



“After the Tempest”: Assessing audience response through Playback Theatre^{☆, ☆, ☆, ☆, ☆}

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ABSTRACT

Audience response is linked to a production's intentionality towards its audience. Playback Theatre is a form of community theatre designed to facilitate the audience's interrelations. Applied as a method of reflection, it can explore tendencies and dynamics in specific audiences. This project analyses the impact that a theatrical play had on its spectators, as this was revealed through Playback Theatre. The play involved was Shakespeare's “The Tempest”, which raises existential themes: trust, alliance, betrayal and revenge. The production was based on a two-part adaptation of the play for six performers. In the first part, the performers enacted their roles, while in the second, they “de-rolled” and improvised on the audiences' reflections. Seventy narrations in thirteen performances were recorded and analysed with the consent of the audience members. The data were assessed by the method of “Narrative Reticulation”, which focuses on four performance areas: guidance, atmosphere, spontaneity and story. Further “Thematic Analysis” of the shared stories disclosed those themes of the play that affected the audience. The results show the potency of The Tempest to foster intellectual engagement, interpersonal bonding and psychic resilience in its audience, the prominence of forgiveness versus revenge being the essential issue.

“We need coexistence, interaction with each other, solidarity. The proximity of the stage gives birth to a force. It is not just a possibility; it is a knowledge that nourishes us and allows us to return to the starting point of our existence.”

Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker, (2024)

The audience effect of a theatre performance is studied from different perspectives in the field of the dramatic arts. According to the intentions of the theatre maker – whether the dramaturg, the stage director, or the entire theatre company – a performance targets different aspects of the

reception, participation, and involvement of its audience. Modern and post-modern theatre studies on catharsis (Scheff, 1979), and on the dramatic functions of role identification, alienation and transcendence (Bennett, 1997), have explored the role of the spectator in classical theatre, drama, and performance. The liveness of a theatre performance is related to shared memory, the performers' awareness, and the sense of belonging that the audience acquires through the whole experience (Reason, 2004). The audience's reactions include captivation, intellectual stimulation, emotional resonance, spiritual value, aesthetic growth, and social bonding (Brown & Novak, 2007). The impact of a performance emerges as a personal construct, articulated by audiences in

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terms of emotion, captivation, engagement, enrichment, escapism, wellbeing, worldview, and addiction (Walmsley, 2013). Studies on groups that discussed the impact that theatre plays had on them revealed the development of sensory, artistic, and symbolic levels of understanding (Lindelof & Hansen, 2015).

Playback Theatre, as established by J. Fox and J. Salas in 1975, is based on audience sharing and actors' reflection. Apart from its value as a ritual of community bonding, its methods and techniques have been widely applied in education, therapy, and experimental theatre (Fox, 1994; Salas, 1999). Playback Theatre audiences respond in terms of feedback, social dialogue, and personal sharing (Fox, 2007; Salas, 2009). Additionally, communities in crisis, can be empowered by empathy and a sense of social justice (Barolsky, 2022; Fox, 2020), especially in areas of political conflict or war (Rivers, 2015; Ng, 2023).

A detailed literature review (Gonzalez, de Lima, Preto, 2024) unfolds various aspects of the effectiveness of Playback Theatre regarding the participants' state of mental health, their relationship to self and others, their well-being and creativity. Studies have stressed its benefits of reflection during educational processes (Wright, 2013), or of enriching therapeutic processes with new meanings (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Moreover, it can enhance communication and recovery in mental health patients (Haneji, 1998; Moran & Alon, 2011), and confront issues of stigmatisation of psychiatric disorders by mental health professionals (Yotis, et al., 2017).

Studies in the theory and method of Playback Theatre explore affinities to psychodrama, dramatherapy and expressive arts therapies, as well as its connections to narrative therapy and existential approaches (Yotis, 2023). A new approach designated as "Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre" applies the method within therapeutic groups. The participants become tellers, audience and actors interchangeably, as they share their own stories and improvise on others' narratives. The group leaders include trained psychotherapists who attend to provide a safe container for the participants' mirroring, exchange of psychic material, and expansion of the self through the other (Kowalsky et al., 2022; Gonzalez, de Lima, Preto, 2024).

Description

This research study has been conducted in a theatre space, focusing on the audience effect that was produced by the intrinsic qualities of the art of theatre. Although some of them have a therapeutic potential, it was not designed as a psychotherapeutic intervention. Its renovative hypothesis is that Playback Theatre can be applied to explore the reflection that a theatre play has on its audience. This effect can be revealed within a public theatre event that encompasses:

- The performance of a theatre text;
- Public interaction, discussion of the play, and sharing of personal stories; and
- Improvisation of the tellers' stories through Playback Theatre.

Aim

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the audience's response and connection to a classical theatre play in terms of insight, imagination, empathy, social inclusion and empowerment. The selected play for this paradigm was Shakespeare's "Tempest" and the whole performance was named "After the Tempest".

The framework

The project was conducted at the "Palmos" Association of Dramatic Expression and Therapy and was completed during a period of one year, in 2023. This non-profit organisation has been realising projects in theatre and dramatherapy since 2005. Previous projects of "Palmos" have focused on the effect of working with Shakespeare's "Tempest" in

the context of a dramatherapy group (Yotis et al., 2018), theoretical studies on the relation of Playback Theatre to Dramatherapy (Fragiadaki, 2023a) and to Spiritual approaches (Begioglou, 2023), research on the effect of Playback Theatre on Personal Narratives (Fragiadaki, 2023b), and on Self-Efficacy in the Elderly (Kastrinou, 2023). Additionally, "Palmos" has a long expertise in Playback Theatre performances and runs the Greek School of Playback Theatre, with accreditation from the international Centre of Playback Theatre (www.palmos.info).

Ethics approval

Two mental health professionals supervised this research: The Head of the Board of "Palmos", accredited Playback Theatre trainer, psychiatrist, dramatherapist, scientific assistant at Eginitio Hospital (University Psychiatric Hospital of Athens), and a collaborating psychologist, group psychotherapist, teaching faculty member at the same hospital. Due to their academic access, the research protocol was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Eginitio Hospital, 1st Department of Psychiatry - National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA).

Method

Choosing of the play

The link between classical and Playback Theatre, was offered by the Shakespearean play "The Tempest" (Shakespeare, 2008), an existential tale on human resilience in the face of injustice and maltreatment perpetrated by those in authority, a first version of which was written in 1611. As an antidote, the power of the art of theatre, is the guide towards reconciliation with Self, Nature, and the essence of Existence.

Shakespeare's Poetics have been widely discussed in the literature of therapeutic action (Cox, 1992; Reed, 2000; Hulsmeier, 2024). The "Tempest", in particular, has been considered as beneficial in Dramatherapy as a process of recovery from addiction and reality confrontation (Jenkyns, 1996), as an opportunity of forgiveness for prison inmates (Lister, 1993; Keating et al., 2022), and as a means of increasing the creativity and imagination of young people with autism (Hunter, 2014; MacLellan, 2016; Post, 2016).

Interestingly, historical evidence informs us of the mediating role of the audience in the final format of theatre plays in Shakespeare's time (Logan, 2007; Pangallo & Kirwan, 2021). The process of Playback Theatre can be considered as a mediator of the play to its audience in our time. In the performance "After the Tempest", the play that emerged from the playback performance retained as intact parts of the original text that were supplemented by scenes of physical theatre for plot development.

The plot of the "Tempest"

Prospero, the Duke of Milan, loses himself in magic readings. He also loses his power, after a conspiracy organized by his own brother and the King of Naples. Thrown in a boat with his young daughter Miranda, they are blown upon a coast and survive on an island. On this island live an indigenous human creature, Caliban, as well as a frivolous spirit, Ariel, both of whom end up serving Prospero. Time goes by, Prospero achieves mastery of his fantasies, cures his wounds, and brings up his daughter. Many years afterwards, the Royal fleet with the governors who had expelled Prospero passes near Prospero's Island. Prospero, with the help of the magic power of the spirit Ariel, invents an imaginary tempest and shipwrecks all the King's party to his island in order to take revenge. He makes them pay for what they did to him, deluding them through different trials. Meanwhile, the Prince and Miranda fall in love with each other. After a series of episodes, they all recognize their faults and, reconciled, they look forward to their return to Milan. Prospero gives up

his magical powers and liberates Ariel, while Caliban is left behind, alone on the island.

The design of the performance

This multi-character play was devised for five actors and a musician, assisted by a light designer and a projection mapping technician. In the second part of the performance, the characters de-rolled into Playback actors, ready to improvise on the audiences' stories that the play evoked.

Playback Theatre was used as the play's mirror in each performance. Before the play started, the director introduced the audience to the whole procedure and asked for their informed consent for recording and analysing the tellers' stories.

Each of the two parts of the performance lasted approximately one hour. A short interval was designed to take place between the first and second parts, in the latter of which the audience was asked to meet and share. As the second part started, feelings, thoughts and personal memories arose. The actors offered improvisation on each of the tellers' stories through specific Playback Theatre forms, and the performance ended with the company's free improvisation on all the stories that had been heard. A number of six or seven stories were usually shared by the audience. At the end, a member of the research team asked those tellers who had shared stories to complete anonymously a special form of informed consent before leaving the venue.

Assessment

Two instruments were used for assessment: "Narrative Reticulation" and "Thematic Analysis".

"*Narrative Reticulation*", was invented by Fox (2019). It constitutes a spontaneous, face-to-face mode of communication that stands in contrast to reason-based, planned approaches. It is a tool for assessing effectiveness in playback theatre work, and it may also explain a general approach to reducing social alienation in modern life." (p.1) "Narrative Reticulation" describes the dynamic balance of four attributes, allowing a flow of interconnected stories:

- **Guidance**, concentrates on the role of the conductor, who conducts the ritual and leads the audience throughout the playback performance, balancing respect for the teller with fairness to others.
- **Atmosphere**, is created by the theatrical retelling of each story, where inclusivity should prevail, allowing resonance among the community, a sense of oneness, akin to spiritual experience.
- **Spontaneity**, refers mainly to the playback company's qualities, such as embraces, on the spot reactions, creativity, imagination, movement, flexibility, collaboration and integrity.
- **Story**, refers to the sequence of the tellers' narratives, completed by their stage representation from the performing team. It reveals important aspects of the tellers' as well as of the community's identity and enrich them with various meanings and perspectives.

"*Thematic Analysis*" was used to further analyse the content of stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Isaris & Pourkos, 2015). This qualitative approach includes: attributing codes of meaning to the tellers' text, grouping codes into categories, forming thematic units, and analysing outcomes.

Data collection and analysis

- Two members of the research team were randomly assigned to observe each performance and complete a form of its "Narrative Reticulation" (see Appendix, Table B).
- All narratives were recorded, transcribed into text and coded by one of the researchers.
- Each researcher provided the first codes out of the transcribed text.

- The codes were presented to the research team and group feedback was given in monthly meetings.
- The whole team and its supervisors discussed and formed the categories out of the codes.
- The coded material was exchanged between two supervisors; codes and categories were re-examined and re-assessed (see Appendix, Table C).
- The material was given to the two supervisors who construed the thematic units independently and then compared their assumptions.
- The thematic units were presented to the research team, and links and connections were discussed and settled.
- The final outcomes were interpreted and then designed schematically for their presentation (see Fig. 2).

Study participants

The Performing Team

The rehearsal period lasted six months and involved:

- The recruitment of the performing team. This was realized through auditions as well as through role assignment to actors of the "Playback Ψ" theatre company (see Figure 1 in the Appendix);
- The progressive adaptation and stage direction of the play for the needs of this performance; and
- The training of the actors in Playback Theatre: poetic or symbolic forms of Playback Theatre were selected or created by the group in order to match the style of the whole performance (see Appendix, table A);

Recruitment of the research team

The research team consisted of two supervisors with a wide background in university research projects and four assistant researchers responsible for the observations, data entry, transcription, and analysis. The research members were either accredited mental health professionals and psychotherapists or experts in theatre and dramatherapy.

The audience participants

The audiences for these performances were formed in two ways. Firstly, the project was advertised for a period to the public in general via the media. In addition, specific invitations were issued to secondary school students, as well as to vulnerable populations, such as individuals with psychiatric problems or disorders who were attending therapeutic or rehab programmes. The latter came to the theatre as groups, together with the mental health professionals who were responsible for them. This was actualised after an extended negotiation and ethical management with four different psychiatric/therapeutic settings.

The research sample

Out of a total number of 26 public performances (with 520 audience members), 13 were assessed (with 180 audience members). These contained 70 narratives, each from a different teller. The chosen performances were taken both from the earlier part of the project so that there would be time for a replacement, in case any of them were cancelled, as well as those that included specifically invited audiences. Only stories of tellers who conformed to the research prerequisites were included.

Findings

The findings include the "Narrative Reticulation" of the performances in addition to the "Thematic Analysis" of their content as a whole.

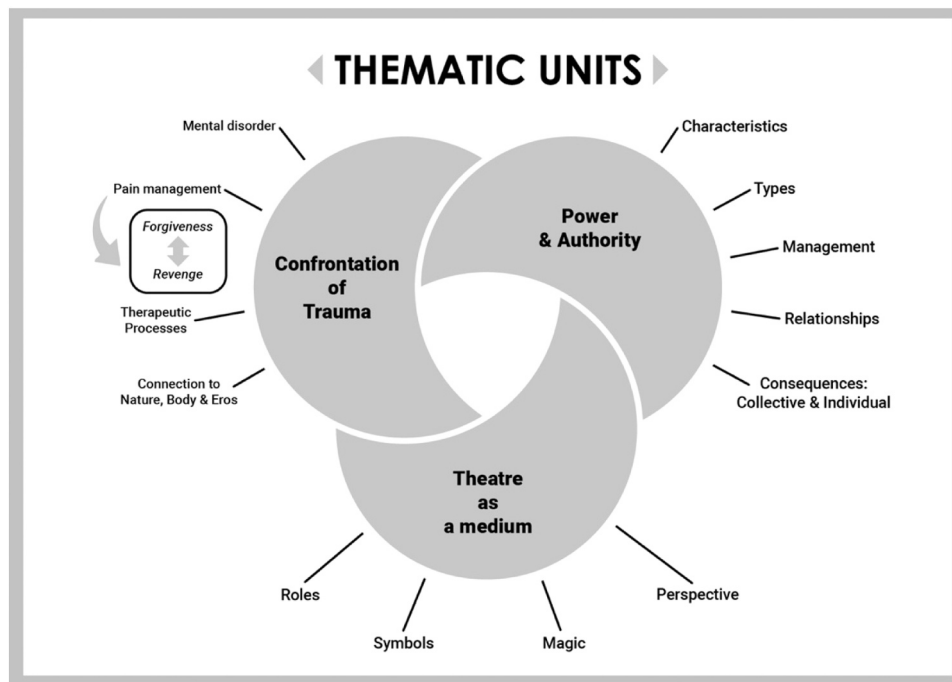


Fig. 2. Diagram of the Thematic Units of the Audience's Response.

Narrative Reticulation

Guidance

The conductor in Playback Theatre is responsible for welcoming and warming up the audience, explaining the process, offering equal opportunities to all audience members, interviewing those tellers who want to share stories following the performances' ritual, selecting the appropriate form of representation for each story, and directing the arc of the performance towards its peak and subsequent closure.

In this performance, the conductor appeared on stage, first to introduce the play and its process to the audience, then to listen to the tellers' stories during the second part. In keeping with the aim of this project, he tried to maintain a broadly similar presence and constant style of directing in all the performances. One of his main concerns was to familiarise the audience both with the paradoxes of the classical play and of the distinctiveness of the Playback process that followed. He focused on the tellers' experience, rather than on theoretical issues and interpretation of the play. "If you had at your disposal Ariel's magic rod, how would you use it?", was one of his recurring questions.

Since the tellers' stories were often about traumatic events and relationships, revenge and forgiveness, the conductor's attitude varied from therapeutic containment to a supportive stance, notwithstanding moments of refreshing humour. He offered equal space for all tellers as regards gender, age, and level of participation. He directed the whole performance towards inclusion and unison, taking into account that a significant part of the audience suffered from some form of mental disfunction.

Atmosphere

The plot of the play as well as the tellers' reflections composed this performance's atmosphere.

The audience entered a welcoming venue. The stage was dimly lit. On it, wooden parts in different shapes represented both the ship's wreckage and the island of salvation, while a folding curtain in the background received projections that mapped aspects of Prospero's mind. Large sheets in dark blue, white, and grey were placed along the stage.

The conductor playfully introduced the audience to the magical

meaning of the number six according to arithmosophy, which was also related to the number of the performers. One by one, the actors presented their roles to the audience and slowly moved into them, putting on their costume and make up.

The play started with the presentation of the eponymous tempest in Prospero's mind. This was created through projections. In tandem, the actors were moving coloured sheets on stage representing both the waves of the sea and the protagonist's thought disturbance. The use of projection-mapping in relation to the lighting design and the actors' few props created different environments for the play's acts, as well as the interior symbolic space of Prospero's mind, which was lit at specific moments of the performance, thus presenting to the audience his hidden intentions. Actors and musician formed successive sound landscapes for the play's actions.

During the second part of the performance the atmosphere was created by the representation of the tellers' stories. The actors, neutrally dressed, no longer in their costumes, used the same props that they had used in the play, adapting them in the stories that they improvised. Humour, memories, and disclosed hard feelings came on stage symbolically through the dramatic forms of Playback Theatre, often offering moments of relief.

The final improvisation summarized all stories in order to encompass the dramatic climax of the Playback part. Within a ritual of movement and sounds created by the actors, words and images related to the tellers' stories were projected on the stage through the technique of projection-mapping. This aesthetic composition was designed to express the atmosphere of connectedness among the audience members.

Spontaneity

Playback Theatre has specific forms of improvisation that function as shields for the tellers' stories, enlivened by the performers' spontaneity. Some of these forms are standard for the genre, others were created by the company. Actors, musician, light designer, and projection artist collaborated for this task without any overt communication on stage.

In the performance as a whole, the element of improvisation was evident. The actors' bodies were present and available, enacting with fantasy the content of each story. They transformed the play's props on the spur of the moment; the rod of the play was used to portray power; a

white cloth was used to portray protection in one story and a trap in another. In this way, they linked, consciously and perhaps not only, the content of the stories to the plot's play.

Among the roles of the play, the audience's attention was often driven to Ariel, a spirit imprisoned to its master's intentions. Ariel, who experienced a lifelong lack of freedom while obeying Prospero's desires, became for the audience a symbol of suppression. Audience members of different genders and ages shared personal stories of being fixed or confined in unhealthy relationships. The actors improvised on the emerging stories using Prospero's rod in various ways, such as suffocating the teller's actor, or drawing a circle of entrapment around them. In addition, the musician used the play's musical patterns as a baseline for musical improvisation during the audience's sharing.

Story

During the three-month performance period, shocking international events, such as the outbreak of the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza took place. Additionally, an increasing incidence of traumatic episodes were reported in Greece itself, including homicide, and abuse of children and women. Yet further, the high cost of living, being the consequence of an exhausted domestic economy, was a constant pressurizing factor for the middle- and lower-income classes throughout this period. All the above formed the social context of this performance and informed the tellers' personal stories with a common awareness.

One story after another connected the tellers, in their seats, through an imaginary red thread. In order to avoid overwhelming feelings, the tellers were not recorded head-on, so the non-verbal expressive aspect of their narrations was intentionally not documented. The content of the stories was analysed through the qualitative method of "Thematic Analysis".

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the stories' content was conducted following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Isaris & Pourkos (2015). The analysis adopted a semantic approach, aiming to foreground the participants' voices and extract meaning from their narratives, rather than imposing a researcher-driven inductive framework.

The entire dataset was distributed among four researchers, who engaged in an active familiarisation process through repeated readings. Each researcher independently identified meaningful features within the text, assigning initial codes in a verbatim manner based on the content and wording of the narratives, without imposing predefined patterns. Coding was performed manually, without the use of qualitative analysis software.

Following this initial phase, a latent analysis was conducted to identify underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptual structures embedded in the text. This interpretative process was guided by psychotherapeutic and dramatherapeutic frameworks, reflecting the expertise of the two research supervisors.

To ensure consistency and reflexivity in the coding process, the four researchers exchanged their coded data in randomly assigned pairs, allowing for critical discussions and refinements. This collaborative process led to the final consolidation of codes into categories of meaning, which in turn formed specific themes. Some codes were assigned to multiple themes, illustrating the interconnectedness of the data.

Finally, the research team examined the relationships between these themes and collaboratively developed a comprehensive thematic map, capturing the depth and complexity of the participants' narratives.

A number of seventy (70) audience's narratives were codified and numerically represented by the serial number of the performance, the story and the lines in the transcript text (e.g., 5/6: 235–251, meaning 5th performance, 6th story, 235–251 lines in text). The codes were grouped into categories that formed, in the end, three main thematic units (see Appendix, Table C) as follows (with given examples):

First theme: confrontation of trauma

Categories / Examples:

● Pain Management (41 codes)

"Forgiveness is a Golgotha (place where Jesus was crucified), on which Resurrection finally arrives [...]. Only through a tempest we shall be able to find joy; for myself, only through life's withering. Prospero, breaking the spell in the end, filled me with joy, because he was not stuck to the role of the revenger, but he forgave. For me, this is like a resurrection, Prospero sought redemption." (11/2:208–220 and 11/4:250–256)

● Mental disorder (13 codes)

"My thoughts are about schizophrenia. Persons with schizophrenia can experience in their mind tensions that are in their fantasy, but for them they are real. It is not like a dream, they live them.... What is this island in the play? It is our mind, our psyche, how we think, how we feel." (9/1:7–13)

● Connection to Nature, Body & to Eros (15 codes)

"I focus on the purity of nature, the magic of the natural environment that brought catharsis to Prospero. It revealed his humanity, his empathy, his softness, and allowed him to forgive...When I faced an important family loss, I moved to an island, I set a tent by the sea and I used to wake up listening to the waves and the seabirds. Slowly, my pain softened, I understood I needed help and this nature's present". (1/5: 176–219)

"I was impressed that prince Ferdinand endured all trials on this island, in order to be allowed to see Miranda once daily. I met and fell in love with a person recently, there is attraction as well as respect between us, and this makes us strong, we can achieve all we want." (10/3:147)

● Therapeutic Processes (25 codes)

"Shakespeare invents a tempest in Prospero's mind. This is not a real tempest; it is just a medium, in order to lead Prospero to catharsis. So, as I am listening to the stories all people share here, I am thinking of the obstacles that hinder our life, whether they are real obstacles or just part of the process. Though they seem gigantic to confront, they are just a part of our transition to something else." (13/4:75–78)

Second theme: power & authority

Categories / Examples:

● Characteristics of authority (13 codes)

"As I was watching the play, another scene came to my mind. It was in 1980, during a commemoration against dictatorship, we were all protesting in the streets, when police forces arrived and, without any reason, they started hitting us on the face, one after the other, so I think this performance is an allegory on the violence of authority." (2/2:20)

● Types of authority (8 codes)

"Another type of authority is that of an older person towards a younger one. Maturity of adults can help younger people in their development. As a younger person, I feel this influence can be magical, and I can consciously let myself be guided intellectually by an adult I trust." (6/1: 68–80)

- Management of authority (8 codes)

"There are times I can manage my freedom and there are other times I cannot, I was surprised when Ariel was happy when it was liberated, I was afraid it would not know how to use its authority and who it was without Prospero's orders." (4/3:81–87)

- Authoritarian relationships (6 codes)

"Ariel was Prospero's blind servant, he was not aware of his deeds, which were motivated by exercising power and by envy [...] and when he was liberated, he grasped the rod, to regain his authority, because he thought that freedom was nothing else than manipulating others." (4/3: 68–91)

- Consequences: collective & individual (19 codes)

"People seeking authority end up being slaves of this power and nearly lose their minds. They become fearful of losing power. Their greed grows more and more, they lose control, lose their conscience. This becomes a loop from which it is difficult to escape, even if it is obviously arduous and tragic, not only for themselves, but for the whole world." (4/3: 104–113)

Third theme: theatre as a medium

Categories / Examples:

- Symbols (17 codes)

"The performance as a whole was like a spirit that departed." (11/3: 244)

- Roles (7 codes)

"I still have a vivid image of the role of Ariel, it seemed crazy, but was very humane at the same time, it could persuade that it was real." (2/6:95)

- Magic (10 codes)

"I am in the process of liberating magic forces, the forces of nature, in order to get rid of what is dominating me, perhaps a strong ego or a passion." (12/4: 139–141)

- Perspectives (14 codes)

"I dream of joy, beautiful people, creative moments of fulfilment of our desires...We all live in conditions of extreme individualisation and antagonism, which many times abolish our dreams." (5/6: 235–251).

In summary, "Thematic Analysis" was applied to and proved

informative of the audiences' response to the play and their involvement in the *Tempest*'s story. Triggered by Prospero's adventure, the preponderant theme in the tellers' stories was confrontation of trauma, both on a personal and social level, with many stories addressing the issue of forgiveness towards revenge. This was linked to the theme of authority, how it is exerted in our times as well as how it had been experienced by the tellers. The third theme was theatre's "magical" power, offering a revitalising energy, through its roles and symbols. The thematic units of the event as a whole are schematised in the relative diagram (Fig. 2):

Discussion

Both theoretical studies and research evidence report the impact a theatre performance has on its audience (Scheff, 1979; Bennett, 1997; Reason, 2004; Brown & Novak, 2007; Walmsley, 2013; Wright, 2013; Lindelof & Hansen, 2015). The findings of this study enrich this literature emphasizing the audience's emotional involvement, intellectual stimulation, symbolic understanding, and sense of belonging, especially when spectators move from the role of the observer to that of an active participant.

Playback Theatre, a unique theatre genre invented by J. Fox and J. Salas (Salas, 1999), outlines a particular theatrical phenomenon, based on the tellers' narratives and their stage reflection by a group of trained performers, which aims at fostering community bonding. Ever since, literature has reported its multiform applications in diverse therapeutic and educational settings (Fox, 2007, 2020; Salas, 2009; Yotis, 2023). Yet, owing to its delineation as a unique form of non-scripted theatre, its use as feedback in performances of theatre plays has not been thoroughly explored.

The innovation of this study lies in its potential to act as a medium for exploring the impact that a classical play has on a contemporary audience. For this reason, an original dramaturgical pairing was created. A stage production was devised, in which the audience watched Shakespeare's "*Tempest*", followed by Playback Theatre, which was realized by actors of the company specially trained for the two genres. This combination allowed personal reasoning and reflection on the play to be openly uttered and projected on stage. By the end of each performance, each audience had formed a unique dramatic synthesis, motivated by the play and prompted by Playback Theatre. The plot of the play was expanded and transformed through its conjunction with the audiences' stories. Its content expanded in space and time and acquired different dictions, images, and meanings. It lived in the present. Instead of the neutral stage of Playback Theatre, the tellers shared stories in front of the play's theatrical set. The actors of the play were cast by the audience as their personal heroes. Therefore, the audience had a second chance of processing the play's ideas, a feature that, although lacking in ordinary performances, can promote greater proximity between the audience and the play.

It was a challenge to use "Narrative Reticulation" (Fox, 2019), as an instrument for assessing Playback Theatre, since it had not been widely used in research until now. The findings of this research pointed out that "Story," "Atmosphere", and "Spontaneity" were obviously influenced by the play, though "Guidance" conformed to what could be called the standard aspects of staging a performance in Playback Theatre. It seems that this instrument can provide us with comparable findings from different audiences in different circumstances. Since the narratives of the audience differed from one performance to another, a detailed study of their content was realised qualitatively through "Thematic analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Isaris & Pourkos, 2015). This assessment procedure denoted how the aims of this study were accomplished as follows.

The "*Tempest*" was chosen for its theme, i.e., the hubris exerted by authority and the journey of its hero, Prospero, from trauma to redemption. The performance "After the *Tempest*", formed by the audience's narratives, unconsciously encompassed adventures relevant to that of Prospero. The findings marked out two preponderant themes: the

confrontation of traumas, and abuse of authority, leading to disease, nervous breakdown, loss, disaster, injustice, or social stigmatization. A substantial subcategory concerned the issue of revenge and the value of forgiveness, two notions that arose sometimes as contradictory and, at other times, as two ends of the same spectrum. Affected by the play's plot, forgiveness prevailed. On the contrary, revenge was charged with abolished rights, threatened egos, anger, and the urge to dominate. Most of the stories had to do with reconciliation. This "life-drama connection", which is a core process both in Playback Theatre and in Dramatherapy (Frangiadaki, 2023a), initiated insightful connections among audience members.

Though this project was not designated as a therapeutic intention, some of the audience's inner processes became apparent. Theoretical concepts and mechanisms from Psychotherapeutic Playback Theatre (Kowalsky et al., 2022) are useful for a further understanding of these processes. Hereon, the notions of "mirroring", "containment" and "catharsis" are discussed in relation to the aims of this project. The authors refer to the notion of theatrical mirroring, as encompassing two simultaneous qualities, i.e., those of observation and wonder, that help to establish a sense of empathy for and validation of the teller's experience. "The play's the thing", Jenkyns (1996) had sharply stated in her inspired writings by object relations psychoanalytic theory, while the *Tempest*, as a Shakespearean mirror, became a "transitional area" for the audience. The phrase "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" (Act IV, Scene 1) was often quoted by tellers as a bridge between fantasy and reality.

The findings of this research highlighted the theme of theatre as a medium for broadening the audience's perspectives. Through the power of theatrical metamorphosis, i.e., masks, uniforms, and music and lighting, another stage was created for personal stories to emerge. Connections of real events to imaginary ones, just as Prospero's island was both a natural and an imaginary place, offered the space for a symbolic level of understanding, self-awareness, and self-cohesion.

Published literature supports the idea that Playback Theatre can both be a vehicle for social inclusion and work against the stigmatization of mental disorders (Haneji, 1998; Moran & Alon, 2011; Yotis et al., 2017; Gonzalez, de Lima, Preto, Amarante, et al., 2024). Bion's "container", a crucial concept in a groups' psychic development, is relevant to this project's process. The whole event became a container for the audience's projections. Careful conducting was indispensable when the audience included people with mental disorders. Some stories were raw and unstructured; meanings were distorted. Flexibility was essential both theatrically and therapeutically, because it helped contain experiences of anxiety, non-understanding and meaninglessness. This challenging situation offered new meanings. Magic was linked to madness, abolishing magic could lead to sanity. As in a tempest, the risk of subverting order was apparent, but control brought consolation. Psychological resilience tolerated psychic pain and attained redemption. As Prospero moved from revenge to forgiveness, and from delusion to reality, the audience members questioned and reframed some of their disordered concepts, seeking understanding, acceptance, and peace.

The social aspect of the play was considerably addressed. Before Prospero confronts his enemies, he tells Ariel: "The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance" (Act V, Scene I). This phrase particularly motivated the audience to express personal traumas caused by people in authority. Usurpation of authority and enslavement were seen as a continuous loop, a motive that perpetuates wickedness and injustice in a vicious circle. Several tellers linked the play directly to contemporary political or existential issues.

In the world of spiritual torture, playfully presented in the "Tempest", Playback Theatre offered the counterweight of a cathartic experience. Eros appeared as a balsam, through the devotion of the

young couple in love, providing a momentary delusion of connection to the Universe; a revitalising and empowering energy that maintains the cycle of life. In the terms of existential therapists, a spiritual catharsis was offered to the audience: "In this field of mutual hearts, love and forgiveness emerge as the ultimate truth. The movement from an egocentric world to a unified one unburdens us from the fear of loss or the fear of death (even temporarily), and may constitute transcendence to a collective consciousness." (Begioglou, 2023, p.172)

Among the limitations of this study, is that the findings were based only on the tellers' sharing right after the performances. Further information on the performances' effect upon their audiences after a certain time period could throw further light on this research. This study did not take into account the non-verbal, physical aspects of the tellers, because this needed special permission and technical equipment. Furthermore, it was based on the stories of the tellers who decided to speak. It did not take into account the spectators who did not share their stories. Additional questionnaires, if completed by all audience members, might disclose the views of the silent attenders. Besides, future projects could also take into account the perspectives of the performers and broaden the horizon of this research field. Despite all the measures taken to ensure neutrality of the stance of the researchers during the project, the double role of the author as supervisor and as the director of the performances may have undermined the subjectivity of the findings.

Conclusion

Playback Theatre can be applied as a method that provides feedback, fosters relationships, and enhances communality in audiences, viewed as the receptors of a theatre play. Its potency relies on the lived experience of watching a play, on memory awakening, on public sharing of personal stories and watching them on stage through the performers' improvisation. The role of the director who conducts the whole event is crucial, as an intense sense of "holding" is required, in order to instill trust, safety, and the social inclusion of audience members. The ritual of this process creates an atmosphere for moving from observation to self-disclosure, and from the virtual world of the play to the audience members' imagination. The personal stories in this study were linked to the play's themes. They renew the play in each performance, attributing to it new meanings and perspectives. A cornerstone of the audiences' narratives was the need for forgiveness, which was related to the social context of the relevant performances. In this way, a classical play can reach an audience directly in the here and now. The stories' improvisations contained and stimulate the audience with new imaginative landscapes and, consequently, new perspectives. "Narrative Reticulation" and "Thematic Analysis" proved to be adequate instruments for the study of similar theatrical projects and their audiences' responses.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Stamatiadis Nikolaos: Investigation, Data curation. **Skali Theodora:** Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Yotis Lambros:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Grysolaki Anastasia:** Investigation, Data curation. **Anastasiou-Veneti Phaedra:** Investigation, Data curation. **Karambela Myrto:** Investigation, Data curation.

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Appendix



Fig 1. "After the Tempest": The Playback Ψ Theatre Company

Table A

Symbolic / Poetic Playback Theatre Forms Used or Created by the Company

Four	Each actor expresses the story symbolically through one of the following four ways: moving with an object, dancing, reciting a poetic phrase or using a mask.
Pathways	The actors cross the stage simultaneously in different directions, uttering phrases from the story.
Light and shadow	Two actors simultaneously express opposing parts of the story: one is fully lit, the other stands in his/her shadow.
Totem	All actors interact on stage non-verbally, through props. Finally, they put all the props in the middle as a totem, they sit around it in a circle and they say one word each, one after the other.
Transformational Group	All actors together form a group sculpt that is then slowly transformed into a new one.
Sculpt	
Instances	All actors improvise freely different aspects of the story.
Constellation	One actor dances with a cloth under a headlight, while the others create a sound effect together, sitting still at different spots on the stage.
Free association	All actors combine different aspects of the stories and create a final improvisation, as a closure of the performance.

Table B

The Narrative Reticulation Form

Narrative Reticulation Form Date:	Audience No:	Name of observer:	Guidance: Underline the conductor's actions used frequently during the performance or that were of special significance / describe: Welcoming / Warming up / Explaining / Asking / Interviewing / Giving space and voice / Protecting / Containing / Directing the forms / Directing the performance's arc / Following ritual / Keeping balance / Closing the venue. Atmosphere: Note specific processes that affected the overall atmosphere of this performance: Audience introduction & warm up / Structure and Ritual / Theatricality of space or venue / Chances of inclusion / Elements facilitating dialogue, links, unity in the audience. Spontaneity: Note specific performance elements that had an effect on the audience: Improvisation / Acting / Movement / Creativity / Roles / Music / Singing / Lighting / Collaboration among actors, musician, and visual artists. Story: Note: The series of the stories / How the stories emerged / Name of each teller / Theme of each Story / Form of each representation / Teller's feedback / Theme of the total playback performance.
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Table C
Thematic Analysis of the Audience Response: Codes, Categories and Themes

Thematic Analysis		
Code Description (from 1st perf/1st story, line 5, to 13th perf/4th story, line 87)	Categories (with number of codes)	Themes
<p>Forgiveness / irredentism /revenge / survival / taming the evil/ captive of habit / repression in trauma / survival / relief / confronting loss / difficulty in being together / solitude and loneliness / security in moving around / choice to leave a relationship / estimating life after an illness/ loss of love / the Golgotha of forgiveness / resistance of pain / inner conflict /emotional liberation / providing food and home for all children / avoidance of toxicity /seeking encouragement.</p> <p>Self-exile of the mind / anxiety dystopia / absence of self from the body / agoraphobia / tempest in the heart / the unbearable self / panic attack on stage / the King's madness / identity crisis / the experience of fantasy as reality in schizophrenia / the disorder in schizophrenia / aggression outbursts / thought entrapment in loneliness.</p> <p>The cycle of moon and light -the need for balance after the storm /enthusiasm of youth / magic of reality / harmony with nature / living and dancing in nature / the magic of birth / the pink glasses of love / love as a source of strength / blue boats in the sea / liberation of the body /carefreeness.</p> <p>Solitude as an opportunity for self-improvement / effort of reintegration / redemption and forgiveness / becoming adult / theatre as self-knowledge / acceptance of reality / insight /connection with the inner child / connection with others / equality as medication / acceptance of reality / the wisdom of maturity / forgiveness and closure / calm attitude / knowing oneself / strength from the joy of siblings / co-creation, fellowship and communication / inner calmness / faith in the immortality of the soul / release from perfectionism / lessons of love / the tempest as a transitional process</p>	<p>Pain management (41 codes) Subcategory: The contrasting poles of forgiveness and revenge (8 out of 41 codes)</p> <p>Mental Disorder (13 codes)</p> <p>Connection to Nature, Body and Eros (15 codes) Therapeutic Processes (25 codes)</p>	<p>1. Confronting trauma (4 categories, 94 codes)</p>
<p>The strength and lack of power /good and bad power /manipulation /violence / paradox of authority / responsibility / greed and immunity / abuse / injustice /arrogance and lack of empathy / the delusion of having authority</p> <p>The subjugation of nature / colonialism /civil power / junta / authority within family / international power games and political power / the power of adults towards young people / the power of blind love</p> <p>The riddle of liberation / omnipotence as power and threat / abuse of power / the civilized closure /political betrayal /equality as a remedy / the usurpation of authority /social conflicts</p> <p>The loop of authority / the mechanism of victim and perpetrator / abuse in family relationships / unpermitted love / hatred among brothers & sisters</p> <p>The gap between extra rich and very poor / the fallacy of power / war and peace in Gaza / slavery / management of freedom</p> <p>Behavioural changes after gaining power / punishment / hatred and accusation / abuse and trauma / authority drives one crazy / no personal choices / hallucination of omnipotence / betrayal / auto - stigmatisation</p>	<p>Characteristics of Authority (13 codes)</p> <p>Types of Authority (8 codes) Managing authority (8 codes) Authoritarian Relationships (6 codes) Consequences of authority (19 codes altogether) Subcategory: Collective (9 codes) Consequences of authority Subcategory: Individual (10 codes)</p>	<p>2. Power and Authority (5 categories, 54 codes)</p>
<p>Wings for flight / the sea as freedom /a "mind-soup" full of thoughts / an image of utopia /nature as a mirror of humanism / the symbolic material of dreams / books, music, plays as relief and escape from reality / the island of utopia / the stick that suffocates / the miracle that takes place on stage / the island as psyche and mind / the pink colour of Eros/ little boats in the big blue / the masks of authority / the stick as a symbol of liberation / the abandoned crown and sceptre</p> <p>paradox of the roles of slave and master / the mad King / the role of Ariel as a symbol of liberation / reference to capitalism / the role of Prince Ferdinand and the magic of love / the role of the slave Caliban / Miranda as a positive role</p> <p>'We are such stuff as dreams are made on' / the relationship between reality and imagination/ the magic element of nature/ the magic of reality / the magic of love /Prospero as a refugee /omnipotence of magic / annihilation: the performance as a gone spirit / breaking the magic /the protection magic offers</p> <p>A call for comrades / the political dimension of a performance / pleasant memories from theatre performances / taking energetic part as audience in the Tempest / theatre and youth / the Tempest's dialectics on death, survival and redemption / primitivism and civilisation / a civilised closure / spirituality through theatre: the superior Self forgives/ vanity of life and death/ theatre as self-awareness / theatre as means of contact with others/ humorous superstition / the pleasure of theatre</p>	<p>Symbols (17 codes)</p> <p>Roles (7 codes)</p> <p>Magic (10 codes)</p> <p>Perspectives (14 codes)</p>	<p>3. Theatre as a Medium (4 categories, 48 codes)</p>

Data availability

The data are in Greek and they rely on personal stories. Permission is given by the tellers for this research only. Most of them are coded in the article's appendix.

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