Participatory family theatre: A historical review of Theatre Workshop Boston’s creative, transformational, healing theatre for young audiences and families

ABSTRACT
Participatory, environmental plays evolved in the 1960s amidst social unrest through several experimental theatres. Original plays were created, using theatre space in new ways, awakening audiences to a new consciousness. This article offers a historical review of Theater Workshop Boston’s evolution within that movement. Their first experiments were adult environmental plays. Next, they developed participatory environmental plays for young audiences, and then for families to explore family issues/dynamics together creatively.

KEYWORDS
family youth participatory theatre experimental transpersonal drama therapy environmental

Las obras ambientales participativas evolucionaron en la década de 1960, en medio de la agitación social, a través de varios teatros experimentales. Se crearon obras de teatro, utilizando el espacio teatral de formas nuevas, despertando al público hacia una nueva conciencia. La compañía de teatro del autor era parte de ese género. Este artículo demuestra la evolución del Taller de Teatro de Boston dentro del movimiento. Sus primeros experimentos fueron obras ambientales para adultos. Luego, desarrollaron obras ambientales participativas para audiencias jóvenes, luego para familias y así, poder explorar temas / dinámicas familiares todos juntos de manera creativa.

In a panel at a recent North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA) conference, several pioneers who have led drama therapy training programs (David Read Johnson, Armand Volkas, Susanna Penzik, Stephen Snow, Rene Emunah and the author) were invited to participate. Most of the panel members had been active participants as actors, directors and/or playwrights in the avant-garde theatre of the 1960s. The dialogue among participants on that panel fleshed out their stories of how they were influenced by the improvisational and experimental approaches they had learned in the creation of original plays reflecting the social issues of their time and their work with ensembles of actors. Each of them went on to create drama therapy approaches that were informed by their earlier theatre work. As noted by Johnson, drama therapy’s formation as a distinct field emerged when drama therapy pioneers ‘leapt into the breech’ opened by the divergence between psychodrama’s theatrical roots and its actual practice by non-theatrically trained mental health professionals (2006: 5–6).

The 1960s was a time of great upheaval in the United States: politically, socially, educationally and culturally. The feeling then, particularly among people under 30, was that the old systems were not working and that new systems had to be created. It was a time of experimentation in all areas of society. There was an excitement, creative energy and vitality. Many of us living through that era believed that we could collectively make real change.
In retrospect, it seemed natural to us younger adults to challenge existing social norms and institutions; yet it went unnoticed that the fabric of families, communities and society, still strong at that time, was also a resource for, not only an obstacle to, change.

This article primarily focuses on the evolution of experimental participatory theatre for young people and families as developed by the author and others at Theatre Workshop Boston, Inc. (TWB) and Omega Theater. It postulates that the evolution of this form of theatre influenced a conscious therapeutic use of these theatrical forms in the development of drama therapy. The author suggests that impactful encounters of children and families with larger social/political/spiritual life issues are/were enhanced by participatory theatre in a manner consistent with the goals of therapy with these populations. The author is not claiming that active participation in theatre is ‘therapeutic’ in the narrower clinical sense; instead, the act of theatrical participation with others in the family brings/brought about beneficial changes in family awareness and functioning. This distinction can be likened to that between psychodrama and sociodrama. Psychodrama is a therapeutic form for individuals and groups focused around personal issues; sociodrama is a broader therapeutic form that focuses around social issues and concerns, often that members of a group share, i.e., teachers in a school who are all dealing with a challenging principal. Participation theatre is thus more sociotherapeutic than psychotherapeutic.

BACKGROUND: EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE

During the 1960s, there were two other experimental theatre companies in New York – The Living Theatre and its offshoot, The Open Theatre. These theatres, and TWB, all received grants from The National Endowment for the Arts at the same time in a new category, ‘experimental theatres’. At the time the plays and experiments described below were developed at TWB. There was only a slight direct influence between the three theatre companies; later, following the experimental theatre grants, there was greater mutual awareness.

From its conception, in the 1940s, The Living Theatre was dedicated to transforming the organization of power within society from a competitive, hierarchical structure to cooperative and communal expression. The troupe attempts to do so by counteracting complacency in the audience through direct spectacle. [...] The troupe reflects Artaud’s influence by staging multimedia plays designed to exhibit his metaphysical Theatre of Cruelty. In these performances, the actors attempt to dissolve the ‘fourth wall’ between them and the spectators.

(Anon. 2017, original emphasis)

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF BRIAN WAY TO PARTICIPATORY THEATRE

The article traces the work of several playwrights and directors in developing this theatre form. Brian Way from England was one of the first people to experiment with participatory theatre for young people in schools. He wrote and adapted 50 plays, many from well-known fairytales. Way was inspired for the same reason as this author: young people do not have an idea of ‘what theatre should be’. Brian was interested in seeing where children were and developing and stretching their hearts. Theatre for them, he wrote, should
start to use the natural participatory inclination of the child in a valuable, rather than token way (Way 1981). After writing over fifty plays, Brian Way wrote *Audience Participation: Theatre for Young People*. In this book, he presented practical approaches to audience participation, one of the most rewarding and stimulating forms of theatre for young people, in open stage, arena, and proscenium theatres’ (Way 1981).

An anonymous actor, writing an obituary for Way, recalled his experience of working in Way’s theatre company:

[…] he created this whole range of participatory with the whole audience, getting them to make sounds, getting them to support characters, getting them to imagine – very much what was happening at the same time in a different way in educational drama – imaginative work to assist the actors and the atmosphere – you might blow a wind or hold hands to help a person get up a hill or something – which by then people were feeling was very old-fashioned, but actually when you saw it done in a school could be very moving.

(Anon. 2006)

This was also one of the main expressed beliefs in TWB’s work. The two theatre companies also agreed that this makes great demands on actors in order for them to accept it as genuine, requiring study as a different art form (Way 1967; Linden 1972).

TWB developed independently from the influence of Way’s work; only much later were parallels noted. The TWB company took at least a year to create each play and train the actors to work effectively with their audiences, both young audiences and family audiences. The London theatre primarily went into schools to work with their young audiences. They worked much faster with Way’s already written plays, totalling 50 in all, including his adaptations of well-known fairy tales. Way, like Linden, valued the form of family theatre:

We have been looking at ‘family theatre’, a form of utmost importance in the overall field, and a form which makes it incumbent on those of us involved in theatre itself to move from the narrower confines of specialization, whether or not we are actually able to solve the additional problems that inevitably arise.

(1998)

Some directors in the United States did not see the participatory approach as ‘the Brian Way’ method, and yet English audiences sometimes used this term to refer to participatory theatre in general. Way’s approach was revered by some of his colleagues and audiences, although scorned by others. Many of the American playwrights and directors were pioneers of this form, involving audiences of all ages, including families. For example, on multi-generational audience participation, Leslie Elias noted: ‘Seeing the adults leap into new roles, taking risks, willing to make fools of themselves in front of a large group, provides a role model for the students, allowing them to follow suit in the spirit of the play’ (Elias quoted in Hale 2001: 25). By contrast, TWB/Omega Theater found in their productions with families that the young people often inspired their parents to put aside the rules of traditional proscenium theatre and enter the play.
THEATRE WORKSHOP BOSTON

TWB was incorporated in 1967 as an experimental theatre. Julie Portman and the author, as Artistic Directors, wanted to create an experimental theatre to explore new ways to break down the barriers between actors and audiences within the structure of the original plays that they wanted to develop. The vision was to create plays that would awaken audiences to important socio-political issues about which the Artistic Directors were passionate. They wanted to give audiences an experience of their message, not by having their audiences sit passively, but by engaging them in other ways.

We worked with the interplay of different artistic disciplines, the richness coming from that interplay in creating theater to give a sense of total theater. During the period of time in which this evolved, the mid-sixties, the manner in which the different artistic disciplines reframed themselves was a very exciting part of what went on.

(Portman 2006: personal communication)

PARTICIPATORY THEATRE AND ENVIRONMENTAL THEATRE

Environmental theatre focuses on the goal of breaking down the barriers between actors and audience. This is done by using an entire space in different ways from the traditional stage and seating. It also goes beyond theatre in the round that still has a traditional central space with seats around it. Participatory theatre takes this goal one step further. The audience never sits down to watch. Rather they are initiated (in different ways depending on the play) into roles that they will be playing, guided by the actor leaders. Proscenium theatre is our traditional theatre form with a stage and an audience in seats watching them. This relationship of the audience with the actors is the most formal and distances one from the other. Way, who later wrote about working with ‘family theater’ (1981), chose to work with theatre in the round rather than on a proscenium stage so that the children could be more engaged. Theatre in the round creates more intimacy between actors and audience but is still a formal form. Full participatory theatre uses a totally open space into which environments are created in whatever the play calls for. The audience, young people and/or families are guided though a total experience where there are no barriers between actors and audience. For example, Tribe had three different Native American tribal environments; Toward the One had an open space designed as a board game through which families travelled, doing different arts activities together along the way. In The Finding Place families became part of one of the four Medicine Wheel directions and later were guided to dance around an illuminated earth.

THE NINE PLAYS

Nine original plays and theatre events, presented in chronological order of production, are described in this article. While these descriptions are primarily subjectively tinged recollections of the author, other information and evidence is supplied where available. Supplemental information on five of these plays has previously been published (Linden 2009: 206–08). As TWB progressed in its creation of more environmental participatory plays, there were many lessons learned with the creation and performance of each play. Both the use
of the theatre environment and the integration of the participatory form developed in different ways, culminating in full participation of the whole family in these theatre experiences.

The first of the nine is an adult play that laid the groundwork for TWB’s experimental approach. The other original plays were all for young people and their families. Our approach to how we could best work with families evolved over time, from adults taking passive roles in participatory theatre created for young people to all members of a family fully participating throughout the theatre experience. Some descriptions will also be given of what was learned from these productions.

I: The first original play was *Riot* (Portman and Rollins 1967–69), an Obie award-winning experimental, environmental play in which the audience was surrounded by an experience of a race riot conveyed through sound, movement and light. *Riot* was a precursor to the development of other original environmental and participatory plays for young people and families.

II: The next theatrical experiments resulted in the creation of *Tribe* (Linden [1969–70] 1989, Flint production 1989), developed by the author in collaboration with an ensemble of adolescent players. The goal was to create a total experience, in this case, in which participants could learn about Indigenous people. In 1967, the Passamaquoddy tribe in Maine was involved in a large law suit process with the US government to get their land back. We met the lawyer for the case and subsequently leaders of the tribe. We asked them whether they would like for us to create a play about their cultures and the injustice of our government. They were very supportive and gave us a lot of information about different Native tribes and the variety of cultures within the larger culture of North American Indigenous people. They were quick to tell us that all of the tribes shared the issue of unjustly being moved off their land and put us in touch with other members of Native American tribes. We chose three tribes to represent, to show the contrast between their cultures, rituals, living environments at that time. We all shared a desire to break down the stereotypes of what young people had been seeing on TV about Indigenous people. They not only welcomed us to create a play on their behalf but were happy to serve as informal consultants through our process.

The young audiences never sat down. As soon as they entered the theatre, they were ‘initiated’ into one of the three ‘tribes’. The adults, mostly parents and teachers, were then seated as ‘Elders’ of each of the tribes in the three different environments. *Tribe* took young audiences through an experience intended to evoke the beauty and richness of the rituals and culture of one of three indigenous people’s tribes as they witnessed the activities of the other tribes. Audience members experienced what it felt like to be forced to leave their homeland by an ominous, mysterious government force, represented by a booming authoritarian voice that filled the space through a loud speaker system.

Towards the end of the production, the young tribal audience was forced onto the ‘trail of tears’ in a darkened environment where the play was staged. Experiencing starvation and illness, our young tribal members with their actor tribal leaders were pushed together onto a small, barren grey circular platform ‘reservation’ by the mysterious government voice. Their direct experience, and vicariously that of the adult audience, thus reflected the real experience of a minority culture being violated by an oppressive force that they could not see, did not understand and felt they had no control over. In psychodramatic terms, participating youth and parents reversed roles with the actors.
playing tribal members, entering representations of the worlds and points of view of Indigenous cultures and environments. They experienced, rather than passively witnessed, what happened to these tribes.

The talented adolescents in TWB's theatre company, many of whom were disenchanted with school, developed into an attuned, disciplined ensemble as they worked to create and perform this play. Ensemble performances are a form of social therapy, as is generally accepted within drama therapy. They bonded like a family, creating together and supporting each other. When the parents of the teen actors experienced the play after the whole gestation and rehearsal period, they understood their actor-adolescents better and could support their creative endeavours in new ways.

Boston critics would not attend the play because they did not come to 'children's theater'. Eventually, after audience members wrote to them, Kevin Kelley of the Boston Globe and other critics ended up coming and then writing glorious reviews:

Tribe uses clever techniques from the avant-garde to reach its audience and it reaches them. [...] Miss Linden and her company have created a viable dramatic experience, and all I can urge you to do is to take your children to see it.

(Kelly 1969)

This publicity was very encouraging because it meant that plays of quality and of real educational value on many levels for young people and families could be honoured professionally, just like traditional adult theatre was. This public recognition also seemed to have paved the way for many other playwrights and directors to work with full participatory theatre. Since the company wanted to only have an audience of 60 young people there was little revenue, a financial challenge to the viability to TWB. Later, Tribe was produced elsewhere (Flint, Michigan) and the director found a way to produce the play effectively for three thousand students in the Flint school system, and demonstrating how to make Tribe financially viable.

Following its successful long run in Boston, Tribe also received favourable recognition within the theatre community. Pat Hale, a publisher, took the play to print and distributed it through her network and catalogue, citing TWB as (possibly) being the first theatre to create a total participatory play for young people that had substance and real educational value. In her later book, Participatory Theatre for Young Audiences: A Handbook for Directors (1968), Hale included a chapter by Tribe's playwright (Hale and Linden 1968) that detailed many pragmatics of producing participatory plays.

III: Creation (Linden and Rosenberg 1970–71) explored the ways in which we were polluting the environment and our ways of life. Three environments were theatrically represented. In the first, 'the country', children were brought into an experience of enjoying nature in its pristine form, through a tapestry of movement and sound. Then the children watched as the pollution took over, causing the natural world to decay and the animals to die. The second environment was 'the city', where the adults, mostly parents, were seated and where they witnessed the acting ensemble's vignettes of polluted values and ideals. The third environment (located between the other two) was 'a factory', where 'an ominous bureaucrat' was represented by a deep, powerful voice. Each time he spoke, pollution from the factory spewed into the river between the city and the country, in the form of a giant plastic sculpture with tentacles
that forced the audience adults in the city to move their chairs back from this impending danger.

As the play progressed, the audience was involved in an experience of breakdown of our environment and our values. In the end, the participating children were guided to move across the whole performing space to confront ‘the bureaucrat’ and to express their feelings about the dangers of pollution. In this final interchange, the children held the power, confronting their parents forcefully, asking them to heed the dangers of pollution. Finally, the children gave the adults brochures and flyers with information from environmental organizations. *Creation* and its director were featured in a film that was part of a PBS television series, *Artists in America*, which aired nationally the following year. Later that year, Earth Day was created nationally to raise consciousness about environmental issues, as was *Creation*’s intention. This play did allow for a larger audience, but did not really achieve the total participation of families together. In the next three theatre experiences, the company experimented with how to involve families together more creatively.

*IV: Praise: Three Rings from Jerusalem* (Linden and Ensemble 1972). This play was the product of an NY State Council Dance Festival grant through its Office of Cultural Affairs. It was performed outdoors in several New York City venues, including banks; office buildings; on the Staten Island Ferry; and other places. This street performance featured both a script and improvised scenes involving people who were wandering by. Many of these groups were families, encouraged, in the moment, to ‘play’ with the actors as they performed tableaus, through drama, music and movement, from the three monotheistic religions. Audience members were invited to participate; when they did so, often as whole families, the actors created a vision of peace with their help. These family performances drew in still more audience members who stopped on the street to watch, thereby enlarging the spectator audience’s size. People from many different backgrounds connected with the joy of possible peace by dancing together to a crescendo of flute and drums. While large numbers of people had become involved in the play, it was challenging for the actors to work spontaneously with an audience that was continually changing. From the limitations of this experience, the company focused next on developing a creative, inspiring and fun play where families would play together throughout the theatrical structure.

*V: Toward the One: Journey to the City of Peace* (Linden and Ensemble 1973). These next productions were explorations of how to create environmental theatre experiences for families. The intention of these plays was to awaken in each family an awareness of how they could creatively work together to make the world a better place, in the process transforming their family dynamics. The first version took place in a blackbox theatre with no fixed seats, where families experienced together stages of a journey towards Jerusalem by physically moving from enactments of the Middle East conflict (a metaphor for conflicts between family members) to the ‘City of Peace’. Although the stage was open space, it felt constricted. As a result, audience participation did not flow well throughout the experience. The company decided to work with that idea in a different form.

*VI: Toward the One* (Linden et al. 1973). In this multi-arts theatre experience, designed exclusively for families, a large room was set up as a giant board game in which families played creatively together. Each family was directed to create a life-size token in a human sculptural form, which the family embodied together. Families, each situated in a different place on the game board,
Figure 1: The Family Board Game Setting in Toward The One.

Figure 2: In Toward The One, a family of four is guided to create a life-size ‘token’ together to move around the theatrical board game of multi-arts experiences.
moved between different art experiences (music, clay, drawing, movement). A family therapist (Barry Dym) functioned as the Game Master in the centre of the space, controlling when people should move to the next creative experience. After going through these creative play sessions, everyone was brought together for a joyous music/movement finale. Many of the families expressed their delight, exclaiming that they had never experienced anything like this as a family. Many believed that it helped the whole family open up to each other in new ways, as they laughed together, enjoying the whole process.

**VI: Sunsong** (Linden and Sonneborn 1975–76). In 1974, TWB created a teaching company and began working with special needs students in the Boston schools. The directors of the theatre’s school programs told the special needs teachers, ‘Give us the students who can’t learn for any reason’. Some of the criteria for student selection included those deemed mentally or emotionally challenged, learning disabled, language disabled, socially and economically deprived, lacking apparent motivation or ‘acting out’ from boredom. The teaching company facilitated theatre games and a variety of creative learning experiences with these students to build their self-esteem and motivation for learning. The directors did this while teaching curriculum requirements through games and exercises that they designed. Omega Theater’s teaching company was successful in motivating these challenged learners, through creative, fun, embodied experiences.

Inspired by the need for an effective healing, educational play for the special needs students and their families, TWB created a participatory therapeutic musical play called *Sunsong*. The play’s construction was directly informed by Family Systems theory, with definitions and descriptions of technical terms inserted into the script by noted family therapists David Kantor and Barry Dym (Linden and Sonneborn 1975–76). One foundational concept in Family Systems theory is that the symptoms observed in a child are to be viewed as evidence of family dysfunction. This leads family therapists to treat the whole family system to improve the situation. *Sunsong* was a musical play about a family problem, that of a People-Puppets family whose communication breaks down. During this time, the theatre company was also experimenting with how therapeutic meditation practices could be translated into theatre forms. They combined a Sufi purification healing breath practice (Khan 1979) based on the elements in nature with Family Systems theory as the foundation of the play.

Child participants were first guided to draw each of their family members in the lobby space, before coming into the theatre. This was an adapted social atom exercise from sociometry, a discipline within psychodrama (Dayton 2005: 83–98). From what the children drew, the actors assigned each child to one of the four element breath environments (earth, water, fire, air). Some parents participated with their children from the beginning, while others began by observing. The actors playing Element Guides concentrated on the breathing practice and attunement internally, while working with the children externally in the four elemental environments. The actors playing people-puppets, as mother, father, sister, brother, performed on their knees with a full body costume attached in front of them so that they would be at the same height as the audience children.

Original music accompanied the physical warm-up through which the audience was guided. Later in the play, everyone was led through a musical circle dance, singing, ending with: ‘Feel that love; follow that love, into the center of your heart’.
The groups of children in the four environments created healing gifts in the form of songs, dances, stories and rituals to help the puppet children transform the dynamics in their family.

As a result of the healing, the puppet children felt empowered and changed their behaviour. When they re-entered the interaction with the puppet parents, the puppet parents transformed, causing the dysfunctional dynamic to change. The message to these troubled students and later to all the young audience participants was, ‘If you change your behavior, you have the power to help other family members change their behavior. You can begin to help heal the dysfunctional dynamics in your families’. In essence, this play was a profound translation of a spiritual approach to Family Systems therapy conducted in an hour-long participatory musical for children and their parents and teachers.

Although no audience feedback was solicited at the time, the impact of this play was memorable. Reviewers did give feedback:

[...] The children were loosening up and a beautiful spontaneous expression was beginning to develop out of the structure of the play. As a parent, I grew very warm watching my children interact with the others. They were opening up, growing and learning in a very natural way. *Sunsong* was much more than a short Saturday afternoon entertainment. Everyone there had been transformed. I had witnessed a very vivid enactment of therapy that had shaken rigid parts of myself. All the parents in the audience seemed recreated in some way.

(Eivers 1975)

The author also recalls meeting a child who participated in the play when she was four years old, now in her twenties, who still remembered the play vividly and who indicated that it continued to inform how she relates to her family in the present.

The then Director of WGBH (Public Educational Television), Michael Rice, came to a performance (Rice 1976, personal communication). He told the author that he was so inspired by the power of the play and its therapeutic value to families that he would like to get funding to create an interactive television series based on the creative therapeutic process of *Sunsong*. He envisioned that the television audience would call in with family challenges and a team of family therapists would consult and direct the theatre company to act out the stated problem, reflecting new possibilities for transformation of family dynamics. Although the television series never came to fruition,

All of that led me to realize that as theater artists, we can create theater for healing, for transformation and for education on deep levels, and that is what led me, and many of my colleagues, into drama therapy.

(Linden 2000)

**VIII: Coming Home: Jamaica Plain Community Arts Celebration** (Linden and Ensemble 1987). This multicultural, multidisciplinary work was designed as a participatory environmental theatre celebration for the opening of the Jamaica Plain (MA) Multicultural Arts Center. The families of this town had recently experienced much tension among the diversity of races, religions and cultures in their community. The goal was to involve different Ethnic arts groups who
would collectively experience the collective ancestry of their community and create a vision of harmony.

The script for *Coming Home* began with the ensemble of actor-guides greeting each audience member with a program in one of six colours that they placed around the audience members’ necks, thereby designating which group/train each family member would join during the performance. When the lights came up, a Native American invocation was followed by several vignettes illustrating Jamaica Plain’s historical, cultural and spiritual roots. This led to the formation of the ‘Creation Trains’ (six groups of families) that proceeded on a tour through the collective ancestry of the community via six different cultural art experiences in six rooms in the Art Center. Each train of family participants experienced each activity for ten minutes; the trains were all carefully scheduled to ‘Come Home’ at the same time.

The activities included Afro-American dancing; singing with a Scandinavian vocal band; painting with a Hispanic visual artist; acting and moving in a Chinese Peking Opera experience; writing poetry with an African American poet; and Irish step dancing. The production featured 50 culturally diverse artists who represented the highest standards of professional excellence in their art forms within the community.

In the finale, all performers and audience members together experienced an envisioning exercise of the ideal community art centre, writing and drawing gifts offered in a candle-lighting ritual with beautiful drums and flute in the background. This was followed by an original song and dance created for the occasion, ‘Coming Home’. The celebration concluded when a very large cake was wheeled in as the different artists led versions of ‘Happy Birthday’ sung in different languages.

There was only one performance; it took an enormous effort to create and to involve the different cultural arts groups. Families did fully participate together and enjoyed being part of their extended neighbourhood family. Although tension abated between the different cultural background groups during the experience, the company wondered how that positive energy could be maintained.

**IX: The Finding Place** (Linden et al. 1992) is an original participatory play designed for families to experience together. The play was performed as part of ‘Sejecho, Voice of the Earth’, a multi-arts weekend festival organized to challenge the dominant American cultural narrative during that larger culture’s celebration of the 500th anniversary of ‘Columbus discovering America’. The company’s choice of celebrating the indigenous people who preceded Columbus was combined with drawing attention to Mother Earth’s ongoing plight.

The play was performed in an open space in which several environments were created, including the four directions of the Medicine Wheel, a metaphor for a variety of spiritual concepts. The story also honoured Mother Earth in the form of Gaia, a Medicine woman.

The actor guides played totem animals. Each family participated in rituals, dance/movement and singing, culminating in the appearance of an Illuminated Earth around which the families chanted and danced.

After the play, actors asked the families what they had learned about themselves. Families engaged fully in the discussion and it was clear that they would take home some meaningful therapeutic insights and possibilities for transformation. The main challenge in this production was that the company was given little notice and had only two weeks to write a script, rehearse,
make costumes, masks and props and create the settings. Although it worked very well artistically, the production’s success came at the cost of much internal tension and pressure.

For 25 years, The TWB/Omega Theater Company kept experimenting with new ways of working with families. Many of its actors, directors and musicians became students and then trainers within the emerging field of drama therapy. A transpersonal approach with a meditative foundation naturally evolved in TWB/Omega Theater's experiments with new forms. Working more intentionally with healing families in private therapy sessions, modalities of participatory theatre have become an integral part of the Omega Transpersonal therapy process (Linden 2009).

WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN PARTICIPATORY THEATRE SINCE THE 1960S?

Pat Hale, who edited many books and plays throughout her career, was a strong advocate for the power of participatory theatre for young people. In her book *Participatory Theater for Young Audiences* (1972), she noted the enthusiasm for this form’s educational and therapeutic value. Yet, in the book's second edition (2001), she also chronicled the recent lull in the art form, speculated about what had caused it and debated its possible resurgence, raising the question, ‘Whatever happened to participatory theatre?’ Carol Korty, one of the pioneers of this form, wrote:

> Participatory theater captured the imagination of many theater artists in this country during the 1960s […] During the 1980s a preference for presentational works seemed dominant, but the last five to ten years have seen a resurgence of interest and practice in participatory theater. Beginning playwrights, directors, and theater educators began asking questions and seeking information about available scripts and guidelines for creating new works.

(2001)

Thus, at the inception of the twenty-first century, participatory theatre seemed to be still growing after a lull (Korty 2001). However, that was sixteen years ago. What about now?

PARTICIPATORY THEATRE: PRESENT AND FUTURE

It seems clear from the author’s research that what used to be is no more. Although the term ‘participatory theatre’ continues to be used, much of this seems to be limited to eliciting responses from the audience. In their seats, young people, sometimes urged on by their parents sitting next to them, are invited to clap or make animal sounds or come onto a stage to participate in a brief interaction of some kind. This is different from full embodied creative participatory that affects the performance of the actors. As far as this author knows, there is little left of what has been called ‘environmental theatre’.

In most Dramatic Publishing Catalogues, from the last several years there is a section on theatre for families and young audiences. In most cases the plays are listed for ‘all audiences’ and participatory plays are not separately referenced. *Tribe* is listed in that Dramatic Publishing Catalogue as an authentic play about Native Americans, without a reference to its participatory form.
Also, a catalogue from Anchorage Press Plays in 2001 has an insert listing eleven participatory plays, stating: ‘These plays are written with the intent of actively involving the audience in the play through participation – action, words, sounds solicited by the performers’ (Anon. 2001). In actuality, few, if any of these plays are fully participatory, most featuring only brief moments of participation.

The 2001 publication by Anchorage Press is the last catalogue of plays that the author was able to find listing specific participatory plays. A number of factors contribute towards the absence of these plays in today's catalogues. For instance, in the 1960s, when experimental theatre flourished, there was a cultural context wherein artists were idealists with little concern about revenue. They only wanted to give their audiences the best experiences possible. This often meant having fewer audience members. Also, it became increasingly more difficult to get funding for the arts in general and for this kind of experimentation and performance of original plays specifically.

This is not to overlook that participatory theatrical elements exist within probably the majority of Drama in Education programs (Jackson 2007), and in many current drama therapy applications. One example is ‘The Raspberry Rose Traveling Nutrition Show’ – theatrical productions that teach a Nutrition Education Program to young children through participatory songs, dances and mimes (Newman 2013).

In this time of screen saturation with television, computers and cell phones, face-to-face family interactions occupy an ever-smaller proportion of people's time. Thus, embodied creative experiences for families would seem to be even more valuable than in the past. Within the context of participatory plays, all art forms are used: storytelling, music, dance, drama, colour, costumes, props, mask-making and puppets. These, also used in therapy sessions, enhance the creative, healing experience. As noted earlier, because all members of the family are embodied, in action, and experiencing the play with all of their senses, participatory has a much stronger impact than sitting passively and observing. The author has been told time and time again how audience members vividly remember their participation in the play(s) that they had experienced, even many years later.

It is the vision of the author that there will be a future resurgence of participatory theatre for families in therapy, schoolchildren and the public. Community theatres, community centres, schools, elementary, middle schools, high schools, colleges and houses of worship are some of the venues in which people could benefit from high-quality, participatory family theatre. These creative, therapeutic and educational experiences could make an important difference to balance our ever-growing passive ‘screen’ culture.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Saphira Barbara Linden, MA, RDT/BCT, TEP, LCAT, artistic director, Omega Theater/TWB (50 years), director TDT Training program (18 years), Teaching Excellence Award, NADTA, ASGPP, PBS Series, Artists in America, adjunct faculty, psychotherapist, consultant, Sufi meditation teacher/guide, author of several chapters and articles, and editor of Heart and Soul of Psychotherapy: A Transpersonal Approach through Theater Arts (Trafford, 2013).

Contact: Omega Theater, 41 Greenough Ave., Jamaica Plain, MA 02130, USA.
E-mail: saphira@omegatheater.org

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