

Abstract

The Arts with the Disabled Association (ADA) Hong Kong is a major organizer of Playback Theatre in Hong Kong since 1997. This paper shares about the various Playback related programmes organized by the Association. 2008 was a year of rapid development of Playback Theatre in Hong Kong – the set up of the School of Playback Theatre (Hong Kong), regular community building Playback activities “Playback Tuesday” at the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre where ADA just opened the first Inclusive Arts Studio in Hong Kong, a pilot and pioneering project to introduce theatrical interpretation and audio description in Playback performances for audience with different needs, Playback Theatre education for people with disabilities, etc. By looking at these various activities, the paper will share the opportunities and challenges met when working on community cultural development through Playback Theatre in Hong Kong.

Playback Theatre in Hong Kong

Playback theatre was introduced to Hong Kong by Veronica Needa in 1996 after she completed her Leadership training in Playback Theatre in the School of Playback Theatre in New York.

In 1996, Veronica offered some short playback theatre workshops for some local community groups over a weekend. And in 1997, with funding support from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC), 16 individuals received three months of training by Veronica Needa in Playback Theatre, resulting in the first public playback theatre performances in Hong Kong at the McAuly Studio of the Hong Kong Arts Centre in July 1997.

Many of the 16 seedling participants, including myself, continued to be involved in playback theatre both in Hong Kong and abroad, using Playback Theatre in a wide range of settings, with different communities such as youth, children, adults, elderly, women, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, etc.

No formal research has been conducted about the number of Playback Theatre companies or groups which practice Playback Theatre in Hong Kong. However, the week-long event known as the “International Playback Gathering” organized by the ADA in 2003 is still a single Playback Theatre programme in Hong Kong which involved the most number of Playback Theatre companies. It was participated by 16 companies. The actual number of Playback groups in Hong Kong must greatly exceed this number. Each of these group organizes various Playback Theatre related programmes, with the most common ones such

as training (whether internal for the group members or open for others), and performances (for public or for closed groups), connecting people and building communities in different ways.

This paper looks at the Playback Theatre related programmes organized by ADA, how these programmes enhance community cultural development, as well as the opportunities and challenges encountered.

### Playback Theatre and ADA

Established in 1986, ADA is the only organization promoting arts with persons with disability in a holistic and inclusive manner, from broad-based to professional development, as well as using the arts as a platform for community cultural development particularly in the promotion of social inclusion, across all art forms.

Since 1997, ADA has been promoting playback theatre. ADA believes that everyone, with or without disability, should have equal opportunity to appreciate, learn and partake in the arts. ADA also believes that arts can be a medium to serve society. Through the participation of people from different communities, ADA uses playback theatre as a platform to encourage communication and understanding of different people and create an inclusive society through the arts.

ADA shares a similar vision with playback theatre. Playback theatre acknowledges that everyone can have a right to share his/her feeling and stories. It believes that everyone can become a citizen actor and serve the community through playback theatre.

The vision of ADA is “Arts are for Everyone”, very similar to Playback Theatre. Since 1997, ADA has been one of the major organizers of Playback Theatre activities in Hong Kong and introduced Playback Theatre to many different communities that include persons with or without disabilities through workshops facilitated by overseas and local playback practitioners, seminars and sharing sessions, performances and publications. As a matter of fact, Playback Theatre is identified as one of ADA’s core programme areas for strategic development in 2008.

In the summer of 2008, ADA set up of the School of Playback Theatre (Hong Kong). Complemented by the opening of the first ever inclusive arts studio in a mainstream arts setting, the ADA Inclusive Arts Studio at the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (JCCAC) in November 2008, many exciting opportunities and possibilities in Hong Kong’s Playback Theatre development are bubbling.

### School of Playback Theatre (Hong Kong)

ADA has a long history of organizing Playback Theatre training programmes in Hong Kong. Many international Playback teachers were invited by ADA to give workshops which led to a blossom of playbackers across different sectors in Hong Kong.

The setting up of the School of Playback Theatre (Hong Kong) in association with the Centre for Playback Theatre in New York, the United States, provides community cultural practitioners and educators not just Playback Theatre training programmes in line with the training path of the Centre. The structure of the School also induces higher awareness of the all-rounded competencies such as performance, conducting, music, ritual, social awareness, core values and theory in Playback Theatre which I find are often oversights in the individual piecemeal workshops as the participants would tend to put more focus on a particular training area.

### Playback Tuesday

“Playback Tuesday” was kicked off in November 2008 with a performance by an inclusive team formed by the Hong Kong graduates, ADA staff and members of the Sunshine Playback Theatre Company (a Playback company formed by persons with intellectual disability) on the theme ‘*The Road to Freedom - "Building an Inclusive Society"*’. On alternate Tuesday evenings, crowds of people gather at the ADA Inclusive Arts Studio and/or the L-2 Terrace of the JCCAC for the monthly Playback Theatre performance by various Playback groups in Hong Kong, or open workshops / sharing sessions led by the other four Playback Theatre graduates in Hong Kong, namely Kelvin Chan, Michele Chung, Mercy Liu and Eddie Yu.

In the past months, many stories have been shared during the public performances under different themes among audience members who maybe new to Playback Theatre, or have loved Playback for some time. They could be coming in support of their friends and family in the performing teams, or just passers-by wandering their way in the arts centre. Many of them have become regulars.

The open workshops are just as exciting. Topics range from improv skills to drilling of a particular Playback form, from exploration of listening, Playback Theatre and inclusion, to how theatre and dialogue connect people as an “Act of Service”.

Thanks to the staunch support of all the Playbackers and teams who have contributed to make Playback Tuesday such a powerful platform in connecting people. Participants and

performers are from across all ages, (dis)ability and professions. I look forward to many more interesting activities and stories to come, or even visits by other fellow Playbackers from different regions and countries.

### Playback Theatre for ALL

ADA believes that persons with disabilities should have equal opportunities to have access to, participate in and enjoy the arts because:

- We are born different, and we respect our differences.
- It is a basic human right to participate in the arts and cultural activities.
- The arts know no boundaries. Everyone can be an artist.
- The arts are for everyone. They help us develop whatever our abilities.

As ADA is one of the beacons in Playback Theatre in Hong Kong, it is no surprise that Playback Theatre is widely used in the social work setting, especially in the rehabilitation sector. Persons with disabilities are not only the audience in ADA's Playback Theatre programmes but also have long enjoyed the joy of receiving training and doing Playback Theatre in Hong Kong.

It was until recently, in 2008, that with the support of the Providence Foundation Limited, Sunshine Playback Theatre Company is formed after a 30-hr workshop in June 2008. Members of Sunshine mainly consist of persons with intellectual disability. They sometimes form inclusive performing teams with different playbackers and tour their performances to different groups and communities, serving people with and without disabilities. Sunshine members maintains regular rehearsals every two weeks and the team has become an ambassador to create an inclusive society through their performances, encouraging people sharing their own real stories and let every voice be listened to.

### Arts and Accessibility

ADA deliberately introduces different means to make art accessible to everyone. After some recent training programmes in audio description and theatrical interpretation, these two pilot assistive methods have already been used to expand our Playback Tuesday to a more diverse audience.

Audio description is a means of providing access of the visual images for people who are blind or have impaired vision. Through the narration of a trained "describer", visual images are translated into words, enabling people with visual impairment to enjoy the performance using a different sense.

Theatrical interpretation is developed for audiences with hearing impairment. It is not merely translating a script into sign language but strives to retain the flavour of the original work, incorporating the director's vision and the performers' characterisations into an equivalent artistic offering. We have so far only tried having the interpreters standing in specific spots (usually besides the teller's and conductor's chairs). To theatrically interpret an improv and spontaneous performance with an artistic touch is proved to be a difficult task. Unlike scripted plays where the interpreters can prepare the interpretation in advance, and work with the artistic team to find the best possible presentation for the play, theatrical interpretation for a Playback performance can easily be congested with signs like traditional sign interpretation on stage, with little room and time for its artistry to brew.

In the Playback Tuesday performance given by "The Citizen Actors" in May, the Playback team was joined by four theatrical interpreters. The performance also provided live audio description given by a describer using audio equipment similar to one may use for simultaneous interpretation. The playbackers rehearsed with the theatrical interpreters and audio describer and adapted some of the rituals (especially with the theatrical interpreters), trying to interweave the "common" Playback Theatre with these accessibility methodologies to reach for quality aesthetics for audience members who have different ways of perception inclusively at the same time.

### Playback Theatre at Integrated Schools

Using Playback Theatre as a tool for bridging differences and community cultural development is also a direction for ADA. One project that is coming in the near future is to introduce Playback Theatre to four integrated schools in the next school year together with the other graduates in Hong Kong to enhance mutual understanding and address the bullying problem in the schools among the ordinary students and those with special education needs.

### Looking Ahead: Opportunities and Challenges

The many exciting Playback Theatre development in Hong Kong has opened up a lot of opportunities to for community cultural development. Within our framework of **rituals**, Playback Theatre has a highly versatile format that allows every citizen in the community to partake in, using each person's skills. Playback Theatre is such a "universally designed"<sup>1</sup> theatrical form that all can participate.

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1 Universal Design is the design of products and environments to be useable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Seven general principles are adapted for Universal Design. They are: (a) Equitable use, (b) Flexibility in use, (c) Simple and intuitive, (d) Perceptible information, (e) Tolerance for error, (f) Low physical effort, (g) Size and space for approach and use.

As Playback Theatre is being brought to a closer level to people with different categories of disabilities, more people including persons with disabilities with different and diverse skills would become playbackers themselves and make use of their different skills and sometimes sharpened senses, resulting in enriched **artistry** in a Playback performance. For example, people with hearing impairment usually have superb body language, to come out with unique and interesting presentation styles to enrich our repertoire in the Playback world.

In one of my recent Playback Theatre performances incorporating audio description and theatrical interpretation with my Playback team, the Citizen Actors, four theatrical interpreters supported the four actors on stage. During the enactment, the interpreters performed on a platform behind the actors, at the same sight line to the audience, resulting in a shadow effect. The interpreters were invited to take part in the rehearsal process. Not only did we work out a set of Playback vocabulary in Hong Kong signs, but we also adapted the rituals about how each Playback form would be interpreted with the most appropriate overall artistic effect, so that the interpreters were incorporated as part of the Playback team. This has opened up a new dimension of aesthetics in a Playback performance for the entire audience, whether they are the direct users of such accessibility service or not. “Four Elements” is an obvious example. The fourth element of “text”, is interpreted at the same time as if it is a piece of visual poetry, with the interpreter side by side of the actor.

Persons with disabilities, though the biggest minority group in all societies, are often the most invisible community in our societies, not to mention among playbackers themselves. It is estimated by UNESCO that persons with disabilities comprise of about 10% of any population. Every person, in one’s life time, would experience some kind of temporary or permanent disability. As Playback Theatre is being promoted to and practiced by a more diverse community, there is increasing chances that a playbacker would need to enact stories from tellers who are persons with disabilities, or even perform together with other fellow playbackers who are persons with disabilities. Unavoidably, the **social awareness**, in particular on disability and ability awareness, among playbackers has to be sharpened.

As a playbacker who often works with persons with different abilities and/or disabilities, the process not only induces higher awareness of me about others, it also enhances my **personal growth** by being more aware of my own abilities and disabilities. These are only the small steps in the beginning. The change could be small and there is still a long way to go to make Playback Theatre accessible for everyone. However, I believe that no matter how long the process goes, **social change** is possible.

Introducing adaptive methods or assistive means such as audio description and theatrical interpretation is only a start in this direction. Arts accessibility services are still in the infancy stage in Hong Kong, not only in the arts and cultural sector, but also in society as a whole. So far, there is no formal systematic training of such accessibility service providers such as theatrical interpretation and audio description in Hong Kong, except for occasional workshops offered by ADA and audio description being offered as one elective module in a university's translation programme. It also takes a lot of education and promotion to make persons with disabilities aware of such services, while at the same time appeal to the arts and cultural practitioners to include such services in their programmes. All these aspects are inter-related and call for much resources. Many people, including artists, arts and culture policy makers, and even sometimes persons with disabilities themselves and their support persons, are not aware that being able to have access to the arts is basic human and cultural right for anyone, whether he/she is a person with or without disability. Most people regard these accessibility services as something "additional" and "optional", rather than necessity.

And as persons with disabilities, like any persons without disabilities, have growing interests and experience in Playback Theatre, it is only natural that persons with disabilities would aspire to become Playback practitioners and leaders. As all Playback practitioners know, to become a Playback practitioner or leader, one has to go through extensive training and practice. Would the existing training method and system be inclusive enough to cater the different learning needs of persons with disabilities? In the existing Playback world, there are Playback practitioners and leaders across different countries, race and cultures. We may be unaware but they all seem to have a certain standard of qualities to become a leader where persons with disabilities may or may never process such "qualities" because of their conditions. Are we looking for the same qualities and skills among Playback leaders who are persons with disabilities? If everyone can be a citizen actor and serve one another through Playback Theatre, does everyone has the potential to become a Playback leader even he/she has different ways of communication, perception, cognitive skills or intellectual ability? When ADA first introduced Playback Theatre to persons with disabilities, little could I imagine how far this can go. Now, there are persons with intellectual disability being citizens in the community who actively serve others, they are very often more effective conductors among other persons with intellectual disabilities. Some of them even completed the Playback Practice programmes at the School of Playback Theatre.

The biggest challenge I deduce to myself, amidst all these opportunities and changes, is "**are we ready yet**"? Are we ready to provide what kind of training and supportive services so that persons with different abilities can learn and have access to Playback Theatre? As Playback leaders and practitioners, are we ready to open up ourselves to embrace more diversity in

our Playback work and work with others who may learn and communicate differently? Can we think in universal design concepts to be as inclusive as possible and aware of different support needs we may have? Are we all comfortable with our own abilities and disabilities among ourselves?

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