

Playback Theater in the Orthodox Religious Community: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

This article explores the issues regarding teaching and performing Playback Theater (PT) in the Religious and Ultra Orthodox (UO) Jewish communities in Israel. A brief description of the UO is followed by case examples that reflect the complexities of spontaneous performances in strict religious settings. Practical suggests for performing and teaching PT is offered as well.

Introduction

I am a clinical social worker specializing in Couple and Family Therapy. I work part time in a public clinic located in the heart of the Jewish Ultra Orthodox (UO) community. I consider myself a traditional modern Jew. I regularly give therapy to UO families, with sensitivity and respect for their way of life. As a therapist, I am usually successful in not having the therapy end prematurely due to ideological or theological gaps between the family and therapist.

As a Playback Theater (PT) conductor, I perform and teach mostly in the UO and religious Jewish communities in Israel. My PT company, Or Chozer (“returning light” in Hebrew) is composed solely of professional male actors, most of whom grew up secular and later turned to a religious lifestyle. All are religious, some orthodox and some traditional. The PT company is part of a professional UO theater company that reaches deep into communities where secular theater does not.

The Ultra Orthodox Jewish community in Israel

In Israel there are many communities, streams and sects of Jewish practice. On the more observant end are Ultra Orthodox communities that have unique features (Jacobs, 1995). UO communities usually send their children to segregated educational systems that emphasize the Halacha (Jewish commandments) and have little “secular” studies such as

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English, math, science or art. Usually, entertainment is expected to include a Jewish educational element that adheres to the clear ethics and strict moral code of the community. There is little room for spontaneity and unpredictability for the community leaders when thinking of entertainment in general, and theater specifically. Most of the performance arts seen by these communities are usually either based on Jewish folklore or values or very general topics (such as a magic, telepathy and such).

The UO communities are increasing in Israel given its high birth rate. This presents a number of challenges for Israeli society. As the UO base grows, it is inevitable that there will be increasing contact and overlap between the different social and religious sectors of Israeli society. The highly regulated social structures of the UO are already beginning to be altered, although, in reality, there is still little mixing between religious sectors in Israel. It has been my good fortune to be involved in one of these special meeting points of the UO and the more “secular” streams in Israel.

PT as an un-orthodox, orthodox ritual

PT has its own ritual: The stage, the actors, the conductor, the musician, the teller (Salas, 1999; Johnston, 2005). One of the core values of the PT ritual is spontaneity and improvisation (Fox, 1994; Salas, 1999; Lubrani Rolnik, 2009). Together with the value of spontaneity, there is an emphasis on structure, hence the different short and long forms, the final word of the teller after the enactment and more. Thus there can be a tension in the meeting of PT and religious orthodoxy: Spontaneity/improvisation versus strict ethics and rituals.

How to resolve this tension?

How can we find the balance between adhering to the PT ritual and at the same time respect the sensitivities of the UO communities we visit? For example, we once performed in front of 500 members of an ultra orthodox community retreat. When we arrived there was a big wall of cloth in the middle separating men from women. It was forbidden for women to tell stories during the performance. So half of the audience wasn't allowed tell a story. This could hurt the collective free-flowing unconscious “red thread” that connects the different stories during the PT ritual (Hoesch, 1999).

Some might see this situation as upsetting or misshaping the PT ritual. I would like to suggest a different perspective after years of performing, teaching and giving therapy in the UO world. Uncontrolled spontaneity is a bold move by these religious leaders. It is a possible threat, which they do not underestimate. Yet these leaders are looking for safe way to better their members, while maintaining their traditions and safe procedures. They

turn to PT because there are some shared aspects between PT and Orthodox religious practice. As Salas (1999) writes when describing her first Japanese tea ceremony: “there is nothing inherently foolish in participating in the established rituals of another culture” (Salas, 1999, pg. 108).

Commonalities between PT and orthodox religious tradition

We can choose to see these two traditions as having common characteristics. Religions are usually built through storytelling traditions, often based on stories and myths, some sharing common archetypes (Campbell, 1949). Jonathan Fox (1994) writes in length about the pre-literary oral drama based on storytelling traditions that influenced the birth of PT.

The Jewish tradition was based for centuries on the oral “Torah” (body of knowledge), passed from generation to generation, told in the synagogue and in the home. The Bible, like the PT ritual, is composed of dozens of stories, intertwined with dreams, metaphors and images. For the past centuries, Every Sabbath Jewish congregations around the world, gather to read aloud the different biblical stories of the past in order to learn from them about the present and future.

A modern day version of the oral teaching biblical stories is through interpretive drama, called Bibliodrama. Bibliodrama is a form of role-playing in which the roles played are taken from biblical texts (Pitzele, 1998). Another modern example is a movement within the Jewish world called StorahTelling² in which these biblical stories are acted out for the community as part of the Jewish ritual. These examples could be seen as an ongoing adaptation of the written text and traditions toward a live, theater based on those stories.

PT as an enrichment and challenge in the UO community

These UO communities are much less exposed to professional performance art. UO rabbis take great efforts to prevent “corruption” of the community by modernity, secularism, technology and capitalism.

Seeing theater is always such a great wonder for adults as well as children in these communities. It seems as if, for a moment, they are transposed to a “potential space” (Winnicott, 1971) where there is freedom to imagine their life and reality in new ways.

By sharing stories publicly, even if UO tellers prefer to tell more general stories of core beliefs and miracles, we breathe into these stories a little potential space (Winnicott, 1971) into these ancient archetypal stories. The encounter between the story and the unconscious of the actors who once were secular, releases metaphors, ideas and

² Read more about StorahTelling at <http://www.StorahTelling.org/>

connections that are perhaps new and surprising to the audience members; a sort of unconscious communication between the actors and the audience through the explicit story.

When PT and religious orthodoxy clash – A case example

In a show for an UO community, as the conductor, I was translating live on stage a story by an UO adult who recently emigrated from the USA to Israel. It wasn't clear to me that in the USA there might be less of a taboo about certain words. He told a story about being locked outside his room in his underwear. I translated the word to Hebrew for the rest of the audience, while hearing from time to time some murmurs in the audience. I then turned the story over to the actors to play it back.

They began to play the story while using the Hebrew word for "underwear". I wasn't even aware of any possible offense. The actors, who do live a religious lifestyle perhaps were so engaged in the performance that they also did not notice. The murmurs escalated and I started seeing some men leaving the audience while yelling. The women's side seems more content. I start to realize that the audience might start to leave altogether so when the enactment ended, I immediately ended the show, 20 minutes early.

Right after the bows, the whole ensemble realized what happened. The organizers were furious and demanded an apology. We tried explaining to them that the show is completely improvised and that we have little if any control of the stories that will be told. It was one of their own who told the story, what we could do? The organizers immediately said that I (and the actors) should have substituted the word underwear to something else, more appropriate for the audience. Years later, I found out that our most orthodox actor later went to the dining room and publicly apologized for offending the audience.

Would that have made the difference? Substituting the word? I don't know and we have never returned to that community again, although the lesson they taught us has been an important one.

But what does work?

But we did return to dozens of other communities, playing back their stories with a touch of our thoughts, associations and even our values. Giving life to stories through a new prism. Today we are more careful in our preparation for these shows and in the actual performance (see advice in the end of the article). We have found again and again that PT is a powerful experience for these audiences. We are invited to perform in UO schools and communal centers, celebrations, conferences and more. Today there are a few all-women orthodox Jewish PT companies and I expect that more will follow.

PT training in the orthodox community – a case example

I have taught many PT classes in the orthodox community, usually to educators, counselors and therapists. These classes were always for men only. I find that what the participants enjoy most is the playful atmosphere that PT brings to their story. Suddenly, they cannot only share personal stories, but they receive a living reflection of that experience, complete with non-verbal, subconscious undertones. The permission to play releases a lot of positive energy, perhaps from the weakening of the repressing energy. Perhaps the brotherhood of men allows for a deeper resonance among us, even though we might be superficially divided by our external practices.

I remember that in the middle of such a workshop for UO educational consultants, my iPhone rang with a MTV pop song ringtone. I was in the middle of conducting a story and felt very ashamed, but didn't want to cut the teller in the middle of the story. Before I could react, one of the participants went to my iPhone and began to try to turn off the ringer. He had never touched an iPhone, so this process took almost a minute. Once completed, he returned straight to act in the enactment, not missing a beat and without shame. I learned that I had to let go of my "otherness", and trust that the deep connection has been made. The archetypal connection between us was stronger than our religious differences.

Advice for teaching and performing PT for religious and orthodox communities

Salas (1999) reminds us that "we perform rituals that are based in the immediate needs of the event itself... with a readily apparent role to play in the purpose for which we are gathered" (Salas, 1999, pg. 109). In that vein, I would like to share lessons learned from our experience for those PT companies who teach and perform in religious communities and who wish to address the needs of those communities.

1. Dress appropriately to the community. See what they wear, and whether a head covering is needed. If the audience feels like the PT ensemble is not a bit similar (or at least respectful) of them, they might not cooperate.
2. Make sure you have the blessing/cooperation of the religious or spiritual leader of the community. If possible, have him or her introduce the PT performance, while extending a warm welcome and mandate to the audience to participate.
3. While preparing for the show, make sure the organizers choose ahead of time one or two tellers who will tell a real story connected to their lives. Sometimes in these communities there is such a stress on modesty that it is considered arrogant to share stories about oneself, and you tend to get general stories or fables.

4. Stress again and again to the organizers that the show is *improvised* and that there can't be an imposed conclusion/solution/educational message to the show.
5. Draw the line – if you see that the requests and limitations of the community would prevent a comfortable, respectable PT ritual, perhaps it is best to kindly turn down the offer.
6. Do not ask for conflict or dilemmas too early in show if at all. These communities tend to publicly stress devotion and not questioning.
7. If possible, use animals, biblical characters or metaphors in the enactment thereby distancing the portrayal from modern times. This will give the company more freedom to bring different shades and emotions of the story.
8. Try not to have actors play god in the enactments.
9. As a conductor, remember that some communities do not allow touching people of the opposite sex, so make sure the teller's chair is not too close to the conductor's chair. Make sure not to hold the microphone for the teller, have him or her hold it themselves to prevent any accidental physical contact.
10. When performing in religious educational organizations, make sure the opening stories of the actors, are ones that include the difficulty/challenge of being observant. It is our experience that the staff in the orthodox educational programs embrace stories of ambivalence and questioning of religious faith and practice as an opening to access their students.
11. When teaching and performing try not to hold eye contact too long with the teller/participant.
12. If you are not sure about what to do, or what a phrase means, ASK! Remember, no matter how you dress, the audience will immediately know that you are not a full member of their community. I suspect they don't really expect you to be a member of their community; they just want to know that you respect them and that you are not mocking their faith or tradition.

Conclusion

Considering all the above, I believe that PT is an important experience for (orthodox) religious groups. PT is built on ritual and community, which are the basis for many religious congregations. With the right sensitivity and modesty, we can enrich these guarded communities, with a myriad of new and diverse images, thoughts and ideas that can help them find change and renewal within their structure and tradition.

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