

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

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<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/104420>.

Many audience members go to the theatre to escape. They pay for their ticket, struggle to find parking, and hope that the bathroom line isn't too long, all in their pursuit to experience life outside of their own, to exist in a liminal space. But what if the audience themselves are the bedrock for the evening's entertainment? *Storytelling on Screen: An Online Playback Theatre Archive and Guidebook* is a supplementary guidebook that details how the authors, and practitioners of Playback Theatre, shifted their process for online creation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Written by Jordan Rosin, Heidi Winters Vogel, and Sammy Lebron, *Storytelling on Screen* chronicles their experiences with Playback Theatre's aesthetic and dramaturgy. The book details how the COVID-19 Pandemic shifted their creation process and concludes with a step-by-step guide in creating your own Playback Theatre experience digitally. This "how-to-manual" is ideal for both anyone desiring to broaden their understanding of Applied Theatre and those wanting to expand their artistic toolbelt in theatrical storytelling beyond the paradigm of audience and performer.

For those unaware, Playback Theatre is a type of community-centered storytelling. It has its roots in improvisational storytelling and was developed in the United States back in 1975 by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas. By 2018, there were over 64 companies globally that specialized in

this type of performance.² It centers on the audience (referred to as “Tellers”) who provide narratives taken from their own lived experiences. Actors then perform those stories back to the audience through improv, guided by a lead actor (or “Conductor”). This style of storytelling utilizes mimesis for the audience as the performers tailor their experience to those who share the space. It is a theatrical experience that fully embraces F.O.M.O; you were either there or you weren’t. It is often used in a range of Applied Theatre contexts, such as therapeutic aid after a natural disaster, working with refugees, or strengthening police-to-community relations. They build upon the idea that good will come when there is true and equal listening to one another. Some practitioners use other known Applied Theatre methodologies, such as Theatre of the Oppressed, in conjunction with Playback Theatre. Salas and Fox, along with their daughter Hannah Fox, have been the primary writers of this performance style. At the end of the *Storytelling*, they provide a robust Reference page and Further Reading List for those interested in exploring more on its history and scholarship.

The book is structured around three distinct chapters. Its ternary structure consists of an Introduction to the Project, The Archive, and The Guidebook. The first section is what you expect from the name; a detailed account of how these three theatre-makers came together by creating Playback Theatre. They elaborate on how the COVID-19 Pandemic altered Playback Theatre given its original need of having people share the same space to create. Like theatre across the nation, they too turned to ‘Zoom Theatre’ as their medium of expression by creating a new, completely digital, and international theatre called Playback for People. The Archive section is the shortest of the three as it provides links along with a timecoded breakdown of three

² Jordan Rosin, Heidi Winters Vogel, and Sammy Lebron, *Storytelling on Screen: An Online Playback Theatre Archive and Guidebook*, 2021, 11, <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/104420>.

separate Playback Theatre events, all recorded on Zoom and shared online. This section is basically one list of URL links, sending the reader to YouTube where these productions are documented. Lastly, the Guidebook goes through the various components and techniques one can use to make Playback Theatre with internal links to the Archive as well as the YouTube videos which showcase the specific building blocks. The authors also made sure to provide further reading and documentation on the theorist or practitioner who created each technique/component. I appreciate the care these authors took in documenting and crediting their sources; it grounds this form of theatre into a larger theatrical community.

The authors' emphasis on Zoom Theatre combined with the mechanics of production gave this publication an identity crisis. Is it a diary documenting how the Pandemic altered its modus operandi, or is it a user manual for an abecedarian? The title suggests this is written for one familiar with Playback Theatre, thus being more suggestions to other Playback Theatre artists, but the Guidebook chapter provides introductory information that seasoned Playback'ers would know. This split focus forced me as a reader to reverse engineer the style to understand what it was and then what it became during the Pandemic.

The book's greatest strength is its brevity. It is a short 55-page document written with word economy in mind. However, its privileging of simplicity causes a lack of clarity. There was more than one moment in which I had to go back and re-read various sections to follow the writers' train of thought; I struggled to connect the context to its application. The guidebook as well is intricately tied to the external URL links woven throughout. While we often glibly say that theatre needs to be experienced rather than read, *Storytelling On Screen* affirms that adage completely. To fully engage with the theory and practice, one needs to follow along with the videos whilst reading the last chapter. This in turn makes the slim, 55-page document become a

larger, more intensive and interactive study of Playback Theatre. While this is not necessarily a point of criticism on the book, it does require the reader to engage both with the written word and the World Wide Web; to print out the document and share it with a colleague would be only providing a rather than a complete codex.

The difficulty of approaching *Story Telling on Screen* is its lack of a broader context of Playback Theatre. The Foreword is labeled as a Forward when it is so much more. Written by Jo Salas, it explains Playback Theatre and passionately details its various concepts (Conductor, Audience/Tellers, Actors, Musicians, and the need for a Ritual as its base) in a far more artistic way than the Guidebook chapter. While the Guidebook section should be more mechanical (and it is), without reading the Foreword I can see an interested individual being lost on what Playback Theatre is from an artistic perspective. I would have liked them to include a chapter earlier on that provides an in-depth explanation of Playback Theatre. Only about halfway through the document does one read more concrete information on Playback Theatre and its origins. While Salas was able to provide that context in the Foreword, it was often positioned around their thoughts on the Pandemic, Zoom Theatre, and the challenges it presented for them. A reader is left wanting more from the section on Playback Theatre's history, dramaturgy, and artistry; I would have appreciated an Introduction with robust context or an earlier stand-alone chapter that outlines these core principles and history. This would have allowed a first-timer to approach the digital aspect as an informed reader, rather than relying solely on a general understanding from the Foreword (if even read.)

Theatre has shifted and evolved to take on the various styles, aesthetics, and functions of its place in time. As the world was forever changed by the COVID-19 Pandemic, so should our artistry change in response. *Storytelling on Screen: An Online Playback Theatre Archive and*

Guidebook documents how the authors pivoted their creation process during the Pandemic; in a sense, they document the ways in which they moved to a digital performance venue. A slim book that ties directly to archived performances of their work in action, it offers a chronicle of both their actual creation process along with how they shifted to accommodate for online playing spaces. *Storytelling on Screen*, however, did lack context on Playback Theatre; at times the book felt lost in who it was for as it provided beginner mechanics but little context into this unique form of theatre creation. A fellow Playback Theatre professional or someone just beginning their work in the form? Despite this, however, Rosin, Vogel, and Lebron wrote a very clear and concise chronicle of their work within the new, digital frontier. Any practitioner interested in the evergreen field of Applied Theatre would benefit from this book for their own creative endeavors.