

Dilemmas and conflicts in Playback Theater – the fuel of the drama

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Intro

A conflict is considered the core of Drama. It is what we want to see onstage. In Playback Theater (PT) there are special forms that specialize in staging dilemmas and conflicts in a clear way. This article offers some terms, models and forms that can aid the PT ensemble in enacting different kinds of internal and inter-personal conflicts. The article begins with clarification of terms relating to dilemmas and conflicts, together with understanding from the Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) field. The article will focus on revisions of some existing PT forms as well as new short and medium forms. An examination of enacting antagonism and conflicts in Scenes will be described in a future article.

Clarification of terms

In order to enact dilemmas and conflicts onstage, we must first define the different terms and to understand their structure.

Ambivalence is a state of having simultaneous conflicting reactions, beliefs, or feelings towards some object. Ambivalence is the experience of having an attitude towards someone or something that contains both positively and negatively valenced components. The term also refers to situations where "mixed feelings" of a more general sort are experienced, or where a person experiences uncertainty or indecisiveness¹. In workshops, we usually describe an ambivalence as a "and/and" story: a combination of positive and negative feelings toward a person/object/idea. Tellers who tell about their ambivalence usually refer to feelings. We have found that a story about ambivalence is best enacted as a chorus and therefore will not be included in this article².

A **dilemma** is a problem offering two possibilities, neither of which is fully desirable. One in this position has been traditionally described as "being on the horns of a dilemma", neither horn being comfortable³. This kind of story we label as an "either/or" story. We have found that dilemmas are usually on a cognitive level.

¹ Ambivalence. (2015, July 23). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 09:58, August 17, 2015, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ambivalence&oldid=672709200>

² For more on choruses see Romanelli, 2015

³ Dilemma. (2015, July 29). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 10:00, August 17, 2015, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dilemma&oldid=673582564>

Conflict is a state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons ideas or interest. It is a mental struggle, sometimes unconscious, resulting when different representations of the world are held in opposition. It can be between parts of ourselves internally (inner conflict) or externally with others (interpersonal conflict)⁴. We call this type of “___against ___”. When relating to interpersonal conflict, this sometimes relates to a behavioral decision.

Most stories contain one or more of the above elements. Each teller may emphasize one of the above elements or a combination of them. Below is an example of story that will help clarify the differences between these terms.

A man told a story of purchasing and renovating his new apartment only to realize that there was a leak from the upstairs neighbor's porch. He approached the neighbor who refused to fix the leak claiming it was caused by the renovations downstairs and demanded that the teller pay for half of the cost of fixing the leak. The teller had to decide what to do.

In this Story, there are a few different dimensions. The teller might voice his *ambivalent* feelings about the idea of “neighbors” – different feelings such as the importance of being nice, the necessity to be firm, the value of open communication but also the respect of privacy. He might choose to focus on the cognitive *dilemma* regarding what to do with the neighbor – to sue the neighbor or to agree to the offer to pay half.

He could also describe his *internal conflict* between that part of him that is nice and peace loving and his assertive part. Or finally, He might choose to focus on the *external conflict* between him and his neighbor.

The focus of teller can and should influence the PT enactment. The conductor must be sensitive to which aspect of the conflict the teller is conveying in order to choose the right form.

NLP conflict resolution

Before integrating these concepts into the specific practice of PT, I would like to use some terminology from the Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) literature. Logical Levels (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000; Knight, 2002) refers to the hierarchy of levels of processes within an individual. The function of each level is to synthesize and organize the interactions of the level below it. In our case, each level represents a prism by which to see a story told. There are 6 levels that a dilemma or conflict can appear:

⁴ Conflict (process). (2015, August 9). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 10:02, August 17, 2015, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conflict_\(process\)&oldid=675314811](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conflict_(process)&oldid=675314811)

1. **Environment** – where? When? Constraints on self.
2. **Behavior** – what? Action of person.
3. **Capabilities** – how? Direction of action.
4. **Beliefs/values** – why? Permission, motivation of person.
5. **Identity** – who? Overall purpose and mission of self
6. **Spiritual** – For whom? For what? Trans-mission, Transpersonal.

When we hear a dilemma or internal conflict, the conductor should clarify at what level the dilemma/conflict is and to make sure that both parts⁵ of the dilemma/conflict are on the same level. If the opposing parts are not on the same logical levels, then higher-level part in some ways includes the lower level part, and therefore the enactment will be less balanced and therefore less powerful emotionally for the teller and audience. When dilemmas and conflicts are described in higher levels (such as beliefs, identity or spiritual), they are often core issues for the teller.

For example a teller has a dilemma whether to move to the countryside (Environment level) or to keep the current job at the bank in the city (Behavior level).

These two parts are not at the same logical level, and the conductor could ask clarifying questions so that both parts are on the same level to better enact the core internal conflict/dilemma.

In this example, if we focus on the behavior level (the job the teller wants to do) then that would include or infer about the environment level (where the teller will live).

Another important NLP concept is that of the *positive intention* of internal parts. “At some level, all behavior is intended or has been developed for some positive purpose” (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000, pg. 970). Each part or opinion in a person has a positive intention that helps and protects him. It is that positive intention that is hopefully maintained in change processes. What we aim to change and/or integrate is the dissonance behavior or thought pattern that the teller currently uses.

In NLP parts integration, the trainer focuses on the positive intention of both internal parts that are in conflict in order to find the possible integration (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000).

In Playback Theater, the positive intention gives actors a richer pool of resources when enacting a specific part. It is especially useful when one part

⁵ I will use the term “parts” to represent the two opposing opinions/emotions/cognitions that make the dilemma or conflict.

of a dilemma or internal conflict that evokes judgment or criticism from the actors or audience.

For example, a woman told a story whether to continue to volunteer full time with ill children or to move to the big city and find a profitable job in the media industry.

Most of the audience will usually be in favor of continuing the volunteering position, and actors who are cast to play the part of getting a good paying job, will act this part without much belief or gusto, usually defaulting into a “greedy” feeling, which might be an unconscious representation of their own feeling about capitalism.

In this example, a possible positive intention of that part is the intention to give the teller a possibility to developing professionally in order to have resources to make a change in the world.

If the actor connects to the above positive intention then he can play that part with a more congruent, embodied tone which can consequently make the dilemma more balanced and “harder” to sympathize with one side.

We have found that in order to faithfully and fully enact a deep dilemma or internal conflict, the conductor and actors must be clear about three dimensions:

1. The *cognitive* level – what is the thought or decision of this part?
2. The *feeling* level – what feeling each part evokes in the teller?
3. The *positive intention* of each part – how does that part protect or serve the teller? The positive intention could be harder to find, so perhaps the conductor can hint or guess about that level. These three levels could be inferred by the actors or gently invited by the conductor.

Emotional breathing

When enacting a dilemma in pairs, there is a need for each actor to portray one one part of the conflict and not to act the ambivalence or confusion between the two parts. The actor must be engaged fully in that specific part in order to be fully embodied and contribute to a potent enactment of a tough dilemma.

A good tool for actors to connect fully and quickly to an emotion is *emotional breathing*. Emotional breathing is the term for the specific breathing of each emotion. Each actor has his or her own idiosyncrotic breathing for different emotions.

For example, when exploring anger, actors find a specific kind of breathing

that is connected to their anger, and then subseqentially they practice that breath playing with the intensity of the breath. For some, angry breathing might be quick shallow nostral breathing, for others it might be slow abdominal breaths. This mastery deepens the conditioning between the specific feeling and the emotion.

Actors who have awareness and access to their different emotional breathing types can use them to quickly in order to swiftly embody an emotion onstage. It has been my experience that audiences connect instantly to emotional breathing, through their own mirror neurons which in turn creates empathy and more intense projections on the actors.

Enactments of dilemmas and conflicts onstage

Before describing PT forms, let us review the different modes an actor can portray a part in a conflict or dilemma:

- Emotional breathing
- Movement – whether it's a singular movement, or a combination of movements.
- Single word/phrase – “less is more” – Using one phrase together with emotional breath can have a strong effect.
- Text
- Songs
- Combination of the above

Actors do not have to use the same mode when enacting their part onstage. One actor can use breathing and movement, and the other actor text. In these cases, we found that the actor using less text usually has a stronger impact.

Intra-psychoic pairs

Below are some suggestions and variations that we found to be useful for pairs playing an intra-psychoic dilemma or conflict. For a comprehensive overview of the pair forms, see Salas (1999) or Lubrani Rolnick (2009).

Traditional pairs

This form is can be used in stories regarding internal conflict or dissonance between different parts of the teller (what the teller shows versus what he feels). Sometimes, the teller might have conscious desire and also a self-contradictory unconscious desire (McKee, 1997).

For example, a teller tells about his son's new girlfriend. On the outside, there is a part of him is happy that his bachelor son finally found someone, but inside he doesn't think the new girl friend is good enough for his son. The positive intention of the happy part can be that of deepening the connecting to his son. The positive intention of the part that doesn't think the girlfriend is good enough can be that of protecting his son, ensuring a good future for his family.

Onstage, two actors will enact this internal conflict, one in front of the other⁶. The front actor would then enact the supportive part, with the back actor representing the darker, more libidinal part, who sometimes erupts forward. Below is our version of the traditional pair:

- Actors stand one in front of the other, in an abstract, vague freeze.
- They each choose their emotional breathing and make sure that they are not in the same breathing mode.
- Staying in that breathing within the freeze, allows actors to fully associate to the part they are playing.
- The front actor unfreezes first; vocalizing clearly which part he is playing and is given a few moments to establish his solo.
- Then the back actor unfreezes and physically tries to pass the front actor and be in the front of the pair and become the dominant feeling.
- The physical struggle onstage will organically give energy to each actor.
- It is possible for the back actor to actually pass the front actor, and do a short solo, like a spark, so that his side is momentarily actualized, and then return to the back.
- Finish in a freeze.

Rotationary pairs – “Shawarma”

In Israel we call this form, Shawarma, like the rotating meat stick that is common in the Middle East. This form is suited for stories about dilemmas or internal conflicts (which can also relate to an external conflict).

- We begin this form with both actors facing each other from opposite sides of the stage. Each actor first connects to his emotional breathing, and when loaded, they make eye contact.
- Once eye contact is made, they start moving toward each other.
- Once they physically meet in center stage, they find an idiosyncratic way to be in contact (usually the back to back configuration) and begin to turn clockwise.
- Each actor has two or three solos while facing the audience during the

⁶ For convenience purposes, I will address actors as male even though I refer female and male actors.

circle of the shawarma.

- Each solo can use any or all the modalities described above (breathing, movement, text, song).
- During these solos, the actors can use text/songs/movements from the other part, adapting and changing it to fit their part.
- The form ends with both actors somehow facing the audience (whether perpendicularly if back to back, or some sort of sculpture).
 - Both actors can end by talking at the same time until they reach a short crescendo.
 - Or both organically find the common higher positive intention by saying the same word/phrase simultaneously in their two separate emotions/sides.

“One in the Head and one in the heart”

This form is used in stories about a dissonance between the thoughts and the feelings of a teller. *For example, a woman told a story about being in a relationship that is stable and safe with great financial stability. But deep in her heart, she yearns for a passionate emotional and physical relationship and knows she won't have that with her current partner.*

The positive intention of the part that wants to stay in the current relationship is that of security and safety from pain. The heart's positive intention is that of living life to it's fullest by being fulfilled and happy.

Below is the description of this form:

- Actors begin on both sides of stage, as in the rotationary pairs, with a single box/chair/stool in middle of the stage.
- When both actors arrive to the box, one of them stands on the box, thereby representing the voice of the reason/cognition/head.
 - One of the actors can decide beforehand that he will stand on the chair, or that could be decided more spontaneously if it not clear which part of the pair is the “logical” one.
 - The head actor usually uses more words and has a wider view into the future.
- The other actor therefore represents the heart/soul/emotional voice, and physically relates to the head actor by either trying to climb up unto the chair, overthrow and replace the other actor, or just swerve around the head actor.
 - Best if “heart” actor contrasts the head actor using less words and uses mostly emotional breathing and archetypal movement.
- It is suggested that from time to time there be some eye contact between both parts during the enactment. This eye contact keeps both

parts emotionally loaded and connected, as well as allowing certain integration between parts.

- Ending – Each interaction between the head and heart will be different and can result in a myriad of ways.
 - We can choose to see the ending (be it both standing on chair, both not on the chair, replacing of the head voice or something else) as a hint of a possible integration of these parts.

The cross

This popular form is suited for a dilemma or internal conflict (which may relate to an existing external conflict). The cross allows each actor to enact the whole range of the dilemma and requires the actors to undergo change on all the three levels: cognitively, emotionally and (perhaps) also in the positive intention. *We will use the previous example of the dilemma between volunteering full time volunteering or taking a profitable job in the media industry.*

- Actors begin on both sides of the stage in a freeze together with emotional breathing facing the audience. Both stay in that position which in turn helps them fully associate to that part.
- The first actor who unfreezes, making a clear offer, so as to know which part of the pair he is acting. His first offer should be the extreme expression of that part.
 - *In our example, the first beat could be an extreme portrayal of being very rich and donating to other organizations.*
 - The first actor then does a short solo (about 15 seconds) while sidestepping toward center stage, facing the audience.
- When the 1st actor is done, the 2nd actor on the other side begins a short solo that expresses the extreme position of the other part while sidestepping toward the center of the stage.
 - *In our example, the first beat of the second actor could be one of living with the people she volunteers with and perhaps choosing to live there permanently.*
- With every step toward the center of the stage, each actor is less confident in his part and enacts solos that are progressively more ambivalent about his original part.
- The actors continue to alternate solos, each time coming closer and closer.
- Once they meet, both actors face each other, making eye contact. This position represents the pure ambivalence, the place where the teller is really confused.
 - This place can also represent the deeper positive intention that is

- shared by both parts.
- At this point both actors look at each other and begin to circle around facing each other, interacting in the here and now, waiting to find a moment that will organically propel them into changing sides and begin the journey to the other side of the stage, and the other part of the dilemma.
- Once both actors find the moment of change, they continue to cross to the other side of the stage while facing the audience and adopt the view of their “new” part using short soliloquies, as in the first part of the Cross.
 - With each step the actor becomes more confident and less ambivalent with his new part.
 - The more extreme sides of the stage represent the extreme position of that part.
 - Once the switch has occurred, best if both actors reincorporate offers from the first half of the cross.
- The form ends with actors on the extreme sides of stage (the opposite side from which they began) expressing one word/phrase that represents their new part.
 - It is possible to end with both sides doing the same vocal or kinesthetic offer at the same time although in their different sides.

Complex forms

During our workshops, there was a need to develop a narrative PT form of dilemmas that would not only show the teller’s internal dilemma/conflict but also the external consequences of those possible decisions.

The next two forms require more than two actors and allow a multi-dimensional narrative view of dilemmas and conflicts including enactments of future possibilities.

Shawarma with Pita – complex rotational pairs

This form is best suited for stories of internal conflict/dilemmas requiring a specific action or decision regarding a specific antagonist.

Three actors are needed: two to play the two sides of the teller, and one actor to play the antagonist.

For example, *a woman told about her ex-boyfriend that she feels she still loves. She had a dilemma whether to profess her true feelings for him or not when they meet in a work conference the following week.*

The positive intension of confessing her love could be to follow her heart and dare to be happy. The positive intention of the part of not confessing her love

could be to keep herself safe from pain.

Two actors will be chosen to play her and one to play her boyfriend, who we will call David. Notice that this is an internal dilemma involving a specific external antagonist with a clear decision to be made.

The form is as follows:

- Teller chooses two actors to play her and one to play the antagonist.
- The two actors begin a shawarma pair as described above upstage⁷ with the antagonist actor waiting downstage⁸ on the side ready for action.
- After two rounds of the shawarma, when both actors established their positions, one of the actors (teller A) leaves the shawarma and goes downstage and beings a scene with the antagonist leading with his specific side/decision. *In our example, Teller A can start the scene with David, confessing her love.* The actor playing David then reacts spontaneously and the scene continues for a few moments.
 - While the scene is occurring downstage, Teller B remains in soft freeze upstage, watching the scene from the shawarma position, being a silent witness.
 - The 1st scene ends once the teller's actor or the antagonist feels that the essence has been shown.
- Teller A then returns to the shawarma, antagonist returns to side downstage and there are another two rounds of the shawarma, relating to the scene that just occurred as material to deepen their original positions.
- Then Teller B leaves the shawarma and beings a scene with the antagonist. *In our example, teller B can start the scene by talking to David about the work conference without confessing her love.*
 - The antagonist begins the scene in the same as before, and reacts naturally to the new offers that Teller B makes in the scene.
 - Teller A remains in a soft freeze in the shawarma upstage position.
 - This scene continues until one of the actors feels it's reached its essence.
- Teller B returns to the shawarma, and antagonist leaves the stage.
- The ending can vary:
 - Both Tellers return to the shawarma for one last round, reincorporating the materials generated throughout the form.
 - Both tellers return to the shawarma and organically integrate to a sort of fluid sculpture.

⁷ The part of the stage that is far from the audience.

⁸ The part of the stage that is close to the audience.

- Both tellers change their original positions to the other opposite and end with a duel solo side by side.

This form can be developed as a technique for long form Scene enactment. It is based on the concept of *spatial anchoring*, using different physical locations as anchors/triggers for different internal parts (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000). When the actor is at a specific location onstage, he is led by a specific feeling/part that is anchored at that location. This is a theater convention as well as a mental convention for the actors.

The form is as follows:

- A single teller's actor is chosen, as well as the antagonist and any other characters needed.
- Teller's actor begins the Scene upstage. The ambivalent position is anchored to the central upstage location. The teller's actor enacts the ambivalence, voicing the two parts together.
 - *Using our previous example, the teller's actor stands upstage and gives a monologue about how she is not sure whether to tell her ex-boyfriend that she still loves him.*
- Downstage the antagonist and other ninja actors are waiting in a soft freeze.
- Once the teller has established the dilemma, she starts a scene, following one of the parts in her dilemma in a full, one dimensional, way. *In our example the teller's actor's first scene will start with her confessing her love to her ex-boyfriend.*
 - The scene naturally develops by way of that initial decision by the teller's actor.
 - The scene will end once any of the actors feel they reached a temporary conclusion, with the ninja actors and antagonist freezing.
 - An artistic decision can be made to end a moment before a major ending will occur. *For example the scene may end with the ex-boyfriend about to reject her love and she is scared, or with the ex-boyfriend about to propose and teller's actor is confused.*
- Teller's actor returns upstage to the anchored state of confusion and begins to associate to the other position (*in our example, not confessing to the ex-boyfriend her love*) and goes downstage to begin a scene in that direction. Downstage, the antagonist and ninja actors return to their original positions and wait in a soft freeze.
- The second Scene develops organically according to the new position.
 - The scene will end organically as the first scene did.

- The antagonist and ninja actors clear the stage, and the teller's actor returns to the upstage position.
- Teller's actor ends this Scene by either reincorporating materials in the upstage position or by moving downstage with a soliloquy with a hint of integration or a new understanding.

Sliding doors

The name for this form comes from the popular 1998 movie "sliding doors" which tells two possible stories of the same character, switching constantly between them.

This form is best suited for external conflict stories that might include an internal conflict. Stories where the teller has some conflict or dilemma with an antagonist. This form, as Shawarma with Pitta, shows possible futures scenarios and not just playing back the story that was just heard.

One man told a story about his son wanting to join his marketing business as a senior employee. He shared his dilemma whether to let his son join the business or not. On one hand they get along great, on the other hand he is a tough boss and he is afraid that being his son's boss will ruin their relationship. The positive intention of letting his son work for him is that of family and connection with his son. The positive intention of not allowing his son to work with him is clear secure intergenerational boundaries that ensure good relationships in the family.

In this case both parts have a similar positive intention of a good relationship with kin, yet their external expressions of that intention are of opposite behaviors.

This story can be seen as an internal dilemma whether to work with his son or not. This dilemma has clear possible future ramifications. We could have seen this story as a traditional or rotationary pair, yet there was a sense that it could be interesting to see how this decision would manifest in the future.

We chose to enact this as sliding doors and two storylines were developed spontaneously during the enactment: one of his successful partnership with his son, and one with a big fight between them over his refusal to work together resulting in a renegotiation of their relationship. The teller was grateful to see those scenarios.

Sliding doors is as follows:

- A teller chooses the teller's actor and 2 other actors to play the same antagonist.

- The two actors who play the antagonist will play the same antagonist but will transform according to the specific storyline that evolves during the form.
 - *In our example, the teller will choose one actor to play the father and two actors to play the (same) son.*
- The teller's actor stands between the two actors and starts turning around in his place (like a sliding door in a hotel) again and again until he gets a little bit dizzy.
- At that point he approaches one of the antagonists (say antagonist A) and endows that antagonist with one of the possible options told by the teller. *In our example the teller's actor endowed antagonist A as being hard to talk to after he refused to let him join the business.*
 - That antagonist then reacts to the offer of the teller's actor and they begin a short scene.
- Once the initial scene is established, the teller's actor turns to the other side of the stage and begins a parallel scene with antagonist B with the opposite decision.
 - *In our example the teller's actor began a scene where him and his son are working wonderfully together and enjoying their time working together.*
 - Antagonist A stays in a soft freeze once the teller's actor moves to antagonist B.
- From that point on, the two antagonists take turns pulling the teller's actor (physically and vocally) to their side of the stage, every time advancing their storyline into the future with strong vertical offers⁹ (offers that move the scene to the next emotional beat).
- With each pulling of the teller, the two antagonists come closer and closer to center stage, with faster changes between the two storylines.
 - This proximity represents the confusion within the teller experience, as well as creating real confusion for the teller's actor within the storylines, which can generate real, "here and now", surprising offers.
- The form ends with a very short crescendo, with both antagonists are pulling at the teller at the same time, which often confuses the teller.
 - Immediately the antagonists freeze (or the musician marks that moment) and the teller steps forward and shares a short soliloquy: a word/phrase that comes into his mind in the here and now.
 - This statement is often a hint of a future integration or a here and now realization about the dilemma.

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See more in Romanelli, 2015.

- *In our example, the teller's actor expressed spontaneously in the end of the form, that what he needs is to have an honest talk with his son.*

This form can also be adapted to be a long form Scene format. It uses spatial anchoring of stage right and stage left for different decisions/emotions/parts. *In our example actors decide that stage right is the story of the son joining the business and stage left is a the story of rejecting the son's offer.*

- A teller's actor is chosen as well as two different actors to play the same antagonist. Ninja actors are waiting on both sides of stage to enter if needed.
- Teller's actor begins the Scene in the center of the stage, expressing the dilemma.
- He begins a scene in stage right.
 - *In our example, with a strong offer of working together.*
- After that scene is established, antagonist and ninja actors freeze, and teller's actor moves to stage left and beings a scene with the other part.
 - *In our example it would be a scene the father rejects son's offer.*
- Once both storylines are established, when one of the antagonists unfreezes on their respected sides, the other antagonist freezes and the teller's actor moves to the new side.
 - When antagonist A located on stage right begins calling for the teller's actor who is in a scene with antagonist B, the whole scene in stage left freezes and the teller's actor continues the scene with antagonist A.
 - The teller's actor remains reactive and allows himself to be emotionally charged, even confused, during and within the transitions between story-lines.
- The Scene ends with a soliloquy of the teller's actor, with all the other actors in freeze or offstage.

Conclusion

In closing, the key to a good enactment of a dilemma or conflict is to clarify not only the cognition and the emotion that is associated to that cognition, but also the positive intention of each part. Because all parts have a positive intention, the gift that PT enactment can give is to allow the teller and the audience to see an authentic, embodied encounter between these two parts. Playback Theater is not therapy and does not aim to give advice or solve dilemma. Yet it has been my experience that scenes onstage between the actors embodying different sides, is sometimes a parallel process of the

internal “dance” between these parts within the teller. These scenes sometimes hint about a possible integration or solution. Daring to play back these dilemma and conflicts fully and with zest, can add emotional fuel to the Playback theater ritual.

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