as such.

Rasia 17:35

And also, there is - sometimes they justify saying, well, but this is very different. And so we have to stress that nobody deserves to be bullied. And just to reinforce the idea that, well, well - what can I learn from your difference? What can you learn from mine? The concept that we also are different for the other and not just the other for me. All that - we we try to work with them and they are very, very receptive. The limitations, I would say are resources, financial resources to sustain these programs, and to make them as a public health in order to get big changes in social changes. These programs should be part of public politics, public programs, and they are not. They're not. So that's (...) because it's clear the benefits of it. It's very clear. So Salas, which is the spouse of Jonathan Fox. He developed a (...) with her company. She also has to stop (...) with playback.

Guest 1 19:23

Sorry, who is that?

Rasia 19:24

Jo Salas.

Guest 1 19:26

Journey Salas?

Rasia 19:27

Jo. Jo Salas.

Guest 1 19:29

Jo Salas.

Rasia 19:30

Yes. If you Google her, you'll see she has a program for preventing bullying through playback theater, as well. She had a experience - plenty of experience in the states with this. So it is easy for you to -

Madeleine 19:54

We've got a question for you in the comment section about - could you talk more about how you the songs?

Rasia 20:02

The songs. We use them a lot. They sensitize and they raise awareness of. The songs we sing - there are two of the programs, which are (...). I don't know the, your course, procedures, but when we adapted them, and we also adapted other songs for this program, and children love them and this generates memory. And it becomes - it makes this program more playful and more. I mean that the humor and the pleasure must be there, otherwise you don't connect with children. So there is the sadness, but there is also always the joy, the joy of overcoming problems, the joy of a sense of community, the joy of the values that are strengthened. And the empowerment, and the song - we also dance with them.

Rasia 21:16

Sometimes we end a workshop with singing and dancing. And they get completely involved in that. We also teach them a choreography, very simple choreography of our songs. And then they the teachers tell us that they keep on playing with that choreography when they are alone. And so it gives a connection with the program even when we are not there. And we also share with them the songs so that they can use them even when we are not there. So to strengthen the message of the program. Does that answer your question? Yeah.

Madeleine 22:10

Thumbs up? So I think so.

Rasia 22:12

Oh, I would like to know you all what what you're doing if you're educators, as well, you work in schools? Can you tell me?

Madeleine 22:26

I think everyone's got their microphones muted to try and be polite. So unmute everyone!

Guest 1 22:31

I don't! I'm not polite. (Laughter) Yes, I I sometimes work in schools, but also in community settings. And I use a whole different range of tools and experiences of theater. And I moved away from Forum Theatre some time ago. A least 15 years ago, 20 years ago, maybe? And I'm curious how much of this uses forum theater technique. The playback technique? To me when I saw it happen, and it was quite a difficult session. And I, I felt quite uncomfortable with it. Probably because I wasn't collaborator. And I wasn't in amongst it. I was observing, but because I do think you have to be in it to get the full benefit of it. But, yeah, how much of it is forum theater?

Rasia 23:46

How much of it is forum theater?

Guest 1 23:47

Forum theater? How much of it uses those techniques of forum theater?

Rasia 23:52

Forum? Yes. Yes. Wow. Methodology? Yes forum. We incorporate elements of forum theatre in playback theatre, as well. In fact, we as well use our plenty of tools, not just playback theatre. And we work in community as well. And we work in hospitals. And yes, we work in many, many contexts. And the tools are very, very fire. Very tight verse. And, yes.

Madeleine 24:31

We've got another introduction in the comment section. So I'll just read it from Rebecca and Mitra, who are teaching artists in Minnesota Opera in the US, and they work with self selected middle school and high schoolers in an opera experience. Rebecca goes into classrooms for an entire year and creates theater with the inner city and lower income schools.

Rasia 24:58

Great, Congratulations. Well, playback theatre is also very useful to adolescents, teenagers, for preventing addictions and to work on sexuality items, because we don't have it anymore. But for 10 years, we had a playback dance company. And innovation we did not just with theater, but with dance, in order to be able to metaphoroze - to metaphor... to work with subjects that are very delicate touch of sexuality, and what's very, very good to work with teenagers. And we had, we also work in preventing addictions to there is one methodology. We call it, I feel - I feel, I think, and I act. And you have a different color of card when you feel, you think, and you act. I mean, I feel is red, I think is blue, and I act is yellow. And we have those cards. So the students raise the conflict and they have to put one card and improvise a monologue. If they are with the red card, they have to improvise that monologue of what they are feeling - just feeling - that they have related to the company. If they work with the blue card, they say what they think about.

Rasia 27:03

So, and the idea is that teenagers are sometimes very impulsive. And we insulate, thinking, and feeling and acting. So we, we try that, that has a place between what they feel and what they do. It's very, very interesting too. It's very interactive, and very useful. Sometimes we see that they are in very complex and difficult to patients. They have to help our blacksmith suppose and they don't want to go home because they want their parents to know of their country. And they have to come home with them very difficult situations, for instance, so they really need that help.

Madeleine 28:22

We've had a comment about how much in Rebecca and Mitra love the think, feel, act activity. I think that's capturing everyone's imagination. And we've also had another question about the choreography, and whether or not that's based on improv. And if that's - is it spoken first and then danced or the choreography first?

Rasia 28:49

So we show the choreography, and then we do it with them. So that they practice it a little bit. Very simple so that they can remember. And, well, the children love it. And you know, when you go to them sometimes there is there are some dancers who show a choreography and they teach - teachit on the spot. Well, we do that. Did I answer the question, yes?

Madeleine 29:21

I think we're getting nods. Does anyone else want to introduce themselves briefly, and talk about the work that they do.

Rasia 29:36

Oh, that would be wonderful. They want to say to all of us, yes.

Peter 29:47

So, my name is Peter Adelety. I'm a teaching artist here in Ghana and all are supporting the ITAC flag, very strong here. I'm much engaged with schools in communities and in schools. What have you done so far (...) - also in 2016, I went with that was my final year project on the piece, where I choreographed some works.

Peter 30:17

I said, I've been doing drama as well. And I'm so much privileged to have what you talked about. I just had power cut out when we got to - you talked about playback theatre. I couldn't get enough of that. But I'll get the video, so I'll have the privilege to go back into it. I don't know if you have also come across TFD - theatre for development. Do you use that?

Rasia 30:41

No, no. What? Tell me about it. At least by the name that name. I don't know it.

Peter 30:50

Okay, it's theatre for development is also improv based. (...)

Rasia 31:01

Oh, that sounds very interesting.

Madeleine 31:06

He may have frozen. Yeah.

Rasia 31:10

Maybe he can send me some information or a link?

Madeleine 31:14

Sure.

Rasia 31:16

I think it's - I would like to know more about it.

Madeleine 31:19

Yeah, I'll start a thread of chat after this session. Because I'm conscious - we've been cut short. We were cut short, a little bit timewise. So if you've got recommendations of resources, Rasia -

Rasia 31:33

I will send, which are - ... it's frozen.

Madeleine 31:40

Yeah, I think he's cut out.

Rasia 31:41

I will be glad to receive your, your suggestions, your links, and yes, to know more about your work to

Madeleine 31:50

Yes, yeah, Peter, it looks like you might be back. I was just saying you cut out there. But, I'll start an email chain at the end. So if you wanted to send information about the developmental theatre practice you were talking about, then you can maybe swap notes on what that was? Unless you want to see a little more about it. Now, I'm not sure how your connection is.

Peter 32:14

Yeah, it's not stable here. I think I will do that later.

Madeleine 32:17

Okay, that makes sense.

Rasia 32:19

Thank you.

Madeleine 32:21

So we're coming into the last five minutes. And just if there are any final things you want to say to wrap up if you want to sum up in some way, or if there are questions. This is probably a good time to invite those because I know we're coming towards the end.

Guest 1 32:43

Just to say thank you for sharing. It's really interesting. I'm interested in the context as well, because I think it's a global thing. And the more we can have conversations about this, and share tools that work the more likely we are to be able to tackle what's happening with young people and schools and mental health.

Madeleine 33:14

Yeah. Is there some kind of toolkit Rasia? You know, there's the teaching art history toolkit and there's loads of resources and sort of specific topics.

Rasia 33:24

There's also a school - playback theatre school in New York, but there are many opportunities of training outside the US, because as I told you, playback theater is in 50 - more than 50

countries in the world. So I will send you the link of the IBTN, which is international playback theater network. And you can find out what you want to know about possibilities of training as well, which is very, very, very interesting. In Latin America, we have also a great movement of spontaneous theater, which is strongly connected to playback theater, but it's more - I'm less specific, less specific, you know, there are plenty of resources.

Guest 1 34:29

I'd be interested in hearing about that.

Rasia 34:32

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Okay, so I will send you information as well. Yeah. Great. Are you in social networks? If you want to keep in contact, I am in Instagram by my name Rusia.F and in Facebook, by my name as

Guest 1 34:56

Rasia dot...?

Madeleine 35:04

For anyone who follows attack on social media, the last couple of posts have tagged harass er. So that's an easy one.

Rasia 35:14

And so that we have the - we are in Facebook as SaludArteFoundation, you put Fundacion SaludArte in Spanish, and you get to you have the link again, right? Yeah. Yeah. And you can follow our activities there as well.

Madeleine 35:39

Thank you. Well, thank you for giving us

Rasia 35:42

Thank you so much! Congratulations on your words. And it was a pleasure meeting you.

Madeleine 35:48

Thank you so much for joining us. And these are every month. So look out for our themes. And if anything catches your attention, do sign up. And thank you very much. Thank you Rasia. And thank you everyone for coming.

Unknown Speaker 35:59

(Words of Farewell)