**Borrowing From Psychoanalysis To Listen More Deeply In Playback Theatre**

by José Marques

August 2012

**Introduction**

Listening is an integral part of the process of playback theatre[[1]](#footnote-1). Appropriate listening by the performers (actors, musicians and conductor) is necessary if the performance is to truly reflect the story narrated by the teller.

Throughout my life, I have been more or less aware of the importance of listening, particularly in managing relationship with others and myself, as well as in study and work. However, when I came into playback in Australia in 2005, my attention to listening gained renewed focus. The preoccupation with listening continued after I started leading the first Portuguese Playback Theatre group founded in 2007. It became clear to me that we could substantially improve the quality of our performances if we improved our listening skills.

A concept that interested me early on in adult life was Freud’s advice to psychoanalysts to listen with ‘evenly-hovering attention’ – also variously translated in English as ‘evenly-suspended’ or ‘free-floating’ attention (Gupta, 2008, p. 1). I was reminded of this concept when I started doing translation work for various psychoanalysts in Lisbon after my return to Portugal in 2006. This contact with the psychoanalytic method of listening inspired me to research the subject further and consider how it might be used to improve the listening skills of playback performers.

By way of a background, this paper first presents some of my earlier experiences with listening, before and during my time with playback, including a ‘deeper listening’ playback training I attended two years ago. This part of the paper is less technical but I have included it perhaps because it shows what led me to search in psychoanalytic theory for a deeper form of listening.

Next, I refer to what has already been said about listening in the playback literature. Lastly, and in the main part of the paper, I set out relevant theories about listening in psychoanalysis and then consider the implications of those theories for the playback context.

**Listening Before Playback**

Listening is an integral process of living life. Babies in particular are very sensitive to noise and as parents we are careful not to wake them up after putting them to sleep. At first perhaps, babies do not seem to filter the sounds they hear. I noted for example that my one-year old daughter would point out the sound of an airplane which I had not noticed. Gradually of course, we learn to filter because it is not practical to listen to every sound that surrounds us.

As we grow up, we are told that we should listen to our parents, our teachers, and adults in general. If a friend is in trouble or upset, we do our best to listen to them. However, I do not recall thinking more consciously about the listening process until I started studying theatre in my thirties.

When I began studying acting and theatre, I possibly became more aware of the process of listening. I observed how actors in amateur productions (and sometimes even in professional ones) did not seem to be ‘listening’ but rather ‘waiting’ for the other actor to finish their lines, before launching into their own. This I did not consider listening. Rather, listening meant being present, in that moment, in that space, with the other actor, and with the public.

In any particular performance, the other actor might speak the same lines rather differently, or give you a look he hadn’t given you before, and you might respond in a slightly different way to the previous performance. Of course, we had been directed not to change our lines, our character, or the dynamic of the scene, which had been set by the director. To do so, might put off the other actors, and endanger the expected playing out of the scene. Curiously, once or twice during my theatre training, I did radically change the way I played my character - without warning the director or the other actors. This brought new life into the scene but also greatly disturbed my fellow actors and the director. I’m not exactly sure why I did this – perhaps it was out of frustration with myself, or the course, or the predictable way in which everybody spoke their lines, which to me at the time, seemed lifeless and uninteresting.

Later, while working as an acting teacher, I asked students to play around with the idea of listening just to the words, or just to the emotions, or avoid listening at all. My own preference was for listening on the emotional level, listening between the words, creating spaces to see what was there, as a means to building a relationship with my character, the other characters, and the play itself. Some of my motivation for this was related to the fact that I lived in Australia, where I considered that actors in general delivered their lines without regard for emotional subtlety, and were largely unable to create characters and relationships that I would have considered real. For example, I remember watching a professional theatre production where I felt that the two actors, portraying brothers, did not transmit any real sense of being brothers.

**Learning to Listen in Playback**

My initial experience of listening in playback, as an actor, was of trying to remember everything that the teller had said so I could faithfully reproduce the story. This made me particularly anxious, especially in the story form, where the teller might narrate a long and complicated story. The anxiety was increased by the knowledge that I was only going to hear the story once and that there was no opportunity to ask questions of the teller. As I have continued my experience in playback, I have been able to observe that initiates usually have this experience.

My anxieties around listening increased when I began to play the role of conductor in performances by our Lisbon group. I had spent most of my adult life (including higher education) in Australia and my Portuguese was quite imperfect. I worried about not understanding the subtleties, or even some of the vocabulary, used by tellers. I compensated for this by allowing myself to ask the teller a question when I didn’t understand something (even when I felt that I was the only person in the room who didn’t) and the actors came to appreciate this because they came to hear the information twice.

Perhaps as a result of these experiences, I began to feel that listening was a very important skill in playback. I wanted to listen better, not just to the words but to what lay beneath the words. I remember the first time I was asked to be the teller’s actor, in a rehearsal with Canberra Playback Theatre. It was a story about a music therapist who had worked with the residents of a retirement home. I felt really lost because, during the telling, I had had no sense of the inside of the story, the emotional dimension of the teller, and this left me in a kind of no man’s land.

I also came to feel that to listen better meant being able to hear what was really important, and not getting lost in the detail. Perhaps because of my work with Portuguese psychoanalysts, I suddenly remembered Freud’s concept of evenly-hovering attention. I asked one of these psychoanalysts to explain the idea to me. Her advice was to listen in a relaxed way and to listen to everything with equal attention … until you notice something out of the ordinary in the teller, a look or a gesture perhaps, or a different emotional quality, which may be a sign of something significant to the teller. Your attention could then focus more acutely on that particular aspect.

Fox (1994, pp. 134-135) cites an example from a performance which I think illustrates this idea of noticing something out of the ordinary:

“During a performance, a woman tells a pair about her pregnancy - how she feels both terribly afraid and terribly excited to give birth. I feel the depth of her response, as well as the connection between her and other women in the hall. Suddenly I am inspired to invite only men up onto the stage who want to take a woman’s role at some stage in the pregnancy cycle.”

I think this is also an example of the performer resonating with the material of the teller, as we shall see later.

This different way of listening - different in that, in our everyday life, we normally filter out what we don’t consider important or worth listening to, or we simply become lost in our own thoughts - helped me to step away from the preoccupation of trying to remember every detail of the story. The listening of our Lisbon group has improved over time but of course, it is difficult to say for certain how much of this has been due to the introduction of these ideas from psychoanalysis.

**Constructive Listening**

The Deeper Listening workshop, held by the School of Playback Theatre UK in October 2010, attempted to address the issue of listening in Playback. As a participant, I was introduced to the concept of ‘constructive listening’ by Kay Kay, who has worked with a variety of professions within several industries and social settings to encourage and facilitate positive change in individuals and in society[[2]](#footnote-2).

The information presented at the workshop (through hand-outs, discussion and practical exercises) was that constructive listening involved the following:

* giving full attention to the speaker by creating an environment that facilitates communication, keeping an open body posture and holding a soft gaze;
* listening with an attitude of compassion by asking for clarification when necessary, and as far as possible using the speaker’s own words rather than interpreting;
* avoiding interrupting the speaker by not finishing their sentences or giving them the words to say;
* listening without judgment, assumption or criticism;
* demonstrating interest in what the speaker is saying by using words or sounds of encouragement, occasionally nodding etc.;
* attempting to fully understand what the speaker is saying by putting needs, beliefs, and agendas aside, by allowing the speaker to show their emotions, and fully entering into their world.

Examples of destructive listening included:

* trying to fix the speaker’s difficulties, or trying to make them feel better before they have finished speaking;
* not allowing enough time for the speaker to say what needs to be said;
* giving opinions before the speaker has finished speaking or being defensive;
* not checking that they have heard correctly and not checking that the speaker feels heard and understood;
* doing something else at the same time as listening to the speaker.

Some of these recommendations appear similar to those followed under psychoanalytic technique. For example, ‘listening without judgment, assumption or criticism’ appears to echo Bion’s advice to ‘abandon memory, desire, understanding, and the use of preconceptions’ (below, p. 14). The practice of this collection of recommendations should lead to the acquisition of a state of mind that would be expected to facilitate good listening, on both an intellectual and emotional level. And practice on a long term basis may well lead to the skill of listening becoming more natural and in some way, unconscious. However, these techniques seem to me to lack some of the power of the psychoanalytic technique of listening with evenly-hovering attention, or its equivalents (see below: **Listening in Psychoanalysis**).

What I thought was particularly useful about the workshop was the focus on listening rather than the techniques themselves. In addition, some of the exercises enabled participants to relate/dwell on experiences of listening (listening to others or being listened to), which often involved an emotional dimension. In some cases, not feeling listened to was experienced as upsetting, even traumatising, in others, not so much. However, in my opinion, the workshop took participants to an emotional depth that I had not previously seen in a Playback Theatre training.

There was for me also, an issue about how different cultures listen. At one point during the workshop, one of the participants felt rather upset because, as she explained later, she was feeling inadequate in her playback skills when compared to the other participants. I have experienced this feeling myself and have had others relate the same to me. After a brief moment, two or three of the participants, rushed to the side of this person to hug and comfort her. This is a way of listening which involves emotionally availability (perhaps the Latin approach). Some of the other participants did not appear to feel comfortable with this behaviour, perhaps regarding it as an invasion of the personal space of the person. This represented an attitude which involves listening by respecting personal space and waiting for a clear direction to approach (perhaps the Anglo-Saxon approach).

**Listening in the Playback Literature**

The subject of listening in playback is dealt with in some detail by Rowe (2007)[[3]](#footnote-3). Other playback texts, in so far as I am aware, do not specifically deal with this subject - a fact which partly motivated the writing of this article.

Based on interviews conducted with actors, Rowe (p. 103) reports that:

1. actors need to yield to the story and be penetrated by it, while making use of narrative structures and theatre conventions to represent it;
2. they need to search in their memories for identification with the story/teller while preserving some distance to ensure ethical and aesthetic representation; and
3. they need to allow the enactment to proceed through group improvisation while ensuring that they remain loyal to the story.

Summarizing these ideas in terms of the listening process, I would say that actors need to listen to the story/the teller, to their knowledge of theatre conventions and ethical principles, to their internal responses and memories, and to the other actors and the group process.

The actors interviewed by Rowe said that “they attend first to … the ‘story stuff’ … they stressed the importance of remembering the sequence of events, the names of the main characters … and they looked out for ‘crucial phrases’…”. They “attributed great importance to remembering these details accurately; this was not only because they would need to represent the story, but also because remembering the details was an indication of attentiveness, acknowledgement and care … to remember these details is to preserve the dignity of the individual story.” (p. 103)

I must admit to feeling some sympathy for this point view, particularly in my early days of playback as I sought to relieve my anxieties about the enormous responsibility of having somebody’s story in my hands, by anchoring myself to the events of the story. The risk of this approach, however, is that you might miss what lies underneath: the emotional dimension, the metaphysical/mythical/archetypal aspects, and your own emotional or unconscious responses to these aspects. To listen on this other level, a different approach might be required.

My own experience, inspired perhaps by the idea of evenly-hovering attention, has been that, to listen on a deeper level, I had to let go of the preoccupation/anxiety of remembering the details of the story. This left me freer to be present with the teller and their story.

Rowe also reports (p. 105) that playback actors talk about needing to “yield” and “be penetrated by the story”, and about “making yourself defenceless” and “letting go of the ego”. This last one in particular, I remember as an exhortation often repeated to myself, particularly before performances or during training workshops with peers.

Yielding to the other or the story, however, should not mean that the actor has to lose her identity. In fact, Rowe (p. 111) warns against over-identification, in which the listener becomes overly enmeshed with the speaker. In order to avoid this trap, he suggests that we follow the advice of French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas to maintain in our awareness “the ‘unknowable’ and ungraspable nature of the other” (p. 113).

The author also points to the opposite danger, that of the actor contaminating the teller’s story with their own subjectivity (p. 109). I am reminded of a former member of our Lisbon group who seemingly used any suggestion of romance in a teller’s story to enact his own desires for sexual romance.

Rowe stresses the importance of the actor simultaneously yielding to the other and being herself; in such a state, the performer remains open to the important possibility of ‘empathic resonance’ with the teller/story/emotions (p. 107). It is this resonance, I believe, that enables the playback actor to represent the story at a less literal/more metaphorical level.

The author (p. 110) cites an example of empathic resonance experienced by an actor during a performance:

“I was reminded of a period in my twenties when I had had similar experiences. I noticed my breathing was becoming heavier and there were ‘churning feelings’ in my stomach. I concentrated on these feelings, knowing that I could make use of them in the enactment.”

Rowe (p. 113) goes on to describe such somatic responses and subconscious promptings as aspects that we must engage with if we are to listen on a deeper level. He cites a key idea expressed by the father of psychoanalysis:

“It is a remarkable thing that the unconscious of one human being can react upon that of another, without passing through the conscious. (Freud cited by Field, p. 512)”

That this occurs in our everyday experience of life is perhaps not so difficult to accept. However, to be able to integrate this idea into the listening process may present more of a challenge. The process of integrating somatic and subconscious responses is, I believe, similar to the process of psychoanalytic listening contained in Freud’s exhortation to attend to evenly-hovering attention or Bion’s recommendations on technique (see the next section). Rowe (p. 114) appears to recognise the validity of this approach when he cites the account of an actor “listening from an id-place”:

“It is a place where I let go of my need to know what I’m doing. The images that come out are more spontaneous – me, the teller and the story all combine in this place. I yield to its formation, letting it create itself beyond my conscious capacity to control it … as an actor in this place I feel vulnerable; not fully formed. I have lost myself a little to something greater than myself. But out of this nothingness, if I can be courageous enough to stay there long enough, I believe the best and most beautiful work emerges. We obviously have to hang it on the form we’re doing, which keeps it anchored in the story; grounded in reality. It means that we can drape our unconscious co-creations upon a frame that we know will support them. And that this will give them enough shape and structure to give back to the teller in their *service*.”

At first sight, this seems like a rather mystical experience but deep down, I think it is also what we, as playback performers, aim for. It is also not unlike Bion’s account of the analyst ‘becoming’ the container of the analysand’s (patient’s) projected mental content (see below, p. 13). Perhaps in a similar way, in a playback performance, the actor’s enactment (the result of the integration of the subconscious responses) acts as the container of the teller’s story (the projected content).

In his concluding reflections, Rowe (p. 118) advises that actors:

“… be careful not to dissolve the tension between self and the other – to do so would risk erasing the ‘otherness of the other’. The performers wish to enter into the story with a receptive body and mind while maintaining their separateness – both empathy and distance need to be simultaneously at work as the actors listen to the story.”

This, I think, is a final reminder that for listening to occur at a deeper level, the performer must maintain a proper equilibrium between attention to herself and to the other. The following section should provide some clues as to how this actually works in practice.

**Listening in Psychoanalysis**

As stated at the beginning, the main aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of the process of listening in psychoanalysis and then consider what might be useful to playback. Analysis and theatre are of course different contexts. However, it is also not uncommon for actors to undertake some study of psychology as part of their training, as I did when I studied acting in Australia in the late eighties.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Playback theatre is not considered a therapy, unlike psychoanalysis, although it is recognised that its enactments can produce therapeutic effects for tellers, actors and audience alike. Therefore, in seeking to apply ideas that come from the word of therapy, playback performers must be careful to keep this distinction in mind. For example, Fox (p. 121) describes the role of the conductor as follows:

“The conductor is *like* a therapist, but unlike the therapist does not have a goal of healing. The conductor and the teller are both in an ambiguous space of hearing and reframing the tale. This does not assume the conductor ‘knows’ the story (or a pathology) of the teller. In this respect, there is less therapist and more witness, as the conductor is mediating between both the teller and actors alike.”

The idea of ‘reframing’ approximates playback to therapy – the analyst reframes the patient’s mental material, whereas the playback performers reframe the teller’s story. So what is different? As indicated by Fox, one difference is that playback performers do not hold themselves out as therapists, but rather, as witnesses. Another obvious difference perhaps is that playback reframes using an artistic form of expression, whereas the analyst reframes through the use of speech and his own ‘healing’ presence. But if the goal of playback is not healing, then what is it? I will come back to this question later.

Freud taught that listening - to the self and the patient - was the main tool of psychoanalytic inquiry and technique. Listening was considered essential to every aspect of the therapeutic process – “hearing, associating, imagining, empathizing, hypothesizing, formulating, interpreting, intervening, and validating” (Rubin, 1985, p. 599). Freud’s recommendation to cultivate ‘evenly-hovering attention’, although developed by others (see Gupta below) or addressed using different forms and language (see Bion below), has been universally accepted as the cornerstone of the listening process.

His advice was to avoid ‘reflecting’ – “a state of mind in which one edits, rejects, and suppresses certain thoughts and feelings instead of being nonjudgmentally aware of them” (Rubin, p. 602) - and to focus on ‘observation’, which was explained as follows:

“It … consists in making no effort to concentrate the attention on anything in particular, and in maintaining in regard to all that one hears the same measure of calm, quiet attentiveness —of ‘evenly-hovering attention’… as soon as attention is deliberately concentrated in a certain degree, one begins to select from the material before one; one point will be fixed in the mind with particular clearness and some other consequently disregarded, and in this selection one's expectations or one's inclinations will be followed. This is just what must not be done. ” (Freud, Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis, 1912, cited by Rubin, p. 603)

As an actor listening to a story, I sometimes have the experience of ‘attempting to fix’ (select) important phrases or images related by the teller – the process is perhaps one of repeating these phrases or images to myself, so that they are stored for later use. However, I wonder if while undergoing this process of fixing, I have stopped listening to the teller. I wonder also if it is possible to do both things at the same time. Whatever the case, I do believe it is important to remain present with the teller as much as possible, and if the mind begins to wander, we should gently pull it back to the teller and their story – and, as we shall see later, to awareness of our own reactions to the teller and the story.

Gupta (citing Thomson, 1980, at p. 4) implicitly recognises the possibility of listening on more than one level when the analyst becomes aware of his own inner reactions:

“If he listens passively, attention fixed less sharply on the client, he picks up stimuli from his own inner life, his preconscious mixing with the client’s material”.

This raises an issue that is crucial to the understanding of the process of psychoanalytical listening (and I venture to add, to the process of listening in playback - as implicitly recognised by Rowe[[5]](#footnote-5)): what is the process whereby the analyst listens, concurrently, to the patient’s free associations (mental material) and to his own reactions, phantasies, memories, feelings etc.?

A related issue is: how exactly does one arrive at the state of evenly-hovering attention that is so crucial to the listening process? According to Rubin (p. 600), Freud “presented a ‘negative account’ —what to avoid (i.e., censorship, prior expectations, and ‘reflection’) — not what to do, that is, how to cultivate ‘observation’ and ‘evenly-hovering attention’.”

In a sense perhaps, the second question answers the first – by listening with even-hovering attention we can listen to ourselves and the patient/teller at the same time. But that still does not answer the question of how Freud’s recommendation can be achieved. I will now consider the contributions made by relevant psychoanalytic theorists to these issues.

In his dissertation, Gupta attempts to trace the development of the concept of evenly-hovering attention, from its origins in Freud to more recent times. His analysis covers the work of Theodor Reik (a contemporary of Freud), Otto Isakower, Theodore Jacobs and James McLaughlin (Gupta, pp. 7-36).

In my opinion, Reik’s work is of greater interest because of his detailed descriptions of the process of ‘listening with the third ear’. Arnold (2006, p. 754) explains the concept:

“In his book of the same title, Reik (1948) contrasts conscious comprehension of psychoanalytic data with the clinician's initial unconscious conjectures that are later elaborated into systematic comprehension. The third ear is the unconscious capacity to decipher the psychological clues that inspire psychoanalytic conjectures. According to Reik, both conjecture and comprehension are crucial. However, the essence of psychoanalytic understanding is the third ear.”

Gupta (pp. 13-14) cites a vignette from the work of Reik which exemplifies the unconscious communication between psychoanalyst and patient:

“A man told me a dream … *I am with my father on board ship. My father shows me a cabin near that of the captain, I ask my father: ‘Does mother know that you are leaving?’ He begins to cry and says, ‘I have forgotten to tell her’, and we decide to telephone before the ship leaves the harbor. We move and we come to Lands End.*

There were no associations to the dream. He did not know where the name Lands End came from nor any ship on which he had gone with his father … Why did I ask him then and there whether he knew the play, Outward Bound? ‘Do I know it?’ he answered astonished, ‘I saw it in the theater and then as a movie and I just thought of it. That is strange.’ The play, which I had seen many years ago in Vienna, shows a ship on which the passengers are all dead without knowing it. The captain is God. (Reik, 1948/1977, pp. 262-263)”.

Reik speculated that something about the dream, its symbols or mood, evoked the memory of the play to both him and patient. The association to the play was, for Reik, his father’s death two years previously, and for the patient, a disturbing superstition that his father would die soon – which Reik did not consciously know at the time (Gupta, p. 14).

According to Reik (cited by Arnold, p. 755) “premature employment of consciously logical thought … checks the free play of associations and the emergence of fruitful ideas that draw the hidden meaning of the products of the unconscious into … consciousness”. Simpler put, our conscious minds have a tendency to interfere with listening at the deeper level, as I found out when listening to Maria’s story as a conductor (see below), and we must find a way to switch off the conscious mind until its use is more appropriate.

Arnold (pp. 756-764) describes Reik’s universe of psychoanalytic conjecture as consisting of three temporal phases:

1. The detection of psychodynamic meanings;
2. The assimilation of these meanings by the therapist’s unconscious; and
3. The emergence of the assimilated meanings into the therapist’s consciousness.

The first phase includes “conscious, preconscious, and unconscious observations of the patient” (Arnold, p. 756). Conscious signals include silences, movements and gestures, tone of the voice etc.

Reik refers to the unconscious signals as “clues … material of a special kind, whose importance has not yet been examined and whose significance is not immediately clear” (Reik, cited by Arnold, p. 757). Their meaning is difficult to decipher because clues are closely associated with repressed material and a “non-rational style of mental processing”, which Freud called the primary processes of the unconscious (Arnold, p. 758). However, Reik pointed to markers that analysts use (mostly unconsciously) to determine “whether a clinical observation should be taken as a clue to the patient’s psychodynamics” (Arnold, p. 758). These include:

* First impressions – including feelings and reactions provoked in the analyst by the patient;
* Absence of some expected behaviour or other material – e.g. absence of a feeling of guilt in a situation where that feeling would be expected;
* Tone and style of the speech – e.g. a patient speaking in a low almost inaudible voice;
* The impact of a person’s behaviour on others – e.g. repeated displays of hostility which tend to push others away.

In the second phase, the markers are assimilated by the unconscious mind of the analyst, with the unconscious acting as the instrument of understanding (Arnold, p. 759). The concept of the analyst’s unconscious acting as an instrument (analytical tool) was further developed by Otto Isakower, who coined the term ‘Analytic/Analysing Instrument (Gupta, pp. 17-24).

Essentially, Reik claimed that the unconscious had “a built-in system designed to intuit the other’s unconscious by decoding interpersonal signals” (Arnold, p. 759). He called this system the third ear. He borrowed a concept from Goethe’s theory of optics – recurrent reflection – to describe a process whereby another’s mind/unconscious can be grasped, not directly, but through the reflection of the other in oneself.

“My mind and the other’s mind are like two mirrors facing each other. We see each through reflection in the other … each reflection is a reflection of a reflection of a reflection, ad infinitum. I see the other in her reflections in me, but my view of myself is based partly on how I am reflected in her. The best we can do is to catch a few glimmers of insight reflected through a hall of mirrors.” (Arnold, p. 760)

As Arnold points out (p. 760), Reik’s idea is closely connected to contemporary concepts of intersubjectivity – knowing the other through one’s subjectivity and knowing the self through the subjectivity of the other. In tracing the development of Freud’s concept of evenly-hovering attention, Gupta (pp. 25-36) also refers to the work of Jacobs (use of the self[[6]](#footnote-6)) and McLaughlin (transference sanctuaries[[7]](#footnote-7)), which in their own different ways foreshadowed current theories of intersubjectivity.

“Evenly hovering attention, third ear, analysing instrument, use of the self, transference sanctuaries – essentially speak of regression, on both sides of the couch, a shared sense of the mind that allows the derivatives of unconscious mental life to be transmitted and received.” (Gupta, p. 42)

It would seem therefore, that what Reik was attempting to do was to describe the mechanisms through which intersubjectivity was possible. He went so far as to say that it was possible to intuit the experiences of others even if they were quite different to our own because “in addition to our memories of actual experiences, we all carry within us innumerable potential experiences” (Arnold, p.760).

The process of understanding another’s mind, whether seen as one of recurrent reflection or of intersubjectivity, depends not only on the quality of the analyst’s listening but also on his subjective responses to the patient, which are “unconsciously facilitated by [his] own life history, inner conflicts, and knowledge of culture” (Arnold, p. 761). Accordingly, Reik warns that the process can be derailed by unconscious forces that lead to self-deception in the analyst.

Self-deception is all the more possible because material emerging from the unconscious tends to be resisted by rational consciousness, either because the material is threatening (to patient and/or analyst) or absurd (because it is structured in terms of the nonrational primary processes of the unconscious).

This is essentially the challenge of the third phase of the process of psychoanalytic conjecture: emergence. The analyst must have the moral courage “to face in others as well as in himself unpleasant and repressed thoughts and tendencies.” As these are brought into consciousness, he may experience a “sense of alienation … a kind of foggy sensation” (Reik cited by Arnold, p. 762), which may point to a conflict between emerging insight and unconscious resistance to the insight.

It should be added that Reik believed that listening was not a long, drawn-out process of waiting for unconscious insight but rather a continuous “oscillation between the conscious and unconscious labors of the intellect and imagination” (Arnold, citing Reik, p. 763). The important issue is not how long the analyst waits to make a conscious formulation but rather whether he makes it at the right time in the sequence.

In contrast, Isakower (cited by Gupta, p. 19) talks about the process of the analyst ‘emerging out’ of the analytical situation (the 50 minute session), a moment in which the analyst becomes aware of the separation of the two halves of the analysing instrument (patient and analyst working unconsciously). After this moment, the analyst can begin to reintegrate the part of him that was ‘stuck’ to the patient and start to reflect on the material that arose from both the patient and himself during the session.

In a similar way, McLaughlin spoke about the need to take time in the garden or some other private space, at the end of the working day, to ‘ponder over’ what had happened in the sessions with clients. In both cases, these theorists speak about this time of reflection as one experienced in a “modified state of wakefulness” (Isakower, cited by Gupta, p. 19) or a dreaming state (McLaughlin, cited by Gupta, p. 31).

Reik explains further that after the insights emerge, “they cannot simply be blurted out to the patient. First, they must be clarified, placed in context, and tested against available evidence”. This is the province of the rational conscious mind. Eventually, the analyst arrives at a formulation which he may decide to transmit to the patient (as an interpretation), if and when it is appropriate (Arnold, p. 763).

On one level, the idea of listening to the unconscious seems quite bizarre, for it cannot be scientifically verified. However, it must be acknowledged that many psychoanalysts, including Reik and other intersubjectivist theorists, have found these concepts helpful in describing the analytical process and conveying their ideas to others.

The above review appears to confirm the suggestion made earlier that it is possible to listen to several inputs at once without loss of significant information, at least in the rarefied atmosphere of the analytical situation. The same should hold true of the playback context provided the necessary rituals of this form of theatre are observed. Of course, it is also quite clear that for this to occur the listener must adopt a certain frame of mind, it is not enough to listen as we do in everyday life, where we filter out things for the sake of convenience or have our minds running on automatic.

The British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion evolved his own recommendations on technique, which seem to have achieved a certain degree of popularity with contemporary psychoanalysts. His ideas which also appear to draw on Freud’s premise of “unconscious-to-unconscious communication” in the analytical situation (Grotstein, 2007, p. 82), seem to provide an alternative to the evenly-hovering attention approach.

Grotstein (pp. 47-48) explains Bion’s quintessential contribution to psychoanalytic technique:

“Following a suggestion of Freud’s, Bion … sought a way for the analyst to approximate the meditative-like stance (reverie) of the infant’s mother - to shut out all stimuli from within the analyst (memory, desire, preconceptions, understanding) in order to be optimally receptive to the subverbal emanations of the emotional being-in-flux ... Only then can the analyst, with much patience - the patience of tolerating uncertainty and doubt - be qualified to become the analysand, or more precisely become the analysand's state of mind. In this state of reverie, the analyst has thus become the container of the analysand’s projected mental content (contained).”

According to Grotstein (p. 48), the process of ‘becoming’ is not unlike the mystical act of ‘exorcism’, where the demons are transferred from analysand/patient to analyst (infant to mother), except that in psychoanalysis, the trajectory is bi-directional.

“The analyst, as the mother does for her infant, absorbs the analysand’s pain by ‘becoming’ the analysand/infant (specifically becoming the latter’s emotional state of mind) and allowing it to become part of him/herself. In this reverie he then becomes his own repertoire of personal experiences to be summoned from this own unconscious so that some of them may become symmetrical to or match up with the analysand's still unfathomable projections ... Eventually, the analyst sees (feels) a pattern in the material, the experience of which is called the ‘selected fact’ - that is, the pattern becomes the selected fact that allows the analyst to interpret the intuited pattern.”

Although Bion’s language is somewhat challenging, we can see parallels between the work of Bion and that of Reik and other intersubjectivist theorists. The focus remains on unconscious-to-unconscious communication although Bion uses different terminology to explain the process. The concept of the mother/analyst acting as a container for the child’s/patient’s ‘difficult to be with’ feelings is central to his thesis. It is similar to Winnicott’s description of the mother as a holding environment which supports and facilitates the autonomous development of the child but it is also more specific because it is concerned with emotional states (Grotstein, pp. 162-163).

Bion’s recommendations on technique can be summarised as follows (Grotstein, pp. 82-83):

* “Use sense, myth, and passion when conducting an analysis” - sense refers to observation by the senses, myths (e.g., the Oedipus myth) underlie conscious and unconscious phantasies, and passion refers to the “analyst’s fluctuating emotional state in resonance with the emotions of the patient”;
* “Abandon memory, desire, understanding, and the use of preconceptions”- desire refers to the desire to cure the patient, end the session etc. Memory refers to remembering what happened in previous sessions and understanding refers to theories or ideas about who the patient is. In the playback ritual, ‘desire’, for example, might be a desire to place a therapeutic context on the story or a wish to deliver an aesthetically pleasing performance;
* "Descend into a state of reverie (‘wakeful dream thinking’) so that you can be optimally receptive to your (the analyst’s) unconscious emotional resonance with the patient’s emotions ... The analyst must not proffer an interpretation that he does not feel. The patient will know.” That is, when the analyst/actor interprets/performs the material, the patient/teller will know if the interpretation/enactment is genuine;
* “Freely employ speculative imagination and speculative reasoning”;
* "The analyst must ‘dream’ the analytic session.”

In a later passage, Grotstein (p. 94) describes dreaming as “our way of rendering the experience unconscious and allowing selective aspects of the experience back into our conscious awareness though the selectively permeable contact-barrier" (the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious).

Whereas Reik and the intersubjectivist theorists attempt to describe what happens when we listen at the unconscious level, Bion also provides specific instructions for how to do so. Several psychoanalysts I am personally acquainted with frequently refer to the concept of reverie or dreaming as the ‘way-in’ to listening at this deeper level. However, this appears to raise yet another question: what exactly is reverie and how we can enter into that state?

In referring to the state of awareness of the analyst, Gupta (p. 34) remarks that “free-hovering attention can extend at times to reverie, hypnogogic and hypnopompic experiences, and even to dream and dreamless sleep”. Dictionary.com defines the hypnagogic state as the “drowsy period between wakefulness and sleep, during which fantasies and hallucinations often occur” and hypnopompic as “of or pertaining to the semiconscious state prior to complete wakefulness”. I can relate to this somewhat, having experienced non-rational images or thoughts, particularly when in the hypnagogic state.

I asked a Lisbon based psychoanalyst (who wished to remain anonymous) how she entered into the state of reverie or dreaming. She answered: “I try to empty myself … and become totally available to the patient … it is like a meditative state”. Another Lisbon based analyst, answered:

“I start to prepare myself on the way to the consulting room … when I arrive I remind myself to be present in that space, at that time. When I listen to the patient, I try to practice evenly suspended attention … the most important thing is to notice my emotional reactions to the patient’s material.”

Reflecting upon these answers, I became attracted the idea of using meditation to listen on a deeper level, possibly because I had already had some personal experience with this practice and because it remains a subject of interest to me[[8]](#footnote-8). Perhaps because of this connection, at some point during playback rehearsals, I began to try to listen with a meditative stance. I do feel I have benefitted from this approach, and that it has impacted on some of the experiences I relate in the next section.

Bion’s instruction to ‘dream’ the analytic session is, I believe, a reference to a meditative stance. It is akin to practising a form of meditation while listening to the other; that is, letting go of the usual chatter inside our minds and becoming a detached observer of the other, one’s surroundings, and oneself.

I think the adoption of a meditative state may also partly answer the question of how we can listen to several inputs at once. During the practice of meditation - as our brainwave activity moves from beta to alpha to theta waves[[9]](#footnote-9) - we are seemingly able to experience deeper relaxation and take in an increased number of inputs, without being drawn in to them (we can for example, remain detached even from our own reactions to the events being observed).

In his article, Rubin proposes the practice of meditation for improving the analyst’s capacity to listen[[10]](#footnote-10). In his opinion, the awareness practices of meditation fill the gap left by Freud, in not positively identifying how one can cultivate evenly-hovering attention. Similarly, he suggests that these practices provide an alternative to Bion’s “coercive approach” to directing the mind to free itself of desires, memories etc. (pp. 604-605). Such attempts, according to Rubin, may simply result in a process of 'reflecting', which Freud warned against.

According to this author, what is needed is a perspective of openness; that is, a “nonselective acceptance and awareness of whatever is, right here, now, moment-to-moment” (p. 605). In my opinion, the expression ‘non-selective awareness’ provides a rather effective, although perhaps simplistic, definition of evenly-hovering attention.

Rubin suggests meditation as a method for achieving this state of awareness. There are of course many different forms of meditation, although broadly they all seem to refer to some form of mental training which originated in India some 2500 years ago (Rubin, p. 601). He points to a meditation technique taught in a particular nontheistic Buddhist tradition, describing the process as follows:

“In the first stage of the meditative process one sits in a comfortable position in a quiet place, closes one's eyes and attends to one object, such as the physical sensation of the movement of the stomach. Attention is not thinking about or analyzing what is occurring. It is a simple registering of what is happening. One invariably loses awareness of the abdomen and “wanders” off and “follows” thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and associations. When this happens one simply notices what is happening without further elaboration or criticism. As soon as one is aware that one is wandering one returns one's attention to the physical movement of the abdomen … When distractibility decreases and attentiveness becomes more sustained and automatic, stage two begins. In stage two one becomes attentive in a nonselective and nonrestrictive way to whatever occurs. Instead of maintaining an exclusively focused awareness — being aware of a specific object such as the abdomen —one has an inclusive attentiveness, fully allowing and remaining aware of whatever occurs. Stages one and two are mutually constitutive and complementary and do not function in precisely the linear way that my description suggests. Stage one provides the foundation for the cultivation of “evenly-hovering attention” in stage two by creating the preconditions for listening with “evenly-hovering attention”—decreasing distractions, quieting and focusing the mind, and enhancing the capacity to perceive with nonselective attentiveness. Stage two utilizes this foundation to cultivate and refine sustained “evenly-hovering attention.” Without this foundation it is much more difficult to listen in this specialized manner.”

In my opinion, Rubin has made a case for meditation to be used to improve listening capacity; however, I would not go so far as to say that Freud as well as those who came after him and sought to refine the process of psychoanalytic listening, including Bion, did not significantly contribute to the development of this crucial skill in psychoanalysis. The many ideas about listening on an unconscious level, some of which have been described in this article, as well as Bion’s recommendations, have helped to train the minds of many analysts and I expect, contributed to the healing of many patients.

Listening is not an ‘abc process’ that can be taught to ensure good listening. The concept of listening itself almost avoids definition. But ideas of how to listen can be gradually integrated into the mind/psyche so that a person learns to listen better (with greater sensitivity and at a deeper level).

I see the process of learning to listen as being like the process of an actor preparing for a performance. The work is done in the rehearsal, where ideas are explored and tested, and analysed and redefined, and then memorised. At the moment of performance however, the actor must not direct the mind to what he has learnt but rather to the experience of the moment, that is, of the other and the self, and of the place. Afterwards, the actor can reflect on what happened in the performance. This, I believe, is similar to the listening process of the analyst and the playback performer.

Rubin makes a further important point about listening. So far we have been talking about listening at the internal level, that is “the listener’s state of mind while listening” (p. 610). The author also refers to the external level, that is “the analytic environment —especially the quiet, tranquil atmosphere —which is arranged to minimize and decrease visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic stimulation and diversions” (p. 610). Just as the analytical situation is designed to reduced external sense stimuli to facilitate the process of free association (by the patient) and evenly-hovering attention/reverie (by the analyst), in a playback rehearsal/performance the environment must be designed to reduce distractions and create a focus for better/deeper listening.

**Anecdotal Evidence**

I will now consider anecdotal evidence taken from some of my experiences as an actor or conductor in playback rehearsals/performances of the Lisbon group[[11]](#footnote-11). Where appropriate, I will make observations about listening technique.

Maria’s Story (rehearsal on 14-12-2011)

Maria told a story about being locked out of her apartment because she had left her keys at home. At the time, she was sharing the apartment with Mark, a Hungarian student, who had asked her if his parents could stay in the spare room for a few days while visiting Portugal. When she returned home with shopping bags in both hands, she stood outside the door waiting for either Martin or his parents to arrive. Eventually, the parents turned up and let Maria into the apartment.

During the telling of the story, Maria talked about the situation in Hungary regarding beggars and street people, she said that if caught by the police they had to go to jail or pay a fine. Maria thought this was very unjust. She related that she had signed a petition to stop this injustice.

Maria seemed very upset with someone about being locked out. I thought, well, she left her keys at home, what can she expect, it’s nobody’s fault but hers. Then I thought about her concern with the Hungarian homeless. This seemed an important part of her story but I didn’t understand how this connected with being locked out of the apartment.

Before performing the story, we analysed it for structure and important detail (something we were doing at the time as a learning strategy), and it suddenly came to me that, for Maria, it was ironic that she was now the one that was homeless, not the Hungarians. When I checked this with her, she nodded.

The important thing here was that I heard Maria’s deep concern about the homeless in Hungary. At first, I didn’t understand the significance of this, but by being able to sit with this concern/emotion, it perhaps eventually resonated with my own feelings/experience of being unjustly left out in the cold. This helped me to connect to Maria’s feelings of isolation and understand the irony of being locked out of her own house by the Hungarians.

In other words, listening on a conscious level, I was confused by my own prejudices, but listening on a less conscious level (waiting for resonance) I was able to identify with the narrator’s peculiar experience. In Reik’s terms, I rejected logical comprehension in favour of less conscious conjecture. In Bion’s terms, I was able to summon my own unconscious experiences of isolation to match the ‘the projected mental content’ of the teller. The process of recurrent reflection/unconscious-to-unconscious communication was centred on this experience of isolation. It was this perhaps that enabled me to listen to/understand the teller’s story at a deeper level.

Paulo’s Story (rehearsal on 4-1-2012)

It was our first rehearsal after Christmas. We had already shared some experiences of the festive season. Then, in very few words, Paulo told the story of sitting with his mother at his grand-mother’s bedside, waiting for her to ‘leave’. As he told the story, tears came into his eyes. We all felt the depth of emotion that suddenly filled the room. At the time, I was conducting and I was taken by surprise, the depth of emotion seemed to come out of the blue. I felt unsure about what to do, what form to choose for the playback. The strong emotion remained in the room. I asked the actors to do a single frozen image of the teller waiting by his grand-mother’s bedside. I did not want the story to be trivialised or overdramatized. Afterwards, Paulo thanked the actors. When the playback of the story finished, some of the actors sat with Paulo and comforted him.

I explained to everyone afterwards that it was important for us to stay with that moment, with the emotion that was given to us by the teller. We held the story and its emotion after it was given to us by the teller, we did not run away from it or trivialise it.

This process reminded me of Bion’s descriptions of the psychoanalyst becoming “the container of the analysand’s projected mental content” (see above, p. 13). As playback performers, perhaps we also had acted as a container for the material of the story, allowing it to resonate with our unconscious experiences (in this case, of grief) before returning it to the teller as an interpretation/image-metaphor-enactment. As in psychoanalysis, the interpretation will be successful if we *felt* our own experience of the story and were able to transmit that to the teller.

Graça’s Story (rehearsal, early in 2012)

During another rehearsal in 2012, the group was visited several times by Graça, a woman who presented herself as a volunteer working with street people (although we had been informed by another volunteer that she also was homeless). I had noticed that there was a strong theme of religion in her stories. One day, she told the story of her brother’s death, which happened when she was still a child. In the rehearsal, I was one of the actors involved in the enactment of the story (but not the teller’s actor). Personally, I had a lot of trouble understanding Graça’s speech because of her accent, so I had difficulty picking up the details of the story. However, what I did understand/hear was how difficult it was for her to deal with her brother’s death (in some unconscious way I was perhaps reminded of my father’s tragic death in a car accident). I also heard that her mother consoled her with the thought that her brother had gone to Heaven. For me therefore, the story was about Graça reconciling herself with her brother’s death. In the enactment, we focused on the grieving aspects of the story and the teller’s relationship with her mother. At a certain point, I entered the scene as the ghost of Graça’s brother, offering the possibility of reconciliation.

I remember adopting a meditative state during the telling of this story, possibly because I was having trouble understanding the teller and I reacted by trying to relax rather than panic. By adopting a state of reverie, I was optimising receptivity to my own “unconscious emotional resonance with the [teller’s] emotions” (see Bion, p. 14). I must admit, however, that I also used prior knowledge of the teller (the theme of religion in her stories), which Bion counselled against.

This story/enactment also perhaps illustrates the need for playback actors to hear/focus on the significant aspects of the story rather than the details of how and when things happened.

Jacinta’s Story (performance on 24-4-2012)

During this performance, a woman told a story about a month of debilitating back pain. During that time, she stayed with her parents and was looked after by them. Jacinta related her gradual recovery and how helpful her mother had been. She also mentioned that it wasn’t always easy being with her mother. I felt this to be an important aspect of the story (I was reminded of my own difficult relationship with my mother) and questioned her further. Jacinta gave signs that she did not want to pursue the subject. I was aware of this but went on, thinking that there was a deeper story there. After a couple more questions, she revealed that during her life she had felt a lack of closeness with her mother. Sensing that the teller did not want to go further, I left it at that.

Sometime later, I had the opportunity to speak to Jacinta and I asked her about the telling of the story. She confirmed that she had resisted going too deeply into the relationship with her mother. She felt it would have been too complicated to explain the relationship in a short space of time. The teller also shared that she was not one of those people who felt comfortable sharing personal stories in that context.

In the enactment, the actors focused on the disability provoked by the pain as well as the relationship with the mother. She later told me that she had been satisfied with the portrayal and that we had accurately represented the relationship with her mother.

On an unconscious level perhaps, I had resonated with the teller’s admission of a less than desirable relationship with a parent, and in my conscious mind I felt this to be an interesting topic to pursue. At the same time, I was also aware of the teller’s need for privacy and that I should respect that, in the same way perhaps that analysts have to respect a patient’s need for defences, which allow them to have a sense of control about when to deal with threatening material.

Two stories about relationship with aged parents (open rehearsal on 20-6-12)

On the night of the event, I was concerned with so many preparatory tasks that I forgot to take a moment to think about the listening. As the conductor, I went into listening mode but I think more on the conscious level. I do not remember entering into the relaxed meditative state that helps me to listen on a deeper level. I felt like I didn’t press this switch.

The evening began with my own story. I read a small text (supported by frozen images/photographs previously rehearsed with the actors) which focused on the feelings surrounding relationships with my family and other important people in my life. This lead to a playback performance with the ten or so invited guests on the theme of stories of love and friendship. Initially, the audience were asked to share what they felt when they loved someone. Later, they were asked to share moments such as the first love or the first kiss, or a betrayal. When we reached the stage of inviting a teller onto the stage to relate a longer story, a theme emerged – stories of love within families, and more specifically stories of the relationship between mother and child. I realised afterwards, that this theme had already been evoked during the reading of my text.

A woman told a story that began before her birth. Her English mother was born with a defect in one of her hands which, according to the teller, had undermined her confidence in developing close relationships with others. She had had children in order to love and feel loved but her disability had remained a symbol of her reluctance to express love for others. For the teller, this translated into a feeling of awkwardness whenever she tried to hug her mother. When asked how she would like her story to end, the teller replied that she would like to have the power to transform this aspect of the relationship with her mother.

This was followed by a story about a relationship between a mother and her son, as told by a friend of the son. One day, after the teller praised the friend for the exemplar dedication he showed to his mother, the son shared the deep pain he felt because his mother could not/would not acknowledge his gift to her. “It was totally incomprehensible”, the teller said, “that a mother would not acknowledge such a loving son.”

As the conductor, I felt I that I had not pressed the switch to listen at a deeper level. However, I realised afterwards, that I had pressed this switch in a different way, by sharing my own stories of deep love during the initial reading. Possibly, without planning it, unconscious-to-unconscious communication had occurred between myself and the audience.

**Implications for Playback Theatre**

In the analytic session, the patient is encouraged to free associate, as a means to reach into his unconscious. The analyst is exhorted to undergo a similar process, by listening with evenly-hovering attention and opening himself to his own unconscious.

In playback, we invite someone from the audience to tell a story, that is, we ask the teller to share moments of his life using a narrative structure. We do not invite them to free associate. However, perhaps something in the nature of playback – its characteristic as a ritual space, or as a liminal space[[12]](#footnote-12) – acts as an invitation to everyone present to free associate. I remember a story told during a performance by the Playback School UK Core Training group in 2008, in which a man relating how much he enjoyed being a farmer suddenly began to talk about a key incident in his childhood. I would say that free association led to this moment of regression for the teller. Also, it seems rather natural to me that playback performers would free associate in order to find personal connections to the teller’s story and that audience members would do likewise as they listen to a teller or watch the enactment of a story.

Of course, playback performers are not usually trained in psychoanalytic technique. However, the techniques of listening with evenly-suspended attention or in a state of reverie can be understood and practiced, as can the attitude of opening oneself to one’s unconscious and imagination (the analyst’s equivalent of free association). With such an approach, the playback performer may be able to listen on a deeper level and may more frequently hit upon a metaphor or image or idea that he can use during the enactment of the story. Such a metaphor, like the play Outward Bound in the Reik analysis, may provide light or perspective on the teller’s story, in the same way that analysts use interpretation to help the patient reframe their story as a means of healing.

As already suggested, the enactment/performance of the story in playback is equivalent to interpretation in analysis. This ‘interpretation’ is made by the performers through the use of colour, metaphor, imagery, music, emotion etc. Interpretation by the conductor is also possible, as he gives voice to his own/ the patient’s subconscious promptings through rephrasing of some aspect of the story; for example, during questioning of the teller, clarification of information for the actors or the offer of a title for the story.

As indicated earlier, timing and accuracy of interpretation are very important in psychoanalytic technique. In playback, accuracy is also significant – for example, we sometimes feel that our enactment did not hit the mark and that the teller remained unsatisfied as a result of this. Timing is probably more of an issue for the conductor, who must judge if and when to bring into consciousness some unconscious aspect of the story. Once the story is handed to the actors, their only option is to interpret or not to interpret. A possible example of non-interpretation is Paulo’s story (p. 18) – although in that case, the conductor seemingly directed the actors not to interpret.

The ‘one-off’ aspect of a playback performance is also in stark contrast to psychoanalytic sessions[[13]](#footnote-13), which are usually conducted over a long period of time (usually years). The playback performer does not have the luxury of getting to know the teller over an extended period of time, and the considerable benefits (or disadvantages) that would be associated with that, for example, the creation of a relationship of trust. Accordingly, the performer must rely on a deep understanding of and fine-tuned sensitivity to herself and others, as well as considerable knowledge and experience of the playback process.

This may lead us to question to what extent listening practices used in analysis can be used in playback theatre. For example, the time between listening and the interpretation/enactment is rather short. Actors are given at the most half-a-minute to (consciously or unconsciously) reflect on the story they have just heard (as musicians take the focus to introduce the enactment to the audience). The preparation time for decoding/formulating/interpreting unconscious material of the teller and oneself is negligible, unless one accepts Reik’s notion of the oscillation between conscious and unconscious thought, meaning essentially that we decode on the fly.

Perhaps because of the shortness of time, I am more attracted to the suggestion that the analyst/performer remain in the dreaming state[[14]](#footnote-14) during the formulation/enactment of the story. Although probably unavoidable, unnecessary conscious thought in performance can disrupt the flow and magic of the enactment. Some of the performance at least is likely to happen at an unconscious level, as performers respond to each other in an intuitive manner to drive forward the story and its metaphors, something which is likely to become more natural as performers grow in trust and confidence.

It should be added that the process of listening does not always operate in a logical way – which is not surprising if we consider that a substantial part of it happens at the unconscious level. In playback, a performer (or the group as a whole) may sometimes miss the mark – for any number of reasons, including improper attentiveness, either to the teller’s story or the performer’s own somatic or subconscious promptings. Or the actor may add something of his own, that was neither implicit nor explicit in the teller’s story. However, accidents or mistakes, unless they involve significant risk of injury, can sometimes lead to fortuitous situations, and this is as much true of therapy (where it might be seen as an opportunity) as it is of the artistic process.

For example, during a performance by our Lisbon group some years ago, a woman told a story of how one day during her early school years, she had swept the dirt out to the edges of the classroom rather than to the centre as was required. The woman had felt a sense of humiliation in the teacher’s laughter. In the enactment, after the representation of the moment of humiliation, one the actors suddenly began to sweep out in solidarity with the teller’s actor as if this was the most fun thing in the world, so that sweeping out became not a wrong thing but ‘a cool thing to do’. The teller afterwards related that this gesture gave her distance from her own story and helped her to deal with the original incident.

Occasionally, these (fortuitous) accidental additions by actors provide just as much magic to the enactment as might a representation that emotionally and artistically reflects the story. In playback, enactments/interpretations can also involve an element of playfulness which is perhaps not so obviously present in therapy (although therapists are known to use ‘play’ as a tool, particularly with children).

The discussion of listening in psychoanalysis also raises issues regarding preparation which are of relevance to playback. Preparation consists essentially of giving attention to both the internal and the external environment in which the event is to take place. First, performers must prepare themselves mentally to listen at a deeper level, by focusing on being present, listening with evenly-hovering attention, in a state of reverie or in a meditative state (the internal environment). Secondly, they must do so in a space and at a time that minimises external distractions and is conducive to the internal work (the external environment).

I would now like to come back to the issue of the purpose of playback. If healing is not the purpose of playback then what is its purpose? In an afterword to the original publication, Fox (p. 264) says that playback, seen from the perspective of the preliterary tradition, attempts “to create a context similar to that of a traditional society, where there is no clear separation between art and healing”. He calls this a redressive purpose.

Throughout the time I have been involved in playback, there has been a clear and consistent message from those involved that playback is not therapy, and I can appreciate the reasons for that, not the least being the fact that generally, performers are not trained therapists (although some are). However, it is just as generally accepted that playback can have a therapeutic effect.

Therapy reframes the patient’s material so it can be digested/integrated for the purpose of healing. Playback, similarly, could be said to reframe the teller’s story so it can be integrated by the teller and those witnessing the performance, namely the performers and the audience.

It seems to me, therefore, that healing should be legitimately recognised as a goal of playback. We are perhaps not dealing with the kind of healing practiced by doctors, psychotherapists and other health professionals but it is a kind of healing nevertheless, one that might be described as a healing of individuals and the communities to which they belong, through the sharing of stories, feelings, unconscious memories etc. At the very least, playback attempts to create a safe space within which such healing can occur.

**Conclusion**

The ability to listen on a deeper level is not a skill that can be acquired overnight but one that requires constant and persistent attention, as well as a degree of experimentation. Also, there will be times when performers may find it difficult to be mentally and emotionally available to listen, or to listen at a deeper level.

Such a skill may require practice in steps. For example, while it may be true that beginner playbackers tend to focus on the details of the story, it is also true that once they acquire the ability to listen for detail, they are more ready to let go of it and listen at a deeper level.

In my opinion, much can be gained by playback performers practicing the technique of listening with evenly-hovering attention or any of its equivalents. The benefit, I believe, is a raised ability to listen at the unconscious (deeper) level, which should lead to greater power and accuracy in the enactment of the story.

I hope I have been able to provide some light on the dynamic of what happens when we listen at a deeper level and the state of mind that must be practiced in order to be an effective listener at that level.

Lastly, I would like to highlight that this paper has focussed on listening technique for playback performers attending to the audience and their stories, and that not much has been said about the listening process between performers or between members of the audience. It is very likely that in these cases, the process is very similar and just as important. During an enactment, for example, performers must listen to the ‘promptings’ of their colleagues as well as their own, and they must do so with a state of mind that enables them to work in cooperation and drive the story forward.

How audience members listen to each other or to the invitations of the conductor also significantly impacts on the stories shared and connections made between stories. An issue that might be pondered is how the audience could be encouraged/prepared for speaking and listening at a deeper level, assuming that this was considered a desirable object.

However, I feel that these additional issues would add significant length to this paper and consequently, only mention them as suggestions for further investigation and writing.

**References**

Arnold, K. (2006). *Reik’s Theory of Psychoanalytic Listening*. Psychoanalytic Psychology, 23(4), 754-765.

Fox, J. (1994). *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in Nonscripted Theatre*. New Paltz: Tulsitala Publishing.

Grotstein, J. S. (2007). *A* *Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion’s Legacy to Psychoanalysis*. Karnac Books.

Gupta, R. (2008). *To the Analyzing Instrument and Beyond: Reconstructing Evenly Hovering Attention*, a dissertation submitted to AUT University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Health Science (MHSc) in Psychotherapy. (<http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/handle/10292/496>)

Rowe, N. (2007). *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Rubin, J. B. (1985). *Meditation and Psychoanalytic Listening*. Psychoanalytic Review, 72(4), 599-613.

1. For a considered explanation of playback theatre see Salas, J. (1993). *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt; or Fox (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See http://www.youmakethedifference.net [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In chapter 6, pp. 99-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I remember in particular, sessions where students were guided through an understanding and practical application of American psychologist Eric Berne’s ego states of parent, adult and child. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Above – when he speaks about empathic resonance and about the need to maintain the tension between the self and the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Self-enquiry is conducted not for the purpose of healing the analyst but as a means to open oneself to the mind and heart of the patient, so “that the unconscious of patient and analyst begin to resonate” (Gupta, p. 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gupta conjectures that McLaughlin was inspired by the Asclepian myth to describe a space where transferences could flow freely between patient and analyst, but always under the watchful eye of the analyst/priest responsible for the ritual (Gupta, pp. 33-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the early 90’s, I learnt a theistic form of meditation taught by the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. By concentrating on one’s third eye, it was possible to achieve a state of inner peace and love known as ‘soul-consciousness’. Since then, I have practiced meditation when I feel the need, using my own methods, and more recently, I have become interested in learning more about Buddhist meditation. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example, *Brainwaves Explained* by Laurence Maynard at http://ezinearticles.com/?Brainwaves-Explained&id=5352082. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. He also refers to research data that appears to validate the proposition that meditation can improve “attention and listening beyond previously established limits” (p. 601). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The names of actors and tellers have been changed to protect privacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As to liminality, see <http://www.liminality.org/about/whatisliminality/> and Fox, pp. 121-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Traditionally, psychoanalysis is conducted over four weekly sessions, with a lesser number of sessions being called psychotherapy. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See the references to Isakower and McLaughlin above, at p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)