



# Storytelling on Screen:

**An Online Playback Theatre Archive and Guidebook**

Jordan Rosin and Heidi Winters Vogel  
With Sammy Lebron





Playback Theatre is a form of community-centered storytelling theater where the audience tells stories, which are then reflected by a company of actors and musicians. *Storytelling on Screen: An Online Playback Theatre Archive and Guidebook* is an open education resource consisting of a collection of full-length recordings of online Playback Theatre performances, and a 55-page explanatory guidebook. The guidebook, featuring a foreword by Playback Theatre co-founder, Jo Salas, explains the adaptation to online performances and some of the key concepts, roles, and forms involved in online Playback Theatre. The resource as a whole is suitable for a wide range of theatre students in courses such as applied theatre, theatre for social justice, improvisation, theatre appreciation, or acting. The guidebook contains hyperlinks to specific sections of the archive where students can see a given form or concept in action, allowing for a comparison of how different companies approach a given form.



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A free version is available online at:  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10919/104420>

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*Storytelling on Screen: An Online Playback Theatre Archive and Guidebook*

Produced and edited by Jordan Rosin and Heidi Winters Vogel, with Sammy Lebron

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Virginia Tech School of Performing Arts in association with Virginia Tech Publishing  
Blacksburg, Virginia USA

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*Jordan dedicates this project to Sayda Trujillo,  
his first Playback teacher and inspiration.*

*Heidi dedicates this project to Inside Out Playback Theatre and  
co-founder, Roger Foster. Your life, wisdom, and stories were a gift to us!*

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# Foreword

Jo Salas

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Jo Salas is the co-founder, with Jonathan Fox, of Playback Theatre and the founder  
of  
Hudson River Playback Theatre in Upstate New York.

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When the coronavirus pandemic hit in early 2020, Playback Theatre practitioners and ensembles all over the world were stopped in their tracks, along with most of the rest of society. Suddenly it was not possible to do a performance, to participate in or teach a workshop, to attend a gathering, to travel. We could not even meet with our company members. For some of us, the pandemic meant a significant loss of income as commissioned performances and training workshops were abruptly canceled.

But, as the world struggled to adapt to this new reality and Zoom became part of daily professional and private life, the international Playback community adapted as well. Some groups began meeting for rehearsals online. Some offered virtual performances. Training workshops were reconfigured as Zoom workshops. There were even online gatherings and conferences. Despite all that was lost, we discovered that indeed it was possible to meet in an authentic space online and share stories. We found new ideas in the very constraints we faced. We created artistic new forms. This flowering has continued.

Playback Theatre is a grassroots theatre where a team of improvisors enact audience members' personal stories on the spot, a seemingly simple practice developed carefully over forty-five years. It depends on the successful creation of an atmosphere of trust, respect, and—paradoxically—adventurousness, in which strangers feel both safe and inspired to take the risk of sharing personal experience in a public or semipublic setting. It is up to the conductor (the onstage facilitator) and the rest of the team to build connection, inclusiveness, trust, and openness on the audience's part to their own and others' stories. Most often, Playback takes place in informal community settings with an intimate audience of no more than fifty or sixty, with houselights up so the performing team can see the faces in the

audience. The show has a recognizable arc: a ritual that serves to hold and weave together the unpredictable stories themselves.

Our pandemic challenge was to re-create all of this in the flat, distanced universe of Zoom, with performers and audience members each in their own little box on the screen, in their own homes, in their own often far-flung locations. Ensembles learned from their experimentation and from that of others: Playbackers were generous in sharing their discoveries with each other. Over time, online Playback Theatre has become a viable form. (Not every group or individual chooses to perform online, preferring instead to wait until in-person performing becomes possible again.)

*Storytelling on Screen* includes some examples of online Playback Theatre performances that show both the possibilities and the pitfalls of this adaptation. Online performances, training, and gatherings are likely to continue long past the end of the pandemic, now that we know they are possible. The archive's value will be in supporting practitioners who work online from necessity or choice to fulfill the basic promise of Playback: to deliver a human-scale, authentic, and aesthetic experience of hearing and honoring the stories of our audiences.

Performing online holds several advantages and opportunities, as we've discovered. A performance is accessible to anyone, anywhere, as long as they have internet access. This has meant that not only are audiences likely to include people from multiple parts of the world, but the performing team itself may consist of performers currently in five or six countries. As well as existing ensembles offering shows, there have also been many ad hoc performing teams deliberately reflecting worldwide diversity. Some have come together for a single show; others formed ongoing ensembles that exist only online, like World Playback Theatre and Pangea Playback Theatre, whose performances appear in the archive.

This new frontier has been a stimulus to creativity—another plus. Practitioners had to adapt long-familiar forms and to create new ones. In Playback's oral tradition, where new ideas spread from person to person, people learned from what they saw and then tried it out with their own ensembles. By now there is a growing bank of effective performance forms, a sort of ongoing research and development available to and benefiting everyone. Some discovered that solo or duo enactments work particularly well on Zoom, like the two-person response in the Pangea show with a dancer in one box and a spoken-word artist in the other.

The sequential solos of “If It Were a Dream” in the Ume show are another example. Companies learned how important it is for performers to be distinguished from audience members visually—with coordinated clothing and neutral backgrounds—as well as with their unfailingly focused presence.

The essential ritual of Playback Theatre is the necessary container for the stories that will come. How to create a sense of heightened occasion and theatrical arc when the show from start to finish is an unchanging set of squares filled with heads and shoulders? How to launch a show gracefully when you must start off with technical information? In the most effective online shows you see an opening ritual that includes Zoom instructions delivered as lucidly and briefly as possible, followed by performers introducing themselves and Playback with sincerity and an artistry calibrated to work on the screen. You see a conductor who holds the ritual at all times. You see actors and musicians who contribute with rhythm and timing of their enactments and the quality of their presence.

Music’s essential role in building ritual and conveying emotion becomes even more important online—and even more difficult to fulfill. Zoom is not forgiving to weak music that might be acceptable in an informal in-person setting. Music at a high level of competence as well as sensitivity greatly strengthens the impact online.

Performers soon discovered the novel potential of doing Playback in your own home: you can grab a household object to use as a prop or a puppet. You can squat under your kitchen table, peek from behind a plant, step outside onto the deck. Occasionally an actor has made creative use of virtual backgrounds, as in the story set in the mountains of Italy in the World Playback Theatre performance.

Zoom itself offers at least two other tools that can be a positive addition. One is the breakout room, creatively used in the Pangea Playback Theatre show as an analogue to the “audience introductions” in a live show when audience members are invited to talk with one or two others. And there is the chat, an effective means of headlining a story or sharing a feeling (as in the World Playback Theatre show) and for building connection (Pangea’s audience members shared locations through the chat). (The chat is not visible in the recordings.)

Lastly, there were some very pragmatic advantages: the ensemble is not paying rent for a performance space. The show is not subject to cancellation

because of weather. Publicity is rarely more than a Facebook announcement. And although internet use has its own environmental cost, no one is burning fossil fuels to attend.

With all the very positive impacts and potentials of this new, unexpected development in our practice, there are also considerable downsides as well. Any seasoned Playback company would prefer to be performing in person, where we can see our audiences both as individuals and as the organism that they are, where we are together in a shared physical environment, where people can easily and informally connect with each other before and after the show, where the ritual of the performance is demarcated by use of space as well as time.

The first great disadvantage is Zoom itself. There is simply no way around the awkwardness of the technical requirements. The best we can do is to manage them with all possible dignity, efficiency, and mindfulness, particularly the unavoidable instructions at the beginning of a performance that, if not expertly dispatched, can derail the all-important opening. It is necessary to have a tech person on hand throughout. Even so, problems are inevitable, from the need to constantly remind a laggardly audience member to turn off her camera, to a performer's internet connection breaking down mid-show.

The Zoom setting brings with it other difficulties as well: audience members get up and wander; they eat in full view of everyone else; some might remain off camera, creating an uneasy sense of being watched by people you can't see. These behaviors work against creating the atmosphere that Playback depends on.

The other insuperable problem of online Playback Theatre is the impossibility of shared use of space and physical interaction on the part of the actors. Even non-physical interaction is made difficult by the medium. Actors can't turn and face each other. The bedrock of theatre is interaction: a story comes to life through the interplay in movement and dialogue of actors embodying characters. What do we have when this is impossible? At best we have beautifully expressive sequences of individual action, responding and relating to each other thematically. At worst we have a jumble of unconnected interpretations, with one form looking very much like another.

The absence of three-dimensional space also makes it harder to establish the arc of the show. In person, the Playback performance begins with a ceremonial,

interactive opening followed by a period of warm up where tellers share briefly from the audience and performers respond with short forms. Then, typically following audience members' introductions to each other, there is a key transition: the conductor invites a teller to the stage to tell a longer story, casting its main characters (to be followed by other similarly longer stories and their enactments). The moment is dramatic and signals a building of intensity and engagement. It is hard to approximate this moment on Zoom, particularly if the conductor does not take care to verbally clarify this change. There is no teller's chair. There is no liminal space to traverse between the audience and the stage.

The conductor must also conduct a story without physical proximity to a teller who may be vulnerable and emotional. In traditional Playback Theatre we conductors sit beside our tellers, we note how they are doing, we can support them if need be. Our inability to do this on Zoom extends to the whole audience: we simply cannot monitor and respond to emotion as we are used to. It raises ethical questions about our responsibility to maintain safety no matter how the stories may turn and deepen.

One more limitation: the vast majority of online Playback audiences so far (to my knowledge) have been other Playbackers. While it is wonderful that our community has been able to connect and care for one other in this way, Playback Theatre is meant for a wider population, not to serve only ourselves. Can we reach out online to others outside the Playback world? Can we do good enough work that they, unfamiliar with Playback, will find it convincing and worthwhile?

By now, a year and a half after the pandemic began, online Playback is a sturdy and growing phenomenon. It is effective to the degree that its practitioners are grounded in the highly developed practices and principles of traditional Playback Theatre. It is these practices and principles that must underlie and guide our work in any context.

My hope is that soon we will be able to reunite with our ensembles and our local audiences—and that online Playback Theatre will also continue to grow and thrive alongside the traditional form.

A note to viewers of the archive: traditional Playback Theatre is notoriously difficult to film. The atmosphere eludes the camera. Online Playback is technically easier: instead of multiple cameras, all you do is press “record.”

But the immediacy is still lost. You, the viewer after the fact, are not part of creating the magic. We must watch online recordings with this in mind.

## Jo Salas

**Jo Salas** is the co-founder of Playback Theatre, a performer and trainer, social activist, and passionate grandmother. She grew up in New Zealand and now lives two hours north of New York City near woods and mountains.

Jo has taught Playback Theatre workshops in twenty-seven countries and was a keynote speaker at the academic symposiums on Playback Theatre held at the University of Kassel, Germany, and Arizona State University. Jo's publications on Playback Theatre include numerous articles, contributions to anthologies, a TEDx talk "Everyone has a story," and three books: *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre*, now published in ten languages, *Do My Story, Sing My Song: Music Therapy and Playback Theatre with Troubled Children*, and *Personal Stories in Public Spaces: Essays on Playback Theatre by Its Founders*, co-authored with Jonathan Fox.

# Acknowledgments

The stories in these performance archives are the property of their tellers. The recordings of them were released by their owners under a [Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 license](#).

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Pangea Playback Theatre

The Ume Group, Jordan Rosin and Keelie Sheridan, Co-Artistic Directors

World Playback Theatre

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## Editor Biographies

**Jordan Rosin** (he & they) is a director/choreographer, actor-creator, and researcher/teacher, specializing in applied and ensemble-devised physical theatres. He is a Co-Founder and Co-Artistic Director of the New York City-based physical theatre ensemble, The Ume Group and is a frequent collaborator with the butoh/physical theatre company 連翹奏 Ren Gyo Soh. Since 2014 Jordan has been recognized for their work as co-choreographer of *Butoh Medea* (Poland, Italy, Turkey, Czechia, Scotland, Germany) with awards for “Best Physical Theatre” (2015) and “Best Choreography” (2014) at the United Solo Festival and a nomination for “Best Physical Theatre” (2018) at the Hollywood Fringe Festival. Critics have hailed his other directorial and choreographic works as “beautiful and disturbing” (nytheatre.com); “commanding, physically impressive” (*Village Voice*); and “minimalist theatre at its expressive best” (*North Coast Journal*). They hold a BFA in Drama from Syracuse University and an MFA in Ensemble Based Physical Theatre from Dell’Arte International, where their practice-as-research thesis explored the intersection of clown and melodrama. Jordan is a member of the Association of Theatre Movement Educators and winner of their 2019 “Integrated Artist-Scholar” and 2020 “Innovation Fellowship” awards as well as a member of Playback North America; International Playback Theatre Network; The Ume Group Playback Ensemble; Playback for People; Network of Ensemble Theatres; and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC Associate). During the creation of this archive and guidebook, Jordan was on the faculty at Virginia Tech’s School of Performing Arts where he taught acting and applied Theatre as a 2019–2021 Post-MFA Teaching Fellow in the Department of Theatre and Cinema.  
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**Heidi Winters Vogel** (she/her) is a director, performer, educator, and activist. She is a member of the theater faculty at Wabash College in Indiana, teaching acting, improvisation, dramaturgy, and socially engaged theatre. Heidi co-founded Inside Out Playback Theatre over a decade ago in Virginia and continues to perform with World Playback Theatre, Playback for People, and Thursday Zoomers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she played back stories with artists from all over the world for international audiences. Her chapter in Playback North America’s *Playback Theatre for Social Impact* on Inside Out’s work with migrant workers on the Eastern Shore of Virginia details their successful collaboration with community organizers. Heidi’s work with her students, “Building Participatory Theatre in a Time of COVID” was published in Routledge’s *Undergraduate Research in Theatre*. She is an accredited Playback Theatre trainer, continues studies in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and is an associate member of Stage Directors and Choreographers. Heidi serves on the Advisory Council for Playback North America, will join the Centre for Playback Theatre’s board as treasurer in the fall of 2021, and serves in

regional leadership for the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival. She has directed for such companies as Crossroads Repertory Theatre, Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, Penn State's Centre Stage, and Loaves and Fish Repertory. [wintersvogel@gmail.com](mailto:wintersvogel@gmail.com)

**Sammy Lebron** (he/him) is a student, aspiring actor, and lover of all things involving storytelling. He provided editorial assistance for this volume. As of the fall semester of 2021, Sammy will be entering his fourth and final year at Wabash College. He is currently studying toward a BFA in Theater. Throughout his time in college, Sammy managed to stay heavily involved with theatre in multiple curricular and extracurricular activities. He was cast in several mainstage productions, compiled data for the costume department, interned with companies such as Crossroads Repertory Theatre and the Sugar Creek Players' Vanity Theatre, and was nominated to compete for the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival's Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship.

# How to Use the Archive and Guidebook

If you're brand new to Playback Theatre and have never seen a performance before, you might go right to the guidebook and start reading "[What Is Playback Theatre?](#)" or start by watching one or all of the videos in the archive, via this [YouTube playlist](#). (Each of the performances are between one and two hours long and demonstrate many of the classic elements of a Playback Theatre show.)

We've designed this archive and guidebook so that users can make use of it in a variety of ways, depending on their interest, skill level, or familiarity with Playback. If you're looking to take a deeper dive, we encourage you to read the entire guidebook (or specific portions you find interesting) and refer to the hyperlinked sections of each video as examples. In the section on "[Forms](#)," we include time-coded hyperlinks that lead you to the spots in each performance where you can see a given style of enactment in action. Note, that to help readers understand the role of the conductor, including how a form is chosen, the hyperlinks will drop you off at the point in the performance when the conductor asks a question or makes a transition that precipitates the next teller's offering. In this way, we hope you can see a few of the varieties of ways the Playback ritual may unfold, even inside the context of the same form.

A detailed look at the guidebook and hyperlinks may—for those forms for which we offer multiple examples (like [Fluid Sculpture](#) or [Perspectives](#))—allow you to compare and contrast the way a given form is used from one company to another to understand some of the numerous ways in which forms may be deployed to create theatrical and sensitive Playback.

Note also for posterity and preservation, each of the full-length recordings is stored not only on YouTube but also on VTechworks. [VTechworks](#) is the free, open access, institutional repository at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, where their institution's University Libraries are largely responsible for funding and publishing this project. While the hyperlinks in the Forms section direct readers/viewers to the versions of these recordings on YouTube, the information in those time stamps could also be used to navigate to the appropriate sections of the recordings on VTechworks, which are both playable on the web *and* downloadable. Links to the VTechworks files are available in the section of this guidebook entitled "[The Archive](#)."

If you are an artist, educator, or theatre-maker reviewing or using this book, we would love to know how you are using this work.

[https://bit.ly/playback\\_interest](https://bit.ly/playback_interest).

# Introduction to the Project

**Jordan Rosin and Heidi Winters Vogel**

## Overview

We first met one another in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic during spring 2020 as part of the formation of a brand-new, entirely online, international Playback Theatre company, [Playback for People](#). Heidi was teaching applied theatre, acting, and improvisation at Wabash College, and Jordan was teaching applied theatre and acting at Virginia Tech. Both of us were teaching almost entirely online due to the pandemic. The challenge of discovering how to teach theatre and storytelling in these new mediums was a significant hurdle, made surmountable by the various communities of artists with whom we ourselves were performing and innovating. We gratefully incorporated many of the insights from these collective experiences into our teaching as individuals. Furthermore, our involvement with Playback as both a community and a practice has contributed to our personal resilience in the midst of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

Before the explosion of online teaching and performance, it was difficult teaching Playback without access to high quality examples. When we realized that online Playback performances could be more easily recorded and shared than their in-person counterparts, it seemed like an opportunity to expose our students to creative work and stories from around the world.

This project also serves to fill an unexpected gap in the current documentation of Playback Theatre performances. While highlight reels or excerpts are commonly available, full-length performances are particularly useful to the study or growth of a Playback practitioner, because of the way they reveal the role of the conductor and the phenomenon of narrative reticulation, which we explore more fully in the guidebook. Such full-length recordings are understandably difficult to come by due to the complexity of securing an audience's consent to

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<sup>1</sup> For more of Jordan's thoughts on Playback Theatre's contribution to resilience during the pandemic, see "Envisioning Resilience through The Ume Group's Inaugural Playback Theatre Event" on YouTube at [https://youtu.be/1d\\_ehoUW-9E?t=2112](https://youtu.be/1d_ehoUW-9E?t=2112) [video] or on VTechworks at <http://hdl.handle.net/10919/99416> [transcript and slides].

release publicly what would normally be undocumented, ephemeral, semipublic sharing. As you can read below, this complexity had consequences for our curatorial process as we undertook to make this archive. We hope the resulting collection can help active practitioners expand or deepen their repertoires, while also introducing Playback to those who are brand new to it.

In addition, we attribute much of our success as teachers to our practice of Playback Theatre and believe that tools like sociometry, deep listening, and reflecting each others' essence, so central to Playback, have much to offer those teaching in-person, online, or in any other modality.

As we've continued work on the project, it also occurred to us how useful this might be in documenting this historic moment in global history. At no other time have so many international collaborations been possible or has the need to connect been felt so strongly by so many. The stories shared in the three performances featured in this first edition of the archive keep returning to the effects or impacts of this historic moment.

The three recordings in this archive are included in chronological order of performance. The first is World Playback Theatre's performance in January 2021. This group came together online in spring of 2020 as the COVID pandemic shut down live performance. Most of WPT performances in 2020 were centered on processing life during COVID with audiences from all over the world. The early 2021 plan was to focus on looking forward with the theme of "new beginnings."

The second performance is from May 2021 by The Ume Group in partnership with Virginia Tech's History Council. In 2020 this previously New York City-based physical theatre company transitioned to online venues and adopted Playback Theatre as a way to do both public and commissioned private performances with their actors and audiences now spread around the globe. The audience for this performance were Virginia Tech alumni and the title "Voices in the Stone" is in honor of the iconic "Hokie stone" from which VT's campus buildings are fashioned.

The final contribution is from June 2021 by Pangea Playback Theatre. This company was founded in 2020 by Hannah Fox, Playback practitioner, author, and daughter of Playback Theatre's founders Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas. Pangea primarily provides private Playback training and workshops to companies and

organizations. Their second public performance, “What Now?” was specifically for friends, family, and inclusion in this archive.

## On Curating the Archive

Because of the need for audiences’ consent to share personal stories publicly, in curating this inaugural installment of the *Storytelling on Screen* archive, Jordan and Heidi have—for the most part—privileged companies with which they share an intimate connection and for whom they could easily assist or manage the audience registration processes. As you can read in [appendix I](#), we intend for this collection to be a living archive to which other performances can be added.

# The Archive - Contents

## Performance #1

World Playback Theatre: “New Beginnings”

### On the web:



[Full Recording on YouTube](#)



[Full Recording & Transcript on VTechWorks](#) [Downloadable]

### In this guidebook:

[Context, Credits, and Outline](#)

## Performance #2

The Ume Group: “Voices in the Stone” at Virginia Tech

### On the web:



[Full Recording on YouTube](#)



[Full Recording & Transcript on VTechWorks](#) [Downloadable]

### In this guidebook:

[Context, Credits, and Outline](#)

## Performance #3

Pangea Playback Theatre: “What Now?”

### On the web:



[Full Recording on YouTube](#)



[Full Recording & Transcript on VTechWorks](#) [Downloadable]

### In this guidebook:

[Context, Credits, and Outline](#)



# Performance #1

## World Playback Theatre: “New Beginnings”

### Context

On 17 January 2021, World Playback Theatre

(<http://www.facebook.com/worldplaybacktheatre>), an international online troupe emerging from the 2019 Leadership Certification program of the Playback Centre, gave a public performance on the theme of “new beginnings.”

### Production Credits

*Conductors:* Heidi Winters Vogel and Para Paranthaman

*Actors:* Pia Loriega, Roni Alperin, Radhika Jain, Pek Kuan Tai















*Musician:* Linda Steuernagel

**Duration:** 1 hour, 41 minutes

**Forms:** [Fluid Sculpture](#) | [Transformational Fluid](#) | [Pairs](#) | [Perspectives](#) | [Monologues](#) | [4 Rooms](#) | [Episodes](#) | [Talking Windows](#)

## “New Beginnings” Outline

(Click timecodes to access the relevant portions of the video on YouTube or guidebook to access the relevant descriptions in the guidebook.)

- [ 0:00:00–00:04:00] Opening Ritual
- [ 0:04:40–00:09:56] Welcome and Technical Settings
- [ 00:09:57–00:17:34] Company Introductions
- [ 00:17:35–00:21:59] **Sociometry** [[guidebook](#)]
- [ 00:21:59–00:23:58] Feelings in Chat
  
- Short Forms
  - [ 00:23:59–00:27:00] **Pairs** based on David’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:27:00–00:30:45] **Fluid Sculpture** based on David’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:30:45–00:40:27] **Perspectives** based on Sarah’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:40:27–00:45:08] **Transformational Fluid** based on Roberta’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  
- Long Forms
  - [ 00:45:08–01:02:26] **Monologues** based on Thulasi’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 01:02:36–01:19:32] **Four Rooms** based on Aviva’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 01:19:32–01:31:30] **Episodes** based on Roberta’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  
- Closing
  - [ 01:31:30–01:34:20] Recap of Stories
  - [ 01:34:21–end] **Talking Windows** [[guidebook](#)]

## Performance #2

# The Ume Group: “Voices in the Stone” at Virginia Tech

### Context

On 6 May 2021, The Ume Group Playback Ensemble, a branch of the New York City-based physical theatre company, The Ume Group ([theumegroup.org](http://theumegroup.org)), gave a commissioned performance for alumni of Virginia Tech’s College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences as part of the university’s 150-year-anniversary celebrations. The performance was sponsored by the Virginia Tech History Council with support from the School of Performing Arts.

The performance begins with a soundscape overture featuring a version of “Tech Triumph” (the Virginia Tech fight song composed in 1919 by Wilfred Pete Maddux and Mattie Eppes) adapted for this event by The Ume Group’s Kate Douglas, along with excerpts from the VT Stories Oral History Project ([vtstories.org](http://vtstories.org)) and other found texts voiced live by The Ume Group actors.

### Production Credits

*Conductor:* Jordan Rosin

*Musician:* Kate Douglas

*Actors:* Jorge Luna, Keelie Sheridan, Karina Sindicich, Kaitlyn Samuel Rosin, Yokko

*Producer/Director:* Jordan Rosin












*Community Partners:* Robert H. Leonard, Council on Virginia Tech History and the School of Performing Arts; Christina Miller, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences; Ren Harman, VT Stories

**Duration:** 1 hour, 18 minutes

**Forms:** [Fluid Sculpture](#) | [Perspectives](#) | [Three-Part Story](#) | [If This Were a Dream](#) | [Three-Minute Poem](#)

## “Voices in the Stone” Outline

(Click timecodes to access the relevant portions of the video on YouTube or “guidebook” to access the relevant descriptions in the guidebook.)

- [ [00:00:00–00:05:19](#)] Pre-Show and Soundscape Overture
- [ [00:05:19–00:10:18](#)] Conductor’s Welcome and Technical Settings
- [ [00:10:18–00:13:03](#)] **Sociometry** [[guidebook](#)]
- [ [00:13:04–00:19:23](#)] Company Introductions (**Caterpillar**) [[guidebook](#)]
- [ [00:19:24–00:22:55](#)] **Fluid Sculpture** of Collective Feelings [[guidebook](#)]
  
- Stories
  - [ [00:22:56–00:32:28](#)] **Three-Part Story** based on Catherine’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ [00:32:28–00:43:34](#)] **If This Were a Dream** based on Tom’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ [00:43:35–00:55:47](#)] **Perspectives** based on Heather’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ [00:55:47–01:07:25](#)] **Three-Minute Poem** based on Catherine’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ [01:07:25–01:15:02](#)] **Fluid Sculpture** based on Tom’s story and Howard’s feeling. [[guidebook](#)]
  
- Closing
  - [ [01:15:02–01:18:45](#)] Acknowledgment of Untold Stories
  - **Once Upon a Time There Was ...** [[guidebook](#)]

## Performance #3

### Pangea Playback Theatre: “What Now?”

#### Context

On 11 June 2021, Pangea Playback Theatre gave a performance on the theme of “what now?” for a public audience of friends and family. This was the group’s second public performance after a year’s worth of numerous private online performances for clients. Hannah Fox, seen conducting this performance, is the daughter of Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas (co-founders of the original Playback Theatre) and is Co-Director of the New York School of Playback Theatre ([nyspt.org](http://nyspt.org)).

#### Production Credits

*Conductor:* Hannah Fox

*Musician:* Steve Nash

*Actors:* Joyce Lu, Cherae Halley, Ricardo Pérez González, Will C















*Technician:* Federico Mallet Flores

**Duration:** 1 hour, 32 minutes

**Forms:** “Zoom” (Fluid) Sculpture | Perspectives | Story | Three-Part Story | Tableau  
| Beat

## “What Now?” Outline

(Click the timecode to access the relevant portion of the video or the form name to access the relevant description in the guidebook.)

- [ 00:00:00–00:02:23] Tech Talk
- [ 00:02:23–00:12:09] Welcome and Actor Introductions
- [ 00:12:10–00:21:53] **Sociometry** [[guidebook](#)]
  
- Short Forms
  - [ 00:21:54–00:29:10] **Sculpture** based on Warren’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:29:11–00:34:54] **Sculpture** based on Autumn’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:35:49–00:42:01] **Three-Part Story** based on Danny (Dynyansh)’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  
- [ 00:42:01–00:45:16] Second **Sociometry** [[guidebook](#)]
- Audience Dyads in Breakout Rooms [[guidebook](#)]
- [ 00:45:16–00:49:10] Welcome Back and Story Titles in Chat
  
- Long Forms
  - [ 00:49:11–01:00:47] **Story** based on Elsa’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 01:00:48–01:06:42] **Three-Part Story** based on Lisa’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 01:06:43–01:15:26] **Beat** based on David’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 01:15:26–01:23:40] **Tableau** based on Linda’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 01:23:41–01:28:11] **Fluid Sculpture** based on Paul’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
- Closing
  - [ 01:28:12–end] **Once There Was** based on all stories. [[guidebook](#)]

# The Guidebook

## What Is Playback Theatre?

According to the International Playback Theatre Network, Playback Theatre is “an interactive form of improvisational theatre in which audience members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted on the spot” (Smigelsky and Neimeyer 2018). Playback was founded in the United States by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas along with members of the original Playback Theatre company in 1975. By 2018 the methodology was reportedly practiced in sixty-four countries on six continents (Fox and Leeder 2018, 103). Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, along with their daughter, Hannah Fox, have published a variety of written works on the theory, application, and history of Playback Theatre, examples of which you can find in the [References](#) and [Further Reading, Listening, & Viewing](#) sections of this guidebook. Most recently Jonathan and Jo have published *Personal Stories in Public Spaces*, a collection of twenty-four essays, both new and previously published, which reflects their “evolving understanding” of the methodology they launched, now over forty-five years ago (11).

In terms of its application, Playback has been used in a wide range of applied theatre/community contexts, including as therapeutic aid after natural disasters (Munjuluri et al. 2020), with refugees (Dennis 2007, 355–70; 2008, 211–15), and in strengthening police-community relations (Smigelsky and Neimeyer 2008; Smigelsky et al. 2016). Artist-educators like Hannah Fox and Abigail Leeder have successfully used Playback in university classrooms—in conjunction with other well-known applied theatre forms like Autobiographical Theatre and Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed—to “build empathy and create dialogue around . . . complex issues” (Fox and Leeder 2018, 102). Scientific studies with elderly

populations have shown that Playback Theatre can have a “strong and persistent positive psychological effect” (Keisari et al. 2020, 1) and can “improve mental and emotional well-being” (Chung et al. 2018, E33). Jonathan Fox writes that Playback is a “method” that “spans the conventional categories of theatre, psychology, and education” (Fox 2021, 82) and is rooted in the idea that “good will comes” if we can truly *speak* and *listen* deeply to one another as equals (87).

In 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, there was a surge of companies that turned to communications software like Zoom, GoogleMeet, and Clubhouse to create fully online Playback Theatre performances. The videos in this first version of the archive were all recorded at such live online performances and took place in early to mid-2021.



## Roles

The following are explanations of each of the key roles in Playback:

### **Audience/Tellers**

The most important part of the Playback experience, the audience is not unlike audiences at other types of live performance with the important exception that they are also all potential tellers. The teller is anyone who voluntarily offers their feeling, comments, or stories to be heard by all and reflected by the company.

### **Conductor**

The conductor is the host or emcee who facilitates the flow of the Playback Theatre event, inviting different people to tell their stories and choosing which of various forms the actors and musician should use to enact a given story. Jonathan Fox writes that the conductor also “monitors the arc of the performance, deciding when is just the right time to invite the first story, and when will be the last. She conducts the ritual, making clear what are its rules and keeping them honored” (2019, 10).

In *Improvising Real Life* (2007), Jo Salas further explains, “The double metaphor of the name ‘conductor’ points to two aspects of the conductor’s job. It refers to the role of the orchestral conductor—directing a group of performers so they can work together and so the pieces they collectively create are organized and beautiful—and also to the conduction of energy between all those present. The conductor is the conduit, the channel through which audience and actors can meet” (65). Elsewhere, she says “The conductor’s role is an embodiment of Playback’s fusion of art and social action” (Salas 2021, 80).

Based on the story shared, including any clarifying details mined by the conductor’s questions, the conductor chooses the form for reenacting the story

that they feel can best capture the story's essence as well as sometimes working collaboratively with the teller to cast the actors as specific characters. This role requires knowledge of the forms and their attributes, familiarity with the actors' capabilities, and a sensitivity to the explicit and implicit meanings of the teller's sharing.

### **Actors**

The actors are the ones who, with their voices, bodies, and imaginations enact the feelings, comments, and stories the tellers offer. As part of a warm up or opening ritual, they may also tell short stories about themselves to introduce a theme or model the kind of real-life storytelling that will be asked for later from the audience. The work of the actor in Playback Theatre is largely, if not entirely, improvisational, meaning almost nothing is prepared beforehand. Acting in Playback Theatre requires creativity, imagination, expressiveness, but most especially, listening and a sense of story. Salas (2007) specifies that Playback depends "on the actor's sense of story, that aesthetic feel for form and the archetypal story shape" (51).

### **Musician(s)**

The musician in Playback Theatre sets the mood of a given enactment and helps to support the ritual nature of the event. The music, like the acting, is improvisational and can often function like a container and help to mark the beginnings, climax, and end of a given form.

## Concepts

The following are explanations of some key concepts in Playback. For greater exploration of these concepts, we encourage you to refer to the texts cited and additional sources in the “[Further Reading, Listening, & Viewing](#)” section.

### **Three Circle Theory**

In 1997 at the first academic symposium on Playback Theatre held at the University of Kassel, Germany, Jo Salas (2021) identified *art* and *social interaction* as two keys to Playback Theatre. Later, in 1999, Jonathan Fox in “A Ritual for Our Time” (2021) identified *ritual* as a third intersecting circle of import to Playback.

Successful Playback Theatre therefore combines three vital elements: ritual, art, and social interaction. The intersection of these three circles result in high quality and effective playback.

### **Ritual**

“Ritual” in a Playback performance is the scaffolding of the audience experience, bringing them to a place of openness and awareness of each other and the stories they carry. It requires “the invocation of a transpersonal dimension, an adherence to rules of conduct; building ecstatic emotional energy; the sparse, rhythmical, highly specialized use of language; and a goal of transformation” (Fox 2021, 94). Not unlike a shamanic journey, ritual in Playback is often correlated with the deliberate arc of the performance event:

- Welcome—music to welcome, invitation to participate, and description of event for first-timers, introduction of the actors (often with short stories of their own on the topic of the performance enacted by the rest of the team to demonstrate playback), and audience engagement.

- Warming up the audience—short forms enacting feelings and moments elicited from the audience by the conductor.
- Stories—complete stories from audience members enacted using Narrative Forms.
- Closure—reflecting the stories shared and ending the performance.
- Post-show conversation—often an opportunity for the audience to interact with the performance group. If the ritual has been successfully used, the audience often wants to talk with the performers and their fellow audience members. They feel connected and prolong leaving the energy of the space.

There is also a ritual way in which individual stories are handled, broadly consisting of an interview or “intake,” an enactment, and a debrief, though the specifics of this structure vary widely from group to group. For more on this, consider the relevant portions of Playback North America’s *Artistic Toolkit* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2015, 101-2).

## **Art**

Jo Salas writes in “What Is ‘Good’ Playback Theatre” that “Playback is theatre not simply because that is how it has been named, but because what we do in Playback fulfills the very essence of theatre’s intention: to convey human experience by enacting it in distilled form; to embody narrative and meaning in space and time” (2021, 62).

“Art” in Playback Theatre lies with the performers and the sensitivity, creativity, and skill they bring to each enactment. Many of the best practices of scripted and improvisational theatre (that is, clear offers, responsiveness to other performers, honest embodiment of characters, commitment to telling the story, and generosity in collaboration) are manifest in a successful Playback performance.

In addition, an artful Playback performer practices deep listening, understands the ethics of Playback,<sup>2</sup> and respects Playback structure. These characteristics are present in all the roles: conductors, musicians, and actors.

### **Social Interaction**

Finally, “Social Interaction” in a Playback performance is the recognition of both the individuals and the community in the space. It is about honoring individual stories while also recognizing how the stories impact the members of the audience. The performers all need to be aware of the impact, potential for harm, and story resonance with others in the space. That often means making space for stories that haven’t been told and that need to be encouraged, especially if they offer a needed counterpoint to what has already been shared. As mentioned before, a common indicator of a Playback event’s success *as a social event* is the audience’s compulsion to linger and keep sharing with one another long after the performance has formally concluded.


### **Sociometry**

“Sociometry,” inspired by the work of sociologist J. Moreno, refers to the portion(s) of the Playback event where the conductor polls the audience on a given theme or regarding certain demographics with the goal of “maximizing and enlivening the participation of all those present” (Salas 2021, 66). It is a part of the process of building an audience of “neighbors,” rather than strangers (Fox 2019, 3–4). Thematic sociometry can also sometimes occur during the intake of a feeling or story by the conductor as a means of building solidarity around issues and/or helping a teller to realize they are not alone in their feeling or perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> See Anna Chesner et al. 2021, *Code of Ethics for Playback Theatre Trainers and Practitioners*. Playback Centre, November, <https://www.playbackcentre.org/code-of-ethics/>.

Raising hands, putting hands alternately on foreheads or chins, showing a specific number of fingers, or showing your thumb-o-meter (one or two thumbs in some gradation of up or down) are all different ways that a conductor might ask an audience to respond in online Playback, visually expressing a preference or affinity. It's worth noting that the chat in Zoom can also be used to quickly ascertain information such as *where* participants are calling from.

 Examples of Sociometry can be found in:

<b>Performance #1</b>	<b>Performance #2</b>	<b>Performance #3</b>
World Playback Theatre's "New Beginnings" <a href="#">00:17:35–00:21:59</a>	The Ume Group's "Voices in the Stone" <a href="#">00:10:18–00:13:03</a>	Pangea Playback Theatre's "What Now?" <a href="#">00:12:10–00:21:53</a> and <a href="#">00:42:01–00:45:16</a>

## Audience Dyads

For in-person or face-to-face Playback this is an opportunity for everyone in the audience to share a story with another audience member. There usually isn't time to enact all the stories told during this time but listening and telling in pairs allows stories to emerge and contributes to the atmosphere of neighborliness. The stories told during Audience Dyads can also later be offered to the group as a whole for enactment in the regular ritual, if a teller chooses.

On Zoom, Audience Dyads often necessitate a quick and consensual use of "Breakout Rooms" with clear instructions for what should be shared and how much time audiences have. Placing a company member in each breakout space to serve as a timekeeper or temporary conductor can also be a strategy for ensuring smooth Audience Dyads.

Breakout rooms on Zoom require technical proficiency, clear prompts, and benefit from the ability of audience members to opt-out of the one-on-one experience since participating in a performance online—often from the privacy of your home—is a much more intimate and possibly risky thing than engaging in small group conversations in public.

## **Listening and Honoring**

The goal of listening is to hear the details of the story but, more important, to find the heart of the story in order to honor the teller’s experience. The heart may lie in what is unsaid or what is only referenced. The awareness of the teller’s body language can reveal what the teller is unable to say or even not recognize for themselves. This is more challenging when performing virtually but is still important.

Jonathan Fox describes it this way in his essay “The Theory of Narrative Reticulation,” “We need super-alive receptors to take in all aspects of the teller’s narrative. Thinking too much gets in the way” (2019, 7).

Balancing deep listening while avoiding being distracted by preplanning the enactment is difficult. Like a stage actor, the Playback performer has a dual consciousness. This is a process attributed to Constantine Stanislavski, the father of modern realistic acting, for being fully in character while also practicing the craft of effective stage work. For more on the concept of dual consciousness, see Gillett and Cnab’s *Experiencing or Pretending—Are We Getting to the Core of Stanislavski’s Approach?* (2012, 10).

Listening fully to the teller, trusting the ensemble to find the heart of the story together, and honoring what was shared are performance skills that get easier to wield over time but always bear improvement.

## **Landscape of Action/Landscape of Consciousness**

These concepts derive from psychologist Jerome Bruner's theory of the double landscape of narration (1987, 14) and have been applied to Playback Theatre as early as 2015 by Playback Theatre practitioners and trainers like Ben Rivers. As Rivers explains in "Cherry Theft under Apartheid": "The *landscape of action* refers to the objectively perceived events that occur within the story, whereas the *landscape of consciousness* indicates the subjective experience of the protagonist. The Playback practitioner strives to preserve these dual landscapes from the Teller's account. This practice becomes particularly pertinent where the landscape of action is characterized by events that are violent or oppressive" (2015, 80).

In other words, "the landscape of action" is *what* happens, while the "landscape of consciousness" is what the teller *felt/thought* about what was happening. Both are equally important, though the landscape of consciousness can be a harm-preventative source of inspiration for stylizing—or side-stepping—the enactment of events which a teller or audiences might otherwise find retraumatizing. For beginning Playbackers, these concepts can be especially useful in helping the actor to listen in a multidimensional way to what the teller is sharing. It can also help focus improvisations to be accurate, not just to the events of the story but to the innately subjective experience of the teller (Rivers 2015, 79–80).


## **Narrative Reticulation**

As Jonathan Fox writes in the *PlaybackNR Workbook* (2019), "Narrative Reticulation" is inspired by the reticular venation of leaves—the phenomenon in biology wherein the veins of certain plant leaves occur in web-like versus parallel arrangements—and describes the way in which a balance of four elements—story, atmosphere, spontaneity, and guidance—during the course of a Playback Theatre event can allow for a similarly web-like flow of "interconnected stories" (1).



The Theory of Narrative Reticulation elaborates on older Playback Theatre concepts such as the “Red Thread” and “Three Circle Theory” (13) and can be employed to structure training or rehearsal, as well as assess the effectiveness of performances (14).

Fox (2019) goes on to say, “when the stories are truly emergent, and the narrative reticulation is strong, one teller’s story sparks another through a web of association, and there are complex connections between narratives. The sequence of stories, considered as a whole, will reveal important aspects of the identity of a community” (2).

 An example of Narrative Reticulation in The Ume Group's "Voices in the Stone"

**Stories:** Connected by themes of

- Home
- Happiness
- VT as a place of learning
- VT as a progressive place
- VT as a place of contradiction
- VT as a site of protest

Produced in part by **Atmosphere:** intimate (only about 5 participants, plus performers/staff), transparent (tornado issues in Alabama were explained to audience), relaxed (conductor kept calm)

**Spontaneity:** KSR's use of props and Jorge's use of the vaccine card juxtaposed with a diary entry [00:29:06-00:31:46], KSR's use of jewelry and Kazy and Yokko's play with and off one another as different sides of the same building [00:50:01-00:54:33] are noteworthy for their playfulness and imagination.

**Guidance:** Conductor's call for "untold" stories [00:55:47-00:56:59] is a point of guidance/intervention. How did it work?

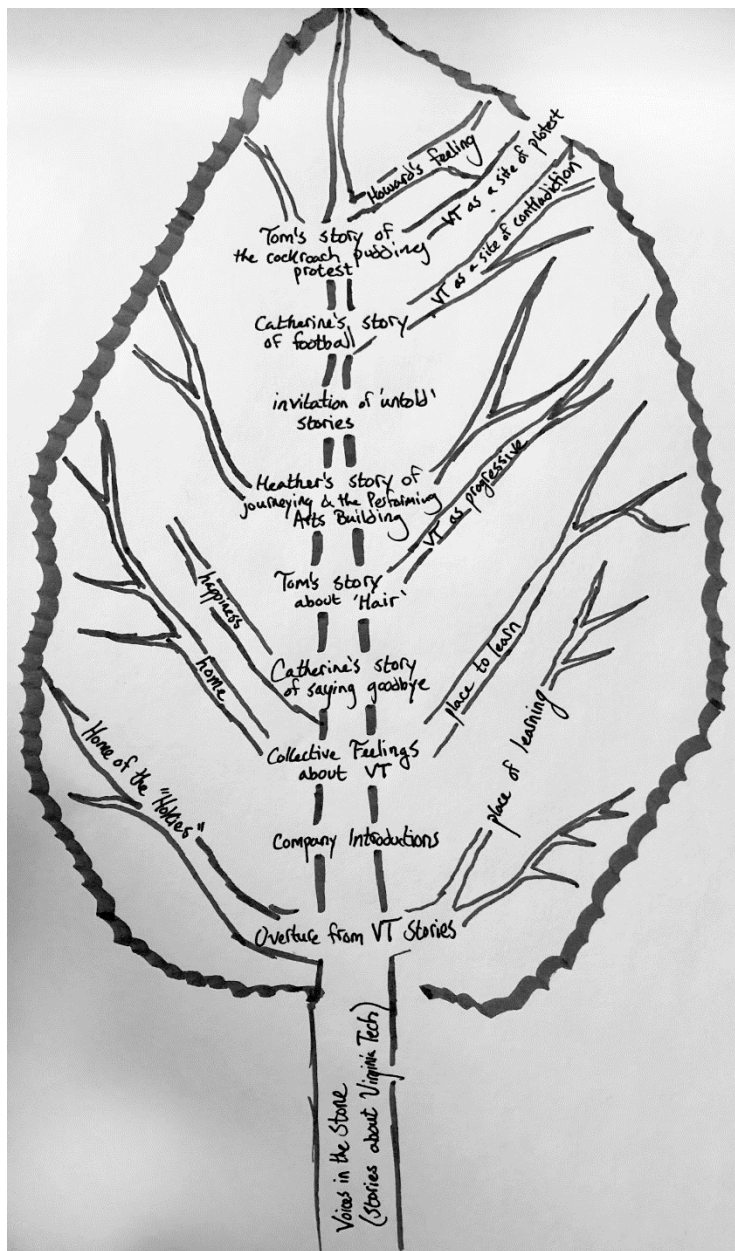


Figure 1: Narrative Reticulation Diagram for "Voices in the Stone"

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## Forms

Playback Theatre practitioners use specific templates called “forms” to give shape to their enactments. Most often the form for a given story is selected by the conductor (before the actors begin improvising) according to the qualities of the story told and/or its position in the overall arc of the performance or relationship to the emerging narrative reticulation. There are many forms practiced in many variations by companies all around the world. In choosing what forms to list here, we have confined ourselves to those that appear in the formal archive.

### Flares

A very short form, useful for warming up the actors and audience. Each actor offers a very brief simultaneous sound and movement in response to the prompt. Each actor works independently until the final moment when all end and freeze together.

#### ***Variation: Caterpillar***

A “Caterpillar” is a sequence of consecutive Flares. It’s often used to introduce the actors or other company members. One actor introduces themselves and is then reflected by the next actor, who then proceeds to introduce themselves and so on.



Examples of Flares can be found in:

#### **Performance #2**


The Ume Group’s  
“Voices in the Stone”  
[00:13:04–00:19:23](#)  
(Caterpillar Variation)

## Fluid Sculpture

The actors enter the frame one by one and perform a movement and a few words or sounds that symbolize part of the teller’s feeling/experience. After a few repetitions by the first actor, the second actor comes in with voice and movement. The first actor keeps moving but stops making sound to allow space for the second actor; the second actor does the same for the third actor and so on. After all four actors have entered, the action builds to a climax (with all voices coming in together, making bigger gestures, coming closer to the screen), followed by a freeze.

### Attribution/Further Reading


Fluid Sculpture is one of the first forms developed by the original Playback Theatre company. Other approaches and further discussion of Fluid Sculptures (also sometimes called “Fluids,” “Moments,” “Moving Sculptures,” or “Zoom Sculptures”) can be found in Jo Salas’s *Improvising Real Life* (2007, 31–33) and Playback North America’s *Artistic Toolkit* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2015, 15–16, 27–28), and *Guide to Playback Theatre online* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2020, 16–17).

 Examples of Fluid Sculpture can be found in:		
Performance #1	Performance #2	Performance #3
World Playback Theatre’s “New Beginnings” <a href="#">00:27:00–00:30:45</a>	The Ume Group’s “Voices in the Stone” <a href="#">00:19:24–00:22:55</a> <a href="#">01:07:25–01:15:02</a>	Pangea Playback Theatre’s “What Now?” <a href="#">00:21:54–00:29:10</a> <a href="#">00:29:11–00:34:54</a>

## Transformative Fluid

This form begins the same as a [Fluid Sculpture](#), but after all the actors have entered, the actor who performed first will transform their movement and *make a clear sound* to indicate the transition to a second state, after which the other actors follow suit. This form is appropriate when the teller tells of one feeling changing to another.

Also sometimes called a “Transformational Fluid” or “Transforming Fluid.”

 Example of a Transformative Fluid can be found in:

Performance #1		
World Playback Theatre’s “New Beginnings” <a href="#">00:40:27–00:45:08</a>		

## Pairs

Working in pairs, one of the actors chooses one of the teller’s conflicting feelings and begins to enact it using sound, movement, words, and so forth. As soon as the first offer is understood, the second actor begins enacting the other aspect of the teller’s experience. Both actors keep moving and developing, taking turns to express the emotions. Each actor directs their offer out toward the audience.

After about 10 seconds the duo freezes and holds their final gestures. Music is generally not played during pairs. However, sound cues can indicate the beginning of each enactment. When a metaphor is used by one actor, the other one should refer to it as well.

## Note

Conductor can choose to have two pairs (four actors) or just go with one pair (two actors). One pair allows for more complex verbal offers and evolving characterization, while two pairs can be chosen to play with different layers of physicality and movement.

## Attribution/Further Reading

Pairs is one of the forms developed by the original Playback Theatre company. Historically, it often came toward the end of the Playback event and served to provide a “peak of intensity, a change of pace from the much longer and sometimes wordy process of enacting scenes” (Salas 2007, 39). Further discussion of Pairs can be found in Salas’s *Improvising Real Life* (2007, 38–40) and Playback North America’s *Artistic Toolkit* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2015, 17–18, 29–30).



Example of Pairs can be found in:

### Performance #1

World Playback Theatre’s  
“New Beginnings”  
[00:23:59–00:27:00](#)

Additional examples of Pairs (outside our formal archive) can be found in:


- Pittsburgh Playback Theatre at Creative Mornings HQ [[00:21:02–00:24:31](#)]
- The Ume Group’s *Identity* (Song and Movement variation) [[00:22:17–00:26:01](#)] and [[00:31:56–00:38:22](#)]

## Tableau Stories

The actors create a series of tableau (frozen images) based on the story, in chronological order, that captures each important moment in the story. The conductor offers a sentence and the actors move into a shape that embodies that sentence. This is repeated until the story is told. Music begins and ends the enactment.

### ***Attribution/Further Reading***

Tableau was developed by the Melbourne Playback Theatre company. Further discussion of Tableau Stories (also sometimes called “Sentences” or “Slideshows”) can be found in Salas’s *Improvising Real Life* (2007, 41–42) and Playback North America’s *Artistic Toolkit* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2015, 23).

 Example of Tableau Stories can be found in:		
		<b>Performance #3</b> Pangea Playback Theatre’s “What Now?” <a href="#">01:15:26–01:23:40</a>

## Three- or Four-Part Story

The conductor assigns sections of the story to each actor (generally in chronological order). Some companies don't assign an order and let the actors choose the part of the story they enact. Each actor performs their part, speaking as the teller, doing a 30–60 second solo in any form they wish and then they freeze in the frame (e.g., monologue, movement, song). The musician plays a short interlude between each actor as a transition.

### Attribution/Further Reading

Hannah Fox and Eugene Playback along with Hudson River Playback developed the Three-Part Story. Hannah added the fourth part for use with more complex stories. Further discussion of Three or Four-Part Stories can be found in *Playback North America's Artistic Toolkit* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2015, 23) and *Guide to Playback Theatre Online* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2020, 17).



Examples of Three or Four-Part Story can be found in:

	Performance #2	Performance #3
	The Ume Group's "Voices in the Stone" <a href="#">00:22:56–00:32:28</a>	Pangea Playback Theatre's "What Now?" <a href="#">00:35:49–00:42:01</a> (short) <a href="#">01:00:48–01:06:42</a> (long)



## Perspectives

Three or four actors enact the teller’s story through different points of view. Music begins and ends the form. The actors come onscreen, one by one, and offer insights or reflections on the teller’s experience from the perspective of any human or nonhuman character that may have been plausibly involved in the story. One actor, usually the first, remains the “Teller’s Actor” and embodies the perspective of the teller. This form can be “cast” or “uncast,” meaning that, during the intake, the conductor may ask the teller which of the available actors they wish to play themselves as well as which should play any other significant characters that have emerged in the story by that point. The remaining one or two actors are then designated “mystery guests” and will pick a character themselves, revealing it only once they enter into the enactment.

### ***Attribution/Further Reading***

This form was developed by Radhika Jain and First Drop Theatre in India. Further discussion of Perspectives can be found in Playback North America’s *Artistic Toolkit* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2015, 33–34) and *Guide to Playback Theatre Online* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2020, 17).



Examples of Perspectives can be found in:

<b>Performance #1</b>	<b>Performance #2</b>	
World Playback Theatre’s “New Beginnings” <a href="#">00:30:45–00:40:27</a>	The Ume Group’s “Voices in the Stone” <a href="#">00:43:35–00:55:47</a>	

## **If This Were a Dream**

The first actor starts a monologue with the words “If this were a dream, it would be about . . .” For example: “If the story of Manny were a dream, it would be about a turtle that is tired of being in his safe and protective home.” The other actors, each, simultaneously, create an emotionally expressive movement to represent the metaphor as it unfolds. The second actor does the same with a different metaphor while the other actors represent it through movement. After all have gone, each actor repeats their version of the sentence beginning with “If this were a dream, it would be about . . .”

### ***Attribution/Further Reading***

Heidi and Jordan first learned “If This Were a Dream” from Malaysian Playback practitioner, Peggy Soo in 2020 as part of their rehearsals with Playback for People. If you know which company or individual first created this form, feel free to let us know at [StorytellingOnScreen2021@gmail.com](mailto:StorytellingOnScreen2021@gmail.com).



Example of If This Were a Dream can be found in:

	<b>Performance #2</b>	
	The Ume Group’s “Voices in the Stone” <a href="#">00:32:28–00:43:34</a>	

## Three-Minute Poem

Three or four actors take three minutes to write a poem in any form (haiku, with or without rhyme, etc.). Meanwhile, the musician plays. The actors' cameras are on and the audience witnesses the writing process. After the three minutes, the actors recite their poems one by one. When an actor has finished, they turn off their camera. At the end the actors come back on stage and offer their poems to the teller.

### Attribution

Heidi and Jordan first learned “Three-Minute Poem” from Italian Playback practitioner, Roberta Roberto in 2020 as part of their rehearsals with Playback for People. If you know which company or individual first created this form, feel free to let us know at [StorytellingOnScreen2021@gmail.com](mailto:StorytellingOnScreen2021@gmail.com).



Example of Three-Minute Poem can be found in:

Performance #2
The Ume Group's "Voices in the Stone" <a href="#">00:55:47-01:07:25</a>

## Four Rooms

Four actors portray four aspects of the story. First the teller’s actor turns on their camera for a monologue. The next actor, representing the primary relationship, joins for a dialogue. The third represents the social environment, and the final one tells the story metaphorically. The social environment actor shows only a portion of their face and the metaphor actor leaves their camera off so only their voice is heard. The other actors physically embody the metaphorical telling.

### Attribution

This form was developed by Andrey Utenkov and the Ukrainian company, Shades of Blue.



Example of Four Rooms can be found in:

Performance #1		
World Playback Theatre’s “New Beginnings” <a href="#">01:02:36–01:19:32</a>		

## Monologues

Three or four actors perform a monologue as the teller in any manner they choose. Music begins and ends the enactment. The actors turn on their cameras one by one and offer their monologue.

### Attribution

Aviva Apel-Rosenthal from Israel developed this form, originally called Three Solos, for the International Playback Theatre Conference in 1989.



Example of Monologues can be found in:

#### Performance #1

World Playback Theatre's  
"New Beginnings"

[00:45:08-01:02:26](#)

## Episodes

The story is played back in a series of short scenes. The teller can be played by any of the actors, but must be played by at least one. The scenes can be played as a solo, duo, trio, or with everybody in it or chronologically. The cameras are turned off between each scene with the musician playing until the next scene begins with an actor making an offer.

## Attribution

This form emerged in slightly different ways from different Playback groups around the world. Related titles and versions: Epizode, Elements, and Corridors.



Example of Episodes can be found in:

### Performance #1


World Playback Theatre's  
"New Beginnings"  
[01:19:32-01:31:30](#)

## Beat

The conductor chooses one actor as the poet and another as the mover. The poet improvises a spoken word poem based on the teller's story. The mover reflects the story by embodying the poet's improvisational words.

## Attribution

This form was created by Hannah Fox and Big Apple Playback.

 Example of Beat can be found in:		
		<b>Performance #3</b> Pangea Playback Theatre's "What Now?" <a href="#">01:06:43-01:15:26</a>

## Story

The conductor asks the teller to choose an actor to play them in the story. One or two other characters can be cast if they figure strongly in the story. The rest of the company plays whomever or whatever is needed to tell the story, each actor can play multiple roles consecutively. Offers are made and the story is told, with actors appearing and disappearing as needed. Music begins and ends the enactment.

## Attribution

Story is the long-form playback used by the original Playback company. Further discussion of Story (also sometimes called “Cast Story” or “Scenes”) can be found in Salas’s *Improvising Real Life* (2007, 33–38) and Playback North America’s *Artistic Toolkit* (Ellinger and Ellinger 2015, 19–20).



Example of Story can be found in:

### Performance #3

Pangea Playback  
Theatre’s  
“What Now?”  
[00:49:11–01:00:47](#)



## Closing Forms: Once There Was, Once Upon a Time, Talking Windows

Playback groups close their performance and the ritual with a form that weaves together the stories shared. Each actor sums up a story in a sentence until many of the stories are represented. There are many different ways to approach the closing, just as there are many different ways to begin.



Examples of Closing Forms can be found in:

<b>Performance #1</b>	<b>Performance #2</b>	<b>Performance #3</b>
World Playback Theatre's "New Beginnings" <a href="#">01:34:21-end</a> (Talking Windows)	The Ume Group's "Voices in the Stone" <a href="#">01:15:02-01:18:45</a> (Once Upon a Time ...)	Pangea Playback Theatre's "What Now?" <a href="#">01:28:12-end</a> (Once There Was ...)

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# Appendix I: Adding to This Archive

## An invitation from Heidi Winters Vogel and Jordan Rosin

Part of our intention in publishing this archive and guidebook under a Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 license is specifically to allow for easy derivatives, adaptations, expansions, and revised editions of this project.

We intend to maintain the YouTube channel “Storytelling on Screen” and are happy to add additional videos that meet the standards for this archive:

- Full, unedited, or minimally edited recordings of Playback Theatre performances in which
- all artists and visible/participating audience members have given their consent to have their likeness and stories distributed under a [CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](#).

For reference, here is a copy of the text that, in one form or another, we used to gather audience’s permission for this first edition of the archive:

### **Artist/Contributor Agreement**

Playback is an interactive form of theatre that relies in part on audience participation.

This Playback Theatre event, [*insert name of event*], will be recorded and made publicly available for the benefit of students and others who wish to learn about the forms and practice of Playback. The entirety of my appearance, including likeness, video, audio, and all other modes, may be incorporated into *Storytelling on Screen: An Online Playback Theatre Archive*, which will be released at the request of Jordan Rosin and Heidi Winters Vogel

by Virginia Tech under a Creative Commons NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 license (CC BY NC SA 4.0). Terms of this license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>.

By participating in this U.S.-based performance, you agree that your appearance may be publicly released under the same license.

I shall hold harmless Virginia Tech and the Commonwealth of Virginia, including respective students, employees, and agents from any and all claims resulting from the use of my appearance in accordance with the terms of this agreement.

By signing below, you confirm that you are at least 18 years of age and agree to the above terms and conditions.

We also created different versions of this text that allowed people to indicate their consent by checking a box during online registration for a given performance via Zoom, Eventbrite, or Google Forms.

If you would like more information about our process or to submit your own video to be a part of the growing archive, feel free to contact the editors:

Heidi Winters Vogel [wintersvogel@gmail.com](mailto:wintersvogel@gmail.com)

Jordan Rosin [jordan@jordanrosin.com](mailto:jordan@jordanrosin.com), or [StorytellingOnScreen2021@gmail.com](mailto:StorytellingOnScreen2021@gmail.com)

## Appendix II: Additional Viewing

### The Ume Group: “Identity,” 11 April 2021

On 11 April 2021, The Ume Group Playback Ensemble, a branch of the New York City-based physical theatre company, The Ume Group ([www.theumegroup.org](http://www.theumegroup.org)), gave a public performance on the theme of “identity.” This was only their second-ever public performance (and third-ever Playback Theatre performance in general). As part of the group’s commitment to rotating roles and leadership, this was also the first time conducting for the two co-conductors, Yokko and Jorge.

#### **Production Credits**

*Conductors:* Jorge Luna and Yokko

*Actors/Musicians:* Keelie Sheridan, Karina Sindicich, Kaitlyn Samuel Rosin, Jordan Rosin

*Producer:* Jordan Rosin

*Rehearsal Director:* Kaitlyn Samuel Rosin

**Duration:** 1 hour, 24 minutes

**Forms:** [Flares](#) | [Fluid Sculpture](#) | [Song and Movement Pair](#) | [Perspectives](#) | [Three-Part Story](#) | [Narrative V](#)

#### **Hyperlinks:**













 [The Ume Group’s Identity–Full Recording on YouTube](#)

 [The Ume Group’s Identity–Full Recording & Transcript on VTechWorks \[Downloadable\]](#)



## “Identity” Outline

(Click timecodes to access the relevant portions of the video on YouTube or “guidebook” to access the relevant descriptions in the guidebook.)

- [ 00:12:30–00:15:49] **Fluid Sculpture** of Collective Feelings [[guidebook](#)]
- [ 00:19:33–00:21:45] **Sociometry** [[guidebook](#)]
- Individual Feelings and Stories
  - [ 00:17:44–00:19:24] **Flares** based on Michael’s feelings. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:22:17–00:26:01] **Song and Movement Pair** based on Shlomit’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:26:45–00:31:16] **Fluid Sculpture** based on Tasha’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:31:56–00:38:22] **Song and Movement Pair** based on Rick’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:40:05–00:42:15] **Flare** based on Mountaine’s feeling. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:43:23–00:50:00] **Three-Part Story** based on Chris’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:51:00–00:56:50] **Perspectives** based on Roni’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 00:57:13–01:03:46] **Three-Part Story** based on Noha’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
  - [ 01:05:56–01:10:20] **Narrative V** based on Dave’s story.
  - [ 01:10:55–01:20:35] **Three-Part Story** based on Michael’s story. [[guidebook](#)]
- [ 01:20:35–01:24:58] Closing

## Other Recordings of Playback Performances

Here are a few other examples of full-length Playback Theatre performances, both face-to-face and online, that were publicly available at the time of this writing:

“Love & Activism in the Time of Covid’ (Edit of performance–4/19/2020),” *YouTube*, uploaded by Mandala Center for Change, 25 April 2020.  
<https://youtu.be/N4GzsA5VjVA>.

“Mystery Speaker: Pittsburgh Playback Theatre,” *YouTube*, uploaded by CreativeMornings HQ, 7 February 2019, <https://youtu.be/GylAg1qDckI>.

“The Playback Theatre Ensemble–Millennium Stage (September 11, 2016),” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Kennedy Center, 11 September 2016.  
<https://youtu.be/8LZJ8s66drM>.

“Tiles,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Theatre Psi, 8 July 2021.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyP4HkXgpfo>.