

Book Review: 'Nossas Historias Em Cena' by C.S. Siewert

Reviewer: José Marques

According to Siewert, this book followed from her research into Playback Theatre (PT), carried out as part of her Masters in Theatre at the University of the State of Santa Catarina. Her supervisor, Professor Marcia Nogueira, states in the preface that at that time, PT was little known in Brazil and that this was a reason for writing the text. And in her introduction, the author says that she wrote the book in response to a growing demand in Brazil for knowledge about PT.

That being the aim of the author, I would say that the book is a most welcome addition to the PT literature available in the Portuguese language. As far as I am aware, the only other comprehensive text available in this language is a translation of Jo Salas' *Improvising Real Life* first published in 1993 (Editora Agora, 2000). In particular, Siewert's book makes accessible, to the Portuguese language reader, some of the most significant literature written about PT, with substantial references made to Salas's text as well as to Jonathan Fox's *Acts of Service* (Tusitala, 2003) and Nick Rowe's *Playing the Other* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007). She also appropriately draws on other literature where necessary.

The question then arises whether this book contributes anything new to the literature already available in the English language.

As a whole, the text acts mainly as an interesting digest of existing literature, with references also made to the author's experience with PT in the DionisosTeatro company during 2008 and 2009. However, it does also draw out some aspects of PT theory that may not have been previously dealt with in so much detail. I refer in particular to section two of Chapter Two which discusses the influences that lead to the creation of PT.

The book consists of four chapters. Chapter One describes PT performance structure and forms and includes a discussion of what is 'good playback'. Chapter Two discusses historical aspects and influences. Chapter Three covers the community aspect of PT and its application in the areas of education, business, therapy and the theatre arts. And Chapter Four talks about the roles and skills exercised by the PT performer.

In Chapter One, the author seems more familiar with the short forms of PT that were then practiced by the Dionisoscompany, with appropriate inclusion of photos from company performances. This is followed by short descriptions of additional forms, but these are very brief and may not be so helpful to PT newcomers. Also, the description of the form 'chorus' appears somewhat out of date, as it essentially summarises Salas's description of the form (in 1993). Here perhaps reference could have been made to the current tendency for this form to be used with stories that lean towards non-narrative content.

I also felt that at the end of this section (short forms) more emphasis could have been given to the ritual of the actors acknowledging the teller following the performance of the story, as this is such an important part of the PT ritual.

In contrast, the significant aspects of performing the story (long) form, including structuring questions by the conductor, balancing real and symbolic aspects, addressing a seeming lack of satisfaction by the teller with the performance, as well as the red thread were all well covered. One aspect that may have deserved more attention is the question of whether PT performances should invite audience members to participate as actors.

In the last section of this chapter, 'what is good playback?', it was interesting to be reminded of Rowe's

ideas about open stories and open performances, which rely on the actor responding to his own subjectivity (Rowe, p. 37) rather than to some perceived notion of what is the essence of the story, as defended by Salas and others. It may have been interesting to hear the author's view on this apparent contradiction of approaches.

In Chapter Two, Siewert draws out in some detail, the influences that lead to the creation of this unique form of theatre. The aspects covered include the experimental theatre of the time (with particular attention given to Beck and Malina's Living Theatre), psychodrama, the oral tradition of storytelling, and Paulo Freire's theory of dialogue.

Of particular interest were references to a non-elitist theatre, to theatre as a rehearsal for life, to psychodrama as useful training for PT actors, to the restorative function of theatre, to the elevation of the individual's status, to the trance aspects of the oral tradition, and to aspects of narrative theory. Occasionally, I felt that the discussion could have developed beyond the references to the authoritative texts. For example, the redressive aspect of PT seems to have become a very significant one, particularly in areas where armed conflicts are occurring or have occurred, and in situations of natural disaster. PT has made an important contribution in places such as Afghanistan, the Middle-East, Sri Lanka, and New Orleans, to name but a few.

Of particular interest also was the discussion on Paulo Freire's ideas, which have been indirectly mentioned by authors such as Fox, but not generally expanded on in PT texts. As explained by Siewert, Freire brought us the idea that dialogue is not theory but action (praxis) and that with love, humility, faith and critical thinking, this dialogue can lead us to the experience of freedom. It seems that the dialogue we engage in through PT (the dialogue between actors and tellers as well as the dialogue between the stories) can create a raising of awareness that (perhaps charged with the humanness or energy of the

performance) can lead to transformative action by the individual and the community.

In Chapter Three, the author highlights the community building aspect of PT. She also provides a fairly comprehensive coverage of the application of PT in different areas. She says that in education, PT is often used as a tool for developing individual as well as group skills and values. In the business context, Siewert interestingly mentions ethical issues, where PT practitioners must confront tensions between furthering the profit motive and the democratic participation of workers. In the mental health context, she describes how PT can be used along with psychodrama and other therapy tools, to assist the healing of patients. Reference is also made to PT being used as 'psychological debriefing' in natural disaster situations.

In the section on the application of PT in the theatre arts, the author reminds us of the challenge of building community in open performances where audience members may not know each other. One can draw the conclusion, from this chapter, that the community building aspect of PT is at the very heart of its existence.

In the last and fourth chapter, Siewert explains the roles of the actor, musician and conductor. She reminds us of Fox's exhortation that the theatre must be 'good' for the actor, and not just for the audience. We are also reminded that PT actors must be self-aware and emotionally mature. In this regard, I note that Salas wrote recently that PT is not for everyone (Salas, 2011).[1]

The author then refers to Fox's reflection that a PT company is like a family, where presumably tools such as psychodrama can be used to resolve difficulties or tensions, as has recently been suggested to me by some international colleagues. However, I believe that this takes us into the murky issue of whether what we are doing

is theatre or therapy. Correctly, I think, Siewert questions whether a PT company should be considered a family because ordinarily, its members do not meet outside rehearsals and performances.

This chapter includes an interesting discussion on spontaneity, based mainly on Fox's ideas (2003). In particular, I appreciated revisiting his ideas on the dichotomies of the PT work: not thinking/thinking, surrender/control, fiction/reality, logical/relational, etc. Attention was also drawn to the complexity of the work carried out by the actor, as he first senses the story, briefly evaluates the choices, and then takes action. This discussion was effectively conducted with reference to the three keys texts already mentioned, although I felt that more contributions from the author's experience could have been useful.

Siewert also refers to the issue of whether the actor should reveal (in the performance) what was intuited by her but not clearly stated by the teller. I would have been interested in the author's opinion or experience of this issue, as I am aware that it sometimes preoccupies PT actors, particularly when the sensitivity of the teller or story is in issue.

As to the musician, the author usefully points out that he is like an actor on the stage and can assist with creating emotion and ambience, as well as provide punctuation in the performance. It is a pity, however, that the author does not go beyond the references to Salas's text. I note that a number of articles on music in PT were published in the IPTN Newsletter of June 2013 but I assume this was after the time of Siewert's writing.

As to the conductor, the author draws mainly on Salas and Fox, to describe this important and complex role. Significantly, attention is given to the task of 'holding' the performance, in other words, in providing the safety

and structure that allows both audience and actors to share their stories and interpretations.

In her final comments, Siewert asks the important question: why should we put the story on the stage, when we can imagine it in our heads, as we listen to its telling? And here, the author draws us back to the social interaction, community building aspects of PT. We need to put the story on the stage because by doing so, by giving it to the actors, it takes on other meanings, and those other meanings lead to other stories. And this, I believe, is one of the most satisfying aspects of PT, for both practitioners and audiences.

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[1] Stories in the Moment: Playback Theatre for Building Community and Justice, in Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict, Vol 2, Eds Varea, Cohen, and Walker, New Village Press.