



**UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE
IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**BEYOND WORDS: THE POTENTIAL OF PLAYBACK THEATRE
IN PROMOTING RECONCILIATION IN POST-ARMED
CONFLICT SOCIETIES**

FINAL DEGREE PROJECT

Cristina Oliver-Rodés Parés-Neira - 768159

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Supervisor: Carles Fernández Torne

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Abstract

For decades, peace and reconciliation procedures within communities in post-armed conflict scenarios have been approached through mainstream lenses, focusing solely on justice and truth-finding. This study examines the flaws of the standard top-down approach and the gap it creates between national intentions and population reality. Further research on alternative approaches to peacebuilding and reconciliation is conducted with a focus on community-based bottom-up approaches. The case of Playback Theatre as a dialogue-enabling technique in a post-armed conflict environment is the major focus of the research to further deepen the findings. The implications of implementing this initiative are examined through the case of Nepalese communities. This case study demonstrates the positive impact that alternative artistic initiatives can have on several levels in countries dealing with post-conflict peace and reconciliation processes. The research shows clear benefits at the local and community levels through the reintegration of people into society and individual healing from the traumatic events of the war, as well as a positive impact at the national level by assisting people in becoming more open to participating in top-down initiatives for reconciliation.

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List of Acronyms

TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
CIEDP	Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons
ProPublic	Forum for Protection of Public Interest

I. Introduction

A. Contextualization: Objectives, Research Question and Thesis statement

When talking about armed-conflict resolution and reconciliation there is a gap between peace treaties and the reality of the affected society. For many decades, this has been either overlooked or addressed through bureaucracy and institutions that in most circumstances have limited actual impact on the affected society's daily lives. Consequently, in recent years, International Relations experts have begun to analyze and study strategies that are closer and better fit the reality that people live in, such as artistic and cultural initiatives. These scholars have begun to acknowledge how the failure to recognize artistic and cultural initiatives as major participants in peacebuilding and reconciliation has hindered progress in conflict prevention and resolution as well as reconciliation in post-armed conflict communities.

This project aims to shed some light on the potential of creative community-based initiatives adapted to each community to enable peacebuilding and reconciliation. Consequently, the main objective of the project is to explore the potential role of Playback Theatre in promoting and enabling reconciliation and peacebuilding in post-armed conflict societies. Thus, the research question posed is *How can Playback Theatre affect peacebuilding and reconciliation processes within a society in a post-armed conflict situation?* In order to find the answer to this question and achieve the main goal of the research, the specific objectives of this study are (i) to study the methods used for peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-armed conflict-affected communities; (ii) to analyze the possible benefits and challenges within the implementation of community-based creative methods; (iii) to examine the potential that Playback Theatre has as a reconciliation mechanism to build long-lasting peace and enable reconciliation in a post-armed conflict community; and (iv) to evaluate how Playback Theatre has been introduced as a reconciliation method in Nepal and the effects it has had in its society. Through these objectives, the project aims to corroborate the Thesis Statement, which states that *Playback Theatre has the potential to promote reconciliation in societies affected by armed conflict. This creative alternative can in some societies create safe spaces for people to share their stories of trauma, this way fostering healing, empathy, trust building, and intergroup dialogue. Thus embracing an environment in society to be more drawn and open to other reconciliation initiatives.*

B. Methodology to be used

The methodological framework of the project will take an interpretivist approach because it is contextually sensitive which is essential to study the effectiveness of different peacebuilding methods depending on the cultural, social, and political contexts and cases used on. Likewise, this method focuses on the understanding of social phenomena through the subjective experiences and interpretations of different individuals which will enable the analysis of different responses to peacebuilding initiatives and how these shape the results of the programs. Lastly, this approach is adequate because it allows the researcher to reflect on their own biases and assumptions and the influence these have on the research, findings and conclusions reached.

This project will be conducted through qualitative research as the main goal is to develop an in-depth understanding of different contexts and subjective experiences rather than to gather quantifiable data. The main methods used will include the collection and analysis of secondary sources such as articles and documentation of existing studies and knowledge, and the in-depth analysis of the case study of the implementation of Playback Theatre as a reconciliation program in Nepal.

Due to the nature of the project, the main research method used throughout the project is the constant comparative method. This method allows the constant process of comparing data with previously collected data. The main comparison will be between the data collected through the literature review and the case study as well as the data from the articles used for the case study and the personal narratives they analyze. This system allows the identification of patterns and facilitates the analysis process. In addition, this method is particularly adequate because it allows the refinement and modification of the concepts as new data is collected, and ensures that the emerging theory is grounded in the data and reflects the experiences and perspectives of the personal narratives.

The case of Nepal will be used as an instrumental case study to further achieve the objectives of the project. The case study is not being studied for its own intrinsic value, but rather as an example of how Playback Theatre has been applied in a specific context to achieve a specific outcome. Nepal is one of the more than 70 countries in which Playback Theatre has been implemented, which is why Playback Theatre is an adequate initiative to study. It has been largely used as a theatre-facilitated dialogue initiative which has become quite popular in recent years as a mechanism for reconciliation. Nepals' prolonged armed conflict and its considerable difficulty in the implementation of traditional reconciliation

methods and rebuilding trust among the communities due to deeply rooted social, cultural, and political divisions is what makes this case adequate for the research. The case of Nepal provides a unique opportunity to explore how Playback Theatre can contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in a culturally and politically complex context. Examining the experiences of communities and individuals allows the identification of the specific ways in which Playback Theatre can be used to promote empathy, understanding, and connection, and to address the complex issues of social justice and inequality that underpin armed conflict.

1. Structure

To explore the potential of alternative artistic and cultural mechanisms such as Playback Theatre as tools for peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-armed conflict communities the project is structured into three main sections; literature review, case study, and conclusion.

The literature review section provides a comprehensive overview of the current knowledge in three main discussions. This section establishes a theoretical framework and provides insights into previous studies and approaches that facilitate the analysis of the case study. The first section contains an overall critical research on the mainstream understanding of Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. The second focuses on community-based approaches to peacebuilding and reconciliation as potential solutions to the shortcomings of traditional methodologies and explains the benefits of bottom-up relationship-building programs through artistic and cultural interventions highly tailored to each community's context, culture, needs, and background. Through this research further development on the context of transformative justice as an alternative to transitional justice will be tackled as well. The third section focuses on dialogue as a key tool for peacebuilding and reconciliation. This section will deepen into the concept of dialogue as a key instrument for facilitating reconciliation in a community shattered by armed conflict, the difficulties encountered in facilitating dialogue and how to find alternatives that address these difficulties. This analysis will direct the research toward the examination of alternative artistic mechanisms for facilitating dialogue. Dance Therapy will be briefly mentioned, followed by the example of Theatre-facilitated dialogue, with a further explanation of Playback theatre as a specific practice of Theatre-facilitated dialogue.

The Case study section is dedicated to Playback Theatre in Nepal as a practical example of the way in which alternative mechanisms can be successful in promoting

reconciliation. This section describes the implementation of Playback Theatre in communities in Nepal that are particularly divided due to the War. This section will draw on the insights gained from the literature review while analyzing several articles on the initiative. To conduct the research and analysis for the case study, conclusions will be drawn upon personal narratives related and analyzed in secondary source articles. The main two articles from where the personal narratives will be extracted are *A Stage for the Unknown? Reconciling Postwar Communities through Theatre-Facilitated Dialogue* by Anne Dirnstorfer and Nar Bahadur Saud, and *EnActing Dialogue: From Concept to Practice, Reflections from Nepal* by Prakash Bhattarai, Nar Bahadur Saud, and Anne Dirnstorfer, which will be repeatedly referred to during this section. These personal narratives will mainly be used to demonstrate the impact of Playback Theater at the local, community and national levels.

Finally, the conclusion highlights the main contributions to knowledge made by the research, summarizes the findings of the literature review and case study, draws conclusions about the evidence supplied to support the research question and the thesis statement, and suggests areas for further research and improvement.

Overall, this project is designed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the potential of alternative artistic and cultural mechanisms such as Playback Theatre as tools for peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-armed conflict communities, drawing on both theoretical insights from the literature review and practical experiences from the case study.

II. Literature Review

A. Peacebuilding & Reconciliation

Building long-lasting sustainable peace after long periods of armed conflict is inevitably a complex process. The political, economic, and social situation in which a country finds itself after an armed conflict is extremely difficult and devastating. The effects can be found at all levels, from the destruction of infrastructures and entire villages to unstable health and education systems. However, the most overlooked but permanent effect that armed conflict has in a country is “the collapse of state institutions, mistrust in government, the destruction of social relationships, psychological trauma and pervasive fear.”¹ In order to allow peacebuilding in these conflict-affected situations, both the tangible and intangible effects must be addressed. Nevertheless, for decades, the intangible effects have been seen as less urgent. This has repeatedly caused the reemergence of conflict, and large instability within the affected countries.

In the same way, when examining transitional justice it is clear how reconciliation attempts through bottom-up culture-based approaches such as the implementation of cultural and artistic initiatives have been disregarded and underrepresented.² The focus is always put on the legal regulations and social mechanisms that provide the foundation for national reconciliation and guard against further violations of human rights. This approach is inefficient and inaccurate because communities have repeatedly proven strength and resilience. Even in the context of sheer desolation, coping mechanisms, organizational systems, and social life reemerge within community networks.³ Thus, there is large potential for the development of peacebuilding through reconciliation initiatives implemented at the community level. Consequently, “growing attention has thus been paid in recent years to the adoption of community-based approaches to help address the extensive needs in conflict-affected and fragile contexts”.⁴

In the early 2000s the field of International Relations began to see a shift in the perspective in which peacebuilding is understood. Scholars like Oliver Richmond and Roger Mac Ginty talk about the so-called ‘*local turn*’ in peacebuilding. This concept refers to the

¹ Huma Haider, "Community-based Approaches to Peacebuilding in Conflict-affected and Fragile Contexts," (Master's thesis, Georgetown University, November 2009), 4.

² Pablo de Greiff, “The Future of the Past: Reflections on the Present State and Prospects of Transitional Justice,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 14, no. 2 (July 2020): 251–259, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijaa013>.

³ Béatrice Pouligny, "Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Ambiguities of International Programmes Aimed at Building 'New' Societies," *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 4 (December 2005): 495–510, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010605060448>.

⁴ Haider, "Community-based Approaches," 4.

change of mindset driven by a wave of awareness on the failure of top-down approaches led by external actors and the visualization of local approaches. This shift is built upon the recognition that peacebuilding can not be a one-way process and to build long-lasting peace the integration and active participation of local actors is key. External actors lack further understanding of the complexity of the political and social dynamics of the places they are working in, therefore, the initiatives they impose lack adaptability to the reality of the communities. Consequently, the programs only work to a certain extent because when the external actor has left, progress rapidly disappears because of its poor local establishment that creates dependence on the external actor.

The lack of collaboration between external and local actors is the main reason why traditional approaches fail as it makes it impossible to detect and address the root causes of tensions and conflict.⁵ External peacebuilding actors continue to impose solutions that are not locally acceptable or sustainable because they have a large lack of knowledge of the local context and cultures. This results in the resistance of local actors towards external peacebuilding efforts.⁶ Therefore, a post-liberal approach is essential in peacebuilding as it takes into account the diversity of local contexts and the need for locally grounded solutions.⁷

A more sustainable approach to peacebuilding should be based on the agency of local actors and the development of local capacities for conflict prevention and resolution, where local actors identify their own needs and solutions. Likewise, many times local actors already have their own mechanisms for conflict resolution and peacebuilding, which should be supported and strengthened rather than replaced by external interventions. Home-grown initiatives for reconciliation involve society as a whole, not only the government or the people who ‘suffered’ and the ‘perpetrators’, this is key because reconciliation is a wider process that includes all sorts of people to enable social, political, and cultural transformation.⁸ Hence, the collaboration between external and local actors is the most sustainable and effective solution because they reflect and adapt to local values, needs, knowledge, and capacities and reinforce these key factors for reconciliation.⁹ ¹⁰ The collaboration can take two forms: implementing brand new initiatives with a prior examination of the culture and traditions, as well as a deep understanding of the conflict and the scars it has left in society, and integrating the society as

⁵ Oliver Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁶ Roger Mac Ginty, "International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace," (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁷ Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace*.

⁸ David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse, *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: a Handbook* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2003).

⁹ Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace*.

¹⁰ Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding*.

a whole and collaborating with local organizations; or investing in already existing local initiatives that tend to hold large potential but lack the necessary resources for its proper implementation.

Reconciliation is a key step for building peace in post-armed conflict societies because it aims to resolve the intangible effects. Reconciliation processes contribute to peacebuilding within societies by promoting social cohesion, healing wounds of the past, and rebuilding the broken trust within a divided community. It does not follow a linear pattern based on revealed truth. It entails looking back on the past and incorporating distressing memories into one's own, community's, and country's history.¹¹ Thus this process is deeply emotional, and it deals with sensible topics within communities and individuals. In addition, it is essential to keep in mind that reconciliation does not necessarily mean that individuals forgive or forget the pain suffered, but that people find peace within their stories. As Dan Bar-On stated, reconciliation is the process through which “the enemies of yesterday will give up and let go of their hatred, animosity or wish of revenge, as well as their identity that had been constructed around the conflict”.¹² Therefore, these processes can not be imposed, they need to emerge from the community. The spaces and initiatives have to be delicately prepared and adapted to the communities’ context, which is why community-based approaches are more effective.

B. Community-based Approaches to Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

As mentioned above, debates on transitional justice have for decades been focusing almost exclusively on social mechanisms and legal conditions. Yet, the most effective is to take a mixed approach that includes both retributive and restorative justice. In post-armed conflict situations, it is important to not only use mechanisms of peacebuilding such as trials but also to include relationship-building programs of restorative quality to build stable long-lasting peace.¹³ As policymaking has proved to be insufficient, larger attention has been put on how cultural and artistic interventions can contribute to peacebuilding processes. These sorts of interventions are the most effective method to engage the larger public and avoid excluding parts of society in reconciliation processes.¹⁴

¹¹ Dan Bar-On, "Reconciliation revisited for more conceptual and empirical clarity." Janja Bec-Neumann (ed.) (2007): 62-84.

¹² Bar-On, "Reconciliation Revised", 66.

¹³ Jeffrey D. Pugh, "Eroding the Barrier between Peace and Justice: Transitional Justice Mechanisms and Sustainable Peace," *International Journal of Peace Studies* 24, no. 1 (Summer 2019).

¹⁴ Greiff, "The Future of the Past," 251–259.

Cultural expressions such as art, music, dance, and storytelling can be vital in reconciliation processes as they have the ability to create a space for people to unite and share their experiences, emotions, traumas, and perspectives in a non-judgmental and non-threatening environment. These sorts of spaces help foster trust, understanding, and empathy between individuals and communities that are divided by conflict in post-armed conflict situations. John Paul Lederach expresses the importance of integrating cultural approaches to obtain successful results in conflict resolution and reconciliation. He states that "Cultural traditions and practices provide meaning, identity, and belonging for people. To ignore or dismiss them is to deny a fundamental aspect of the human experience. In conflict resolution, cultural expressions can provide a safe space for people to explore their experiences and emotions. Through music, dance, storytelling, and other cultural expressions, individuals and communities can come together to share their stories and create a new narrative of peace."¹⁵ Cultural expressions can help process traumatic experiences by expressing emotion, and promoting social justice and human rights, and contributing to broader social and political transformation. Cultural traditions give a sense of identity, belonging, and meaning to people and societies, as well as promote empathy and understanding across cultural, religious, and political divides.¹⁶ Therefore traditions should be used within reconciliation efforts to be adapted to each context and therefore to succeed in building long-lasting and locally rooted peace processes by creating spaces for dialogue, healing, and transformation in the aftermath of conflict.

In addition, engaging with local traditions and practices is key in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts because if these alternative initiatives are imposed from the outside rather than locally rooted and reflective of cultural traditions they will likely be inefficient and rejected by the community. However, if reflective and drawing upon traditions and cultural resources from the affected community, the contribution to building a sustainable and long-lasting peace will be larger. This sort of integration gives legitimacy and builds trust and so people are more open to them and embrace them.¹⁷

Cultural approaches are key to the success of transitional justice and reconciliation processes, especially the incorporation of theatre and performance in order to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually and enable dialogue and reflection on past violence,

¹⁵ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.

¹⁶ Cynthia Cohen, "Creative Approaches to Reconciliation," *Brandeis University* (2010).

¹⁷ Tine Destrooper, "Performative Justice? The Role of Theatre and Performance in Facilitating Transitional Justice," *South African Theatre Journal* 32, no. 3 (December 2018): 199-214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2018.1556115>.

trauma, and injustices. Destrooper believes that theatre is especially relevant due to its power to affect the wider social and political context of reconciliation by challenging dominant narratives, questioning power relations and giving voice to marginalized communities. These shared spaces have a significantly strong impact on the people who attend because they can foster empathy and understanding, and rebuild broken relationships by endorsing the re-humanization of victims, persecutors, and survivors. Furthermore, she also emphasizes how theatre gives voice to a large variety of stories and not only to a single national narrative of the official truth.¹⁸

On another note, Paul Gready and Simon Robinsy propose a new *transformative justice* framework that addresses structural inequalities and contributes to long-term social change by focusing on the victims and locals rather than truth and justice in itself. They suggest that this approach should be participatory, inclusive, and centered on the needs and perspectives of marginalized communities. They also emphasize the importance of addressing economic and social injustices, as well as political repression. These suggestions are mainly based on the reflection that transitional justice can be used by elites to maintain power and that it often ignores the needs and perspectives of marginalized groups.¹⁹

C. Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

Dialogue is a tool frequently used worldwide to settle disputes between hostile communities. Dialogue is key in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, especially in post-armed conflict societies as it allows people to build a shared understanding and common vision of what happened, builds trust between conflict groups, and enables people to communicate and share their grievances, thus building a safe space for expression. Dialogue enables people from different sides of a conflict to listen and understand each other's perspectives, concerns and needs, which creates mutual respect and empathy and often fosters collaboration.

Nevertheless, individuals who have experienced such traumatic periods of violence and loss commonly find themselves with a large difficulty in verbalizing or even comprehending the myriad of emotions they experience. Jenny Edkins suggests that "language is not a neutral medium through which we convey the world to one another. Rather, it derives its meaning from the cultural and social context in which it is used. Violence can shatter these contexts,

¹⁸ Destrooper, "Performative Justice?," 199-214.

¹⁹Paul Gready and Simon Robins, "From Transitional to Transformative Justice: A New Agenda for Practice," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 8, no. 3 (November 2014): 339-361, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/iju013>.

leaving survivors struggling to find a language that can adequately convey the enormity of their experiences."²⁰ Therefore, everyday verbal language is inadequate to convey the full extent of trauma and the depth of emotions that survivors feel because violence has destroyed the social and cultural context from which language derives its meaning.²¹

This dialogue at the community level has traditionally been enabled through community meetings, truth and reconciliation commissions, and local peace committees. However, these methods are not always successful because they tend to have a lack of inclusivity and trust, and there can be political and institutional barriers as political leaders may be unwilling to participate, and conflict parties may not trust official government channels. In addition, these mechanisms tend to be insensitive to the survivors' struggle to understand and express themselves, which results in an inefficient process of dialogue.

Community-based initiatives have proven to be considerably successful in facilitating dialogue for reconciliation in societies with high tensions due to armed and violent conflict. David Bohm examines these in depth focusing on the essence of dialogue facilitating active listening of different understandings without judgment nor defensive approaches. These are essential to bringing participants closer together by opening up and understanding one another's perspectives, ultimately fostering trust by working together towards the common goal of reconciliation. Nevertheless, dialogue participants tend to become frustrated due to this need to listen to others without assumptions and that there is no right or wrong. Therefore, for this type of dialogue to happen, non-traditional mechanisms based on non-didactic participatory tools are the most efficient. Consequently, art methodologies are, by their nature, the most adequate to enable these dialogue spaces, as they build a neutral and safe space for self-reflection and openness.²²

Dance therapy, for instance, provides a non-threatening space for individuals to explore their emotions, express their experiences, and connect with others, thereby promoting emotional regulation, social connection, and embodied awareness.²³ Therefore, initiatives like such can be particularly effective in societies where trauma and violence have been deeply ingrained, as it offers a way to address the physical and psychological effects of conflict in a holistic and embodied way. Dance can be used to express and explore trauma, grief, and loss, promoting empathy, understanding, and healing between individuals and groups who have experienced

²⁰ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 57.

²¹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 57.

²² David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (Routledge, 2013)

²³ Kim Dunphy, Meredith Elton, and Alex Jordan "Exploring Dance/Movement Therapy in Post-Conflict Timor-Leste," *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 36, no. 2 (December 2014): 189-208, 10.1007/s10465-014-9175-4.

conflict or violence. By creating shared experiences and building relationships, dance can promote social and cultural integration and reconciliation,²⁴ and contribute to the development of a more just and compassionate society.²⁵

The use of metaphors and images to understand the lived experiences rather than the use of verbal language results more effective in post-traumatic violent experiences. The use of everyday language can easily lead to misunderstanding and retraumatization, whereas the use of metaphors such as rituals, theatre, writing, or storytelling allows survivors to see the traumatic event with enough distance to understand it.²⁶ Can peacebuilding then be understood as an art through which to facilitate reconciliation? The basis of this idea relies on the understanding that healing can happen when the person is not fully consciously trying to heal. Lederach explains how “the artistic process initially breaks beyond what can be rationally understood and then returns to a place of understanding that may analyze, think it through, and attach meaning to it. This is much like the process of reconciliation. Brokenness wanders all over our souls. Healing requires a similar journey of wandering. It is not possible to cognitively plan and control healing”.²⁷ Therefore, following this understanding, creative initiatives are a key player in peacebuilding and reconciliation as they allow victims to restore their ability to participate in reconciliation processes and take the first steps into their individual healing process.²⁸ Aesthetic processes overcome verbal barriers as through creative acts responsive and adaptive to the needs of survivors new meanings and new languages are created to understand their reality.²⁹ In light of this, it can be said that such artistic initiatives are remarkably effective for peace and reconciliation within a broken society.

Dialogue facilitated through theatre, for instance, has become quite popular. Theatre is a great tool to influence the behavior and thoughts of people and communities because people feel connected to the stories and it makes spectators feel close and relatable to the play. Consequently, theatre has gained widespread acceptance as a tool for communication that can

²⁴ Andreas Velthuisen and Kate D. Ferguson, "Corrigendum: The poetics of peace: From aesthetic knowledge to reconciliation," *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 15, no. 1 (August 2019), 10.4102/td.v15i1.649.

²⁵ David Alan Harris, "Time, Space, and an Aesthetics of Survival," in *Dance and Creativity within Dance Movement Therapy*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020).

²⁶ Stephanie Wise and Emily Nash, *Healing Trauma in Group Settings The Art of Co-Leader Attunement* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

²⁷ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 39.

²⁸ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (London: Routledge, 2013), ISBN 9781136748790

²⁹ Cynthia Cohen and Lesley Yalen, "Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts: A Virtual Collection. Posting a Theoretical Framework," The International Centre for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University.

be particularly useful in rural communities.³⁰ Dialogue facilitated through theatre strives to assist local processes of social cohesion, reunification, and trust-building. Theatre-facilitated dialogue is an interactive process that utilizes theatrical techniques to promote communication and understanding among individuals or groups with different backgrounds or perspectives. This approach creates a safe space for participants to share their thoughts and feelings through interactive theatre activities, such as role-playing, improvisation, and storytelling. This process enables individuals to explore different perspectives and develop empathy for others' experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of complex issues such as social justice, diversity, and inclusion. Ultimately, theatre-facilitated dialogue is a powerful tool that can be used in various settings, including education, community building, and conflict resolution, to foster positive change and promote understanding among individuals and groups.³¹

1. Playback Theatre

Playback Theatre is a mixture of improvisational theatre, storytelling traditions, and psychodrama. It is an interactive theatre based on improvisation through the stories the audience shares, so it has great power for community building. The dynamic of the play consists of local performers displaying the personal stories shared by the audience, and transforming a story into a theatre. Hence, the performances become “a combination of theatre art, music, social work, and a ritual for healing that seeks to give space and acknowledgement to voices that are usually unheard”.³²

Since Playback Theatre was first initiated by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas in 1975 in the United States, it has been practiced in more than 70 countries all around the globe.³³ It has become especially relevant due to its spontaneity and wide involvement with the audience, which enables dialogue by exploring lived realities that often include memories from armed

³⁰ Nar Bahadur Saud, "Playback Theatre: An Approach to Community Reconciliation in Nepal," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* (May, 2020): 190.

³¹ Anne Dirnstorfer and Nar Bahadur Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown? Reconciling Postwar Communities through Theatre-Facilitated Dialogue," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 14 (2020): 122–141, 10.1093/ijtj/ijz038

³² Prakash Bhattarai, Anne Dirnstorfer, and Nar Bahadur Saud, "EnActing Dialogue: from concept to practice," *Forum for Protection of Public Interest* (December 2020): 19.

³³ "What is Playback Theatre?," Playback Theatre Network, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://playbacktheatrenetwork.org/what-is-playback-theatre/>.

conflict, rather than sharing a specific message to the audience.³⁴ Therefore the audience gets involved and is certainly touched by the theatre.

This type of theatre generates an impact on the personal, community, and national levels. “At the personal level, this contributes to the transformation of traumatic memories and creates a space for healing. At the community level, it seeks to cut down grievances, fear, and prejudices and helps empathy take root. Finally, this intervention also intends to play a contributory role in peacebuilding and transitional justice process at the national level through bottom-up reconciliation activities.”³⁵

The purpose of a Playback Theatre dialogue differs from traditional dialogue meetings, which usually focus on the exchange of conflicting opinions. Rather than aiming to alter or agree upon individual stances, Playback Theatre dialogues can incorporate divergent and even conflicting narratives, allowing for recognition and reproduction of ambiguity and complexity. Through this form of artistic expression, Playback Theatre dialogues can facilitate reconciliation processes in ways that surpass the limitations of verbal communication.³⁶

The main characteristics that demonstrate the potential of Playback Theatre initiatives are: (i) it allows people to share their stories feeling comfortable as they are not pushed to explain more than what they wish to; (ii) actors capture the numerous layers of the story and read between the lines to bring to light the deep feelings hidden in the story in a sensitive manner; (iii) its ability to create connections and empathy within a community through the story of one individual.³⁷

Proven the theoretical relevance of alternative approaches to post-armed conflict reconciliation within torn societies, a deeper analysis of Playback Theater and the impact it had in communities in Nepal will be conducted in the following section. With this research, the concepts recently exposed will be further explored moving from theory to real cases.

³⁴ Jo Salas, “Stories in the Moment: Playback Theatre for Building Community and Justice,” in *Acting Together: Performances and the Creative Transformation of Conflict – Volume II: Building Just and Inclusive Communities*, ed. Cynthia E. Cohen, Roberto Gutierrez Varea and Polly O. Walker (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2011).

³⁵ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue"

³⁶ Jo Salas, "A Note on What We Mean by 'Dialogue' in Playback Theatre," *Center for Playback Theatre*

³⁷ Jonathan Fox, “Playback Theatre in Burundi: Can Theatre Transcend the Gap?,” in *Applied Theatre Reader* (Routledge, 2009).

III. Case Study: Playback Theatre in Nepal

A. Contextualizing Nepal

Nepal was historically governed by royal dynasties, but in 1991, political parties initiated a popular movement for democracy. Consequently, a series of violent street protests arose until King Birendra ceded power and a multiparty democracy was settled. Nevertheless, political upheaval continued from 1991 until 1995. During this period the communist government was dissolved, and in 1996, the Maoist revolt began sparked by a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the political and economic system, especially due to the exclusion of marginalized groups from positions of power and wealth. The main aim was to establish a republic and change the constitution. With this, the country entered ten years of violent struggle that killed nearly 13,000 people, 1,300 people went missing, and numerous human rights violations and atrocities were committed by both sides of the conflict. The Communist Party of Nepal and the Government of Nepal finally signed the Comprehensive Peace Accord that officially marked the end of the war in November 2006.³⁸

Following this, in 2015, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons were established to bring justice and reconciliation. Yet, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the work done by these bodies. Both the international community and the Nepali civil society actors repeatedly criticized their slow progress and their lack of regard for victims' concerns. The ability of these bodies to create a trustworthy environment for victims and survivors to express their truth without being retraumatized, and to address the challenges and bridge the gaps between the government, the commissions, and the victims was constantly put into doubt. In addition, the bodies drafted regulations without consulting the victims, therefore it was also claimed that the bodies "not only insulted the victims but also failed to adopt transitional justice principles, UN guidelines, EU framework on transitional justice and ignored the recent verdict of Supreme Court."³⁹ Both the lack of a victim-centric approach from the Truth and Reconciliation bodies and the Constitution-drafting process present how the ordinary Nepalese society was marginalized by the political elite. Consequently, reconciliation in Nepali society was commonly perceived as a procedure intended to shield the offenders

³⁸ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "OHCHR Nepal Conflict Report - Executive Summary," OHCHR Nepal (October 2012).

³⁹ Nischal Basnyat, "It Takes Two," The Kathmandu Post, August 19, 2015, <https://kathmandupost.com/opinion/2015/08/19/it-takes-two>.

rather than the victims. Thus, the victims continued demanding their right to have a voice, and to reconcile and forgive voluntarily.

In addition, even though the TRC and the CIEDP were founded in 2015, several years after the end of the war, in 2012 the former Maoist combatants were resettled. Thus, the integration of ex-combatants occurred before the crimes that occurred during the war could be investigated. This was a huge challenge for community-level reconciliation that could not find support from national-level processes.⁴⁰

The lack of victim-centric approaches added to the struggle posed by the former combatants' resettlement, and the difficulty that victims and survivors face to put into words their feelings and stories⁴¹ clearly posed a huge challenge for them to heal, to understand and process what had happened, and to find forgiveness for reconciliation. Hence, following the theoretical knowledge seen through the literature review section, alternative mechanisms that provide favorable conditions for dialogue, reconciliation and healing at the community level to complement the national process for reconciliation played a key role.

The Nepalese culture is steeped in spiritual and ritual practices, which means that for many families, having spaces to undertake rituals and memorialization to keep the memory of their loved ones alive and for people's healing is key. For instance, the families of the disappeared struggle to find closure due to their inability to proceed with the proper burial rituals. Creative and cultural spaces give them an opportunity to not only bring awareness but also to collectively share their sense of loss and find solidarity for their right to justice, truth and recognition.⁴²

Melmilap means reconciliation in Nepali, and it is defined as "a mutual understanding in an atmosphere of harmony and unity."⁴³ The understanding of reconciliation within the Nepali society finds its base on 'social harmony' and balanced coexistence rather than on 'finding justice'. Many Nepali see the ten-year war as an interruption of harmony rather than a deeply rooted structural violence perpetrated through history. Therefore, reconciliation at grassroots level is about finding empathy and understanding of each other rather than justice and truth. Hence, at that time the main issue was the reconciliation and peace-keeping within communities that received ex-combatants from resettlement. In these communities the restoration of this so highly appreciated harmony was considerably more complex. This

⁴⁰ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 126.

⁴¹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*: 57.

⁴² Ereshnee Naidu-Silverman, "The Contribution of Art and Culture in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Asia," *Centre for Culture and Development* (2015).

⁴³ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 127.

called for the need for bottom-up processes to address the small-scale interpersonal and grass-root level relations in order to facilitate reconciliation and open the doors to top-down initiatives that focus on ‘structural’ processes based on institutions and legitimacy.⁴⁴

B. Adapting Playback Theatre to Nepal

One of the most successful bottom-up initiatives conducted in this period was the *EnActing Dialogue* project which was introduced to complement the government-led post-war reconciliation process. This intervention was conducted by the Berlin Center for Integrative Mediation (CSSP) and the Forum for Protection of Public Interest.⁴⁵ The main goal of the project was to enable dialogue through Playback Theatre within communities with large numbers of reintegrated former Maoist combatants. The project started in 2015 as a continuation of the Pro Public project, which ended almost a year before. The previous project had the same objective of facilitating dialogue through locals from different backgrounds trained to create trust and mutual understanding. However, in the new project, the base was the assumption that theatre-facilitated dialogue facilitators could reach a broader audience.

Theatre has the ability to incorporate a large variety of activities such as music and dancing with traditional rituals of greeting, thus, opening the floor to easily incorporate a large variety of local cultural forms. In Nepalese society, “dialogue through oral traditions and storytelling is very common, and theatre is one of the mediums of dialogue,”⁴⁶ and “theatrical performances are considered very high-level activities.”⁴⁷ Thus, Playback Theatre had a larger potential to succeed in contributing to the reconciliation and healing processes within Nepalese society. The new bottom-up approach allowed the participation of the society as a whole⁴⁸ and it was better adapted to the local values and context,⁴⁹ which as seen during the literature review, is more sustainable in the long term and is received better by the population.

Divided communities are the ones that struggle the most with top-down truth-finding initiatives and reconciliation processes of national-level commissions and are more likely to have the opposite outcome, intensifying fear and frustration, and embracing a polarized climate. However, if alternative initiatives such as Playback Theatre are used to complement

⁴⁴ Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse, *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*: 29.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Fox, “Garland of Flowers,” *Playback Theater Reflects* (April 2017) <https://playbacktheatreflects.net/2017/04/20/garland-of-flowers-by-jonathan-fox/>

⁴⁶ Saud, “Playback Theatre,” 183.

⁴⁷ Saud, “Playback Theatre,” 180.

⁴⁸ Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse, *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*.

⁴⁹ Ginty, “International Peacebuilding”

the national-level processes, these will have a much larger chance to succeed.⁵⁰ Thus, the main targeted audience were communities with a greater need for social cohesion; therefore, it was undertaken in six municipalities⁵¹ of Nepal with large numbers of ex-combatants and conflict victims.

As explained in the literature review, initiatives that have a high involvement of the local community have higher success because they avoid local dependence on external factors by developing the local capacities and thus creating agency of the local actors, and it has a lower level of rejection from the locals because it includes all parts of society and can reflect the local values, needs, knowledge and capacities.^{52 53} The case of the EnActing Dialogue project clearly reflects these because the principal cause of the success of this initiative was the high level of adaptation and inclusion of the local community. EnActing Dialogue had a long-term perspective that intended to train locals to conduct the initiative independently with minor intervention from outsiders. "The ultimate goal of this intervention was to build a framework that could help local artists, in the long term, carry out theatre-facilitated dialogues in their own communities and in surrounding communities."⁵⁴

Thus, six community-based theatre groups, a total of 48 dialogue facilitators, were selected. The groups of facilitators were formed by an inclusive variety of people with different backgrounds. The aim was to give voice, especially to the most silenced groups of the community by making them feel invited to participate. This was particularly beneficial within the Nepali rural communities as "people rarely get an opportunity and common forum to share their feelings, emotions and sufferings."⁵⁵

The groups were composed of a balanced representation of gender, casts and ethnic groups, and most importantly, half of the members were ex-combatants and the other half were victims and locals. These allowed a high level of integration and inclusivity of the initiative within the daily lives of the communities. These people were selected based on their human and social skills, their open-mindedness and will to forgive and reconcile, and their

⁵⁰ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 132.

⁵¹ Triyuga Municipality of Udayapur, Bardibas Municipality of Mahottari, Sainamaina Municipality of Rupandehi, Raptisonari Municipality of Banke, Tulsipur sub-metropolitan city of Dang and Gulariya Municipality of Bardiya.

"Chautari Natak: Storytelling for Promoting Social Cohesion in the Communities of Nepal," ProPublica, accessed May 3, 2023, <http://propublica.org/project/chautari-natak-storytelling-for-promoting-social-cohesion-in-the-communities-of-nepal/>.

⁵² Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace*.

⁵³ Ginty, "International Peacebuilding"

⁵⁴ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 20.

⁵⁵ Saud, "Playback Theatre," 190.

background against the conflict rather than by their acting skills because as in traditional mediation and dialogue facilitation actors were trained to focus on listening to the emotionally meaningful part of the stories. They were trained on a constant basis through refresher training designed to support the facilitators “to find the right level of sharing violence while at the same time strengthening the resilience of the teller,”⁵⁶ this is a very challenging process but essential to allow healing rather than retraumatization.

From the beginning of the project, the actors named the Playback Theatre *Chautari Natak*, which is the translation in Nepali. *Natak* literally translates to drama or play,⁵⁷ and *Chautari* is the Nepali word that refers to “a communal space under the Bal and Pipal trees of great cultural and social importance.”⁵⁸ This space can be found in nearly all Nepali villages and is used for social gatherings and personal rest and recuperation. Additionally, in the past, this location was utilized for traditional justice procedures. Afterwards, paintings of the chautari trees were used as the background of the theatre performances and the opening ritual for the performances became a song about these trees as a place of emotional discharge and rest. This implied a large symbol of local ownership, which has through this research project proved to be key to the initiatives’ success.

Another key aspect to increase local ownership is to include people from the community such as politicians, government representatives, social workers, and social activists in the planning and implementation of the initiative. These will not only increase the feeling of local ownership but also “protect the project from the critique of those who might be afraid of certain narratives being told.”⁵⁹ Moreover, by inviting actors such as police and military, representatives of political parties, and local administration, grievances and prejudices can decrease. Lastly, inviting politicians to the *Chautari Natak* had great consequences as “politicians were emotionally touched by what they saw and felt more compelled to respond personally and beyond their habit of merely performing a position.”⁶⁰ A government official from Dang district told the field-based research team studying the EnActing Project:

“I had never thought that the people who are living in this community could easily work and adjust with the people from an ex-combatant background in such a

⁵⁶ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 16 & 27.

⁵⁷ Collins dictionary

⁵⁸ Fox, “Garland of Flowers”

Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 133.

⁵⁹ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 132.

⁶⁰ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 141.

harmonious and lovely atmosphere. This is a great achievement of *Chautari Natak*”⁶¹

The success of all these factors promoting local ownership and adaptation is shown in how in the second year of the project, after a first year dedicated to intense training and the local groups adapting to the initiative, 34% of the performances were organized by local leaders, and in the third year the percentage went up by another 10%. In addition, as theatre is a strong social connector in the Nepali society, and the dialogue facilitators have such a diverse background, it became easier to collect a diverse and inclusive audience.⁶² *Chautari Natak* integrated so well within the Nepali culture that during its third year, in 2018, the focus of the project shifted from the impact of armed conflict in the community, specially in victims and ex-combatants, to an emphasis on the “growing political polarization and the escalation of tensions at the community level.”⁶³ This adaptation naturally emerged within *Chautari Natak* as stories shared started being more about local politics rather than stories from the time of armed conflict. Thus Pro Public shifted its focus within the training to adapt to the needs of the project.

C. Community level restoration: Cutting down grievances and prejudices

A diverse audience that includes politicians, government representatives, social workers, social activists, and a large variety of backgrounds is key to the success of Playback Theater initiatives because the collective witnessing of a story creates connections between the teller and the audience, as well as among the members of the audience, and it contributes to the collective healing. This factor is key for reconciliation because it strengthens “the teller's relationship with the others present and serves as a pathway to integrate or at times re-integrate an individual into their community.”⁶⁴ Moreover, the collective witnessing enabled through the performance of the theatre in a public and communal space empowers the teller and gives confidence to integrate into the community.⁶⁵

This impact is clearly shown through the personal narratives collected in the *EnActing Dialogue: From Concept to Practice, Reflections from Nepal*⁶⁶ report conducted by a team of

⁶¹ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 70.

⁶² Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 36.

⁶³ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 16 & 24.

⁶⁴ Salas, "A Note on What We Mean by 'Dialogue'"

⁶⁵ Jenny Hutt, and Bev Hosking. "Playback Theatre: A Creative Resource for Reconciliation." Brandies University (2006).

⁶⁶ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue"

independent researchers that studied the relevance of the EnActing Dialogue project. In what follows, personal narratives from a set of secondary sources that study these narratives will be analyzed to develop the conclusions of this research.

The different stories shared during a performance can seem very different at first sight, however, quite frequently the stories are connected to each other at different levels. For instance, during a performance in Bardiya district a woman shared her story about how during the war she and her partner had to separate for two years, and when they returned to Nepal he was married to another woman and had no interest in her. She shared the feeling of betrayal as she had stayed loyal and thought they would stay together.⁶⁷ After the enactment of this story, an ex-combatant came forward to explain a story of the war where they had to throw bombs uphill to hit an army camp. He explained how the bombs had come back and some of his friends were killed. After explaining his story he said, “Sometimes, I feel that this war was a story of betrayal.”⁶⁸

When focusing on the feelings of the stories rather than on the events itself, the red thread that unites both stories is clear. Both stories share the common feeling of betrayal, deep disappointment, and the loss of trust and meaning. A sense of interconnectedness and communal belonging is created by the connection between the stories. In addition, this focus on the feeling of the stories causes the people from the audience that do not share to realize that their stories are similar and that they are not alone, which makes them feel better.

Moreover, this type of theatre develops the ability of the participants to imagine the experiences of the ‘other’, this helps empathize with the suffering of others, even with enemies. This is essential for the construction of a harmonious coexistence and reconciliation within the community.⁶⁹ This is clearly shown in the case of the reintegration of ex-combatants to the communities.

An ex-combatant from the Mahottari district explained how ex-combatants were often left out of the community and experienced loneliness and were misunderstood, and how *Chautari Natak* helped change their reality.

“Community people could hardly understand our true feelings because I think they were entirely indifferent to us. People remained detached from us and simply could not understand or see connections of their lives with us. The greatness of Playback Theatre is that it focuses on the emotions of the storyteller

⁶⁷ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 136.

⁶⁸ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 136.

⁶⁹ Cohen, "Creative Approaches to Reconciliation"

and behaves in an empathetic way. This has brought community people closer and enabled them to restore their relations with us.”⁷⁰

Another ex-combatant who was a dialogue facilitator from Bardiya district also affirmed that:

“We, the ex-combatants were perceived differently in this community. Now, *Chautari Natak* has given us a space for connecting with other community people and a chance to change their perception towards us.”⁷¹

An audience member from Gaighat, Udayapur shared:

“One of the ex-combatants asked me to join and observe the Playback Theatre in our community. That time I was thinking that he might have been [*want*] me to take part in a Maoist’s programme. It was only after I inviting observed [*I was invited to observe*] the theatre, I came to realize the reality of ex-combatants, during the performance. Since hearing the story of the ex-combatant in the performance, my perception towards ex-combatants has changed.”⁷²

These narratives prove that through theatre-facilitated dialogue events, discriminating stereotypes, prejudices, ill-feeling and other negative images towards other groups such as ex-combatants and victims can be transformed. It can be seen that a new and positive common identity is formed uniting ‘ex-combatants’ and ‘community members’, the image of who is a ‘victim’ or who a ‘perpetrator’ gets blurry over time with the performances.⁷³

The change of perspective impacts the daily lives of people which altogether enables social harmony. A clear example is the case of a young widow in Rupandehi who shared her personal story of discrimination, which was based on rumors and superstitions. She had lost her husband during the armed conflict, and afterwards was labeled a ‘husband eater’ and considered a ‘bad omen’ by the family of her husband and people from her community. However, when her story was depicted by the actors in a respectful manner, it created a positive environment that encouraged empathy and understanding. As a result, the family and community members present were able to gradually change their attitudes towards her. Eventually, her family-in-laws treated her as their own daughter and even gave her permission to remarry and start afresh.⁷⁴

This transformation highlights the power of storytelling in transforming minds and feelings. By providing a safe space to share her story, in a way that touched the hearts of her

⁷⁰ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 135.

⁷¹ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 66.

⁷² Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 66.

⁷³ Saud, "Playback Theatre," 189.

⁷⁴ Saud, "Playback Theatre," 189.

community members, a shift in thinking was possible, and this had the strength to transform her life.

D. Personal level restoration: Transforming traumatic experiences into narrative memory

Chautari Natak impacts on the healing process; once people share their story and see it enacted, they experience relief and inner peace. "Psychological restoration and healing can only occur through providing the space for survivors of violence to feel heard and for the details of traumatic events to be re-experienced in a safe environment."⁷⁵ Thus, the trust building process and the safe space created during the performances is crucial; the atmosphere created during the performance triggers the audience to break the silence and share their stories. This spontaneous decision to share their experiences in front of the entire audience is what Hutt & Hosking call 'compassionate witnessing'. This factor enables healing through the expression of vulnerability to connect with inner strength and put into words their traumatic experiences that had never been told. Putting their stories into words and seeing them enacted enables the transformation of traumatic experiences into narrative memory to enable healing.⁷⁶

A 63-year-old male from Bateshowor, Dhanusha who lost his wife and his son shared his story in the *Chautari Natak* and later explained how he felt better and relieved, and he wants more *Chautari Natak* events to take place to explain his story and listen to others.⁷⁷

This effect happens because of the ability enabled by creative spaces to re-experience traumatic events from enough distance to understand them without being retraumatized. As Wise and Nash explain, the use of metaphors and images to understand the lived experiences rather than the use of verbal language is more effective in post-traumatic violent experiences for that reason.⁷⁸

Moreover, "observing the actors on stage and listening to the music simulates the audience to connect with their emotions and to accept parts of their memories they are otherwise not showing."⁷⁹ Thus, storytelling through *Chautari Natak* not only promotes introspection and self-awareness but also evokes memories that otherwise would remain inaccessible.

⁷⁵ Simon Fisher, Jawed Ludin, Richard Smith, Sue Williams, Steven Williams, and Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action* (London: Zed Books, 2000)

⁷⁶ Hutt, Jenny and Hosking. "Playback Theatre"

⁷⁷ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 68.

⁷⁸ Wise and Nash, *Healing Trauma*.

⁷⁹ Dirnstorfer and Saud, "A Stage for the Unknown?," 135.

E. Overview of *Chautari Natak*

To sum up, the study team's field-based observations and stakeholders' experiences show five clear factors that can be used to measure the success of *Chautari Natak* in positively impacting the progress towards reconciliation in Nepal. First, the creation of a congruent civic space that gives voice to the common people who were rarely heard to share their suffering. Second, the creation of a common forum to recognize their past actions and dedicate oneself to embracing a fresh lifestyle. Third, the change in people's behaviors and perceptions towards each other. Fourth, build a space for people to heal from their traumatic experiences. Finally, the fact that *Chautari Natak* has been adapted and well received by communities as a form of art and cultural expression. Moreover, during the six years of the program, from 2015 until 2020, a total of 409 performances were delivered, with a total number of 24,278 participants, which is a significant impact on the local communities and population.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the implementation of *Chautari Natak* had some points of improvement that could make it more impactful. The project consists of five phases: selection of local performers, capacity development of trainers and local performers, pre-performance initiatives, performance of *Chautari Natak*, post-performance initiatives. Within each phase different challenges and opportunities of improvement that are interlinked appear. The main issues appear in the structure of *Chautari Natak* as it only covers 3-5 stories in each episode. Therefore, the actors need to be further trained to convey the essence of the narrative in a more concise manner, and the conductor of the program must have a high level of intuition and sensitivity to select the tellers to attain a balanced selection of stories with large interconnectedness. If the story is not represented and chosen properly and the audience does not feel like they have a similar story and feel represented by it as well, the efficiency is lower because there is a higher number of people who would have liked to share their story but could not. If the *Chautari Natak* does not return to the village, many stories will be untold. Therefore, implementing organizations need to find alternatives for these people who did not get to share their stories, and further expand on finding long-term solutions as some people who shared their stories during the performance might need more than just one healing space. Thus, other mechanisms should be implemented to support people in the long run in a sort of post-performance support initiative. One of the main lacks of the *Chautari Natak* initiative was the lack of engagement with the community people prior and

⁸⁰ Bhattacharai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 60 & 55.

post-performance. One of the main causes of these obstacles is the resource constraint as “the country lacks a dedicated funding source that would help support arts and culture in its many cities and towns, as well as unincorporated areas,”⁸¹ and there is no complete understanding of the potential that *Chautari Natak* has if implemented in the entire country.

⁸¹ Bhattarai, Dirnstorfer, and Saud, "EnActing Dialogue," 73.

IV. Conclusions

It is clear that creative community-based programs such as Playback Theatre are great mechanisms to complement top-down mainstream peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives. Throughout this research project, the different levels [national, community, and local] in which these can impact society in post-armed conflict situations have been put on the table and further restated throughout the deep analysis of the Nepali communities in which *Chautari Natak* has been taking place. The projects' main findings conclude that cultural alternatives can give spaces for dialogue, trust building, social reintegration, forgiveness, healing and pain relief, processing traumatic experiences, giving a sense of identity, belonging, and meaning to people as it includes the society as a whole and is locally tailored, which ultimately opens the ground for other top-down initiatives to be implemented to further nurture reconciliation. This section goes through the key points of the project highlighting how the findings and insights from the research complement and build upon the existing knowledge in the field.

The main issue in Nepal after the armed conflict, as predicted during the literature review, was the destruction of social relationships, mistrust in government, collapse of state institutions, psychological trauma, and pervasive fear that made the TRC and CIEDP establishment inefficient. As foreseen in the literature review, the main issues with these initiatives were, on one hand, the lack of a victim-centric approach, as they were perceived by the people as ignoring the needs and perspectives of marginalized groups and victims, and used by elites to maintain power and protect perpetrators. On the other hand, as explained by Jenny Edkins, the fact that individuals who experience traumatic experiences struggle to verbalize or even comprehend their emotions because the cultural context from which language derives its meaning has been destroyed through the violence of the armed conflict. So if there is not a priorly implemented initiative like Playback Theatre that through aesthetic processes and building safe spaces overcomes the verbal barriers and allows people to transform traumatic experiences into narrative memory, the top-down initiatives will tremendously fail because people will not be able to participate.

Consequently, following the pattern explained by Oliver Richmond and Roger Mac Ginty of the 'local-turn' in peacebuilding, in Nepal, after seeing the failure of the traditional initiatives and understanding that reconciliation can not be a one-way process but needs the collaboration between top-down and bottom-up initiatives, other initiatives were explored. Therefore, from the understanding of reconciliation as a process to promote social cohesion,

healing wounds of the past, rebuilding trust, and integrating painful memories into community and national history rather than finding ‘truth’, the *Chautari Natak* program emerged, developing from another initiative and converting it into a much more locally adapted one.

The impact that *Chautari Natak* had in the communities in Nepal was considerably large because of the high level of adequacy of the initiative aligning with the culture and values of the Nepalese society, that among others, sees theatre as a high-level activity. Moreover, the initiative was further adapted to the Nepalese culture, values, needs, and traditions and promoted the local ownership of the project through several means for a long-lasting sustainable project. As shown through multiple personal narratives, the impact at the community level is the largest as it includes many factors affecting all types of people. Playback Theatre allows dialogue, which is key for reconciliation because it builds trust between conflict groups as it creates a safe space to communicate different sides, and promotes mutual respect, empathy, and builds a common vision. As expressed by authors like John Paul Lederach and Cynthia Cohen, culture has the power to create safe spaces for people to unite and share their stories, traumas and emotions in a non-judgmental environment. It allows people to listen and understand each other without preconceptions which creates change in the perception of one another, these allows people to forgive each other because the main focus is not about blame or truth but about realizing people have feeling and their own side of the story even if they are ex-combatants and even through the stereotypes they have been buried under. As Playback Theatre focuses on the feelings of the stories, it creates connections between diverse audiences, which as seen through the multiple personal narratives of *Chautari Natak*, promotes reintegration into society, and creates a sense of interdependence and belonging to the same community. This space for understanding each other at an unconscious level allowed through art, opens space for reconciliation and social harmony. Moreover, it also builds a common vision by reflecting on the past and integrating painful memories into the community and national history creating new narratives for peace.

At the personal level, the personal narratives reflect the impact of sharing one’s story and how seeing it enacted can result in healing and pain relief. This effect, as explained by John Paul Lederach, is possible because healing can happen when the person is not fully consciously trying to heal, and because cultural expression helps process traumatic experiences, giving a sense of identity, belonging and meaning to people. Playback Theatre gives space to re-experience traumatic events with enough perspective, which as explained by

Stephanie Wise and Emily Nash is essential to understand these memories and heal instead of retraumatizing like it recurrently happens in the mainstream reconciliation mechanisms. Personal healing allows the improvement of people's wellbeing which ultimately helps reconciliation because it opens space for forgiveness in people. The impact that Playback Theatre has at the personal and community level results in the national level impact, the individual healing and the improved relationships within a community settle the ground for top-down initiatives to be successfully implemented.

These main findings of the research project are an interesting contribution to knowledge in the field of study. Over the last decade, more research has been conducted on the potential of cultural and artistic initiatives as a tool for fostering reconciliation. This research takes a different approach to those by going a step further and analyzing a specific initiative and a specific case and through personal narratives finding clear proof of the real impact on people and communities. Analyzing actual executed alternative initiatives to supplement theoretical knowledge is critical for continuing to generate more and better knowledge. Furthermore, these types of analyses are required to identify improvements and further understanding in order to make a more effective impact when organizing initiatives for reconciliation. Therefore, the main contribution of these research projects is not based on fresh theoretical understanding, but rather on collecting existing diverse knowledge on the issue and demonstrating it through the examination of a specific case.

It is important for the continuing development of such alternative initiatives to not stagnate on the theory but to study real cases and make a critical analysis of them to continue improving the knowledge and success of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Thus, it is necessary to continue further research on different cases of countries in which Playback Theatre has been introduced in post-armed conflict contexts, and further research on different initiatives such as dance-therapy. Moreover, additional topics on the line of gender and how it affects the initiatives, and how to help develop a better and more stable collection of funding for the projects as well as prepare post-performance/post-initiative support mechanisms would bring great advantages to the better development of initiatives to foster reconciliation. Moreover, in-field research to measure the impacts of the *Chautari Natak* would be ideal, however, this research project has benefited enormously from already existing literature.

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