

VERBATIM THEATRE:

TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH?

by

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## ABSTRACT

I am a teacher, by profession. I teach Drama as a subject to students aged 11-18, and I'm also a freelance copywriter and I write scripts for performance myself (not professionally). All of these strands feed into this thesis and led me in the first case to propose the study and investigate verbatim theatre, and with it ideas (and ideals) of truth in performance.

The link for me specifically was my Masters thesis, where I was writing a film script that, while fictitious, had to involve research. During this time I came across relevant films that tagged themselves as 'based on real events'. In the Critical Studies essay that I wrote alongside my own creative work, I looked into what this phrase might mean. Once I had left behind the MA I did not leave behind the questions on truth in performance and performance writing. As my work at school became more about verbatim theatre, with it working well for devising modules that students have to do for key components, the questions moved from the MA and film into something else, and eventually this thesis.

The scholarly debates surrounding what authenticity and truth mean within verbatim theatre have been taking place throughout the form's existence. It has been particularly common as a concern since the 1990s as the form's claims of 'truth' and popularity grew.

The form has been especially prevalent in the twenty-first century, but if it is to have a long future without being undermined by claims of misleading the audience in terms of authenticity, truth and bias too, it must look to its past, learn from mistakes, and also beware that as it seeks to reinvent itself to remain fresh, relevant and indeed entertaining, it does not lose sight of its ethical responsibilities.

What follows is research into verbatim's emergence from documentary theatre and a clarification on the hybrids within the form. This also includes a consideration of the form's emergence and use within

schools as a popular approach for devising and engaging with young people. Case studies have been undertaken into key examples from these hybrids, examining the methodologies in collecting, editing and performing the material. The primary case studies are – David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark's *The Permanent Way* (2003), Mark Wheeler's *I Love You Mum and I Promise I Won't Die* (2017), Julia Samuels' and 20 Stories High's *Tales from the MP3* (2012), Cate Hollis and Mark Wheeler's *Kindness: A legacy of the Holocaust* (2021), Alecky Blythe and Dominic Cork's *London Road* (2011), Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris' *My Country* (2017). Sitting within the primary corpus, the body of verbatim work and methodologies of Anna Deavere Smith, Tricycle Theatre Company, Tectonic Theater Project, DV8, Nadia Fall, LUNG theatre company and Frantic Assembly are also analysed.

Testimony, including original interviews with Samuels, Wheeler, Hollis and LUNG's Helen Monks, and extracts from the unpublished personal diaries of Max Stafford-Clark is included, as is the subsequent critical reflection the pieces received; all of which is then analysed. In each case, the discussion returns to the central question for consideration: how much 'truth' and 'authenticity' is there in verbatim theatre?

This investigation examines and acknowledges the ethical issues and tensions that emerge as playwrights integrate and edit personal testimony into a creative project that ultimately must engage an audience and creatively represent its 'subjects'. The thesis also offers an understanding of how complex the notions of truth and authenticity are, discussing their etymology for example. This then leads to consideration of whether verbatim theatre can ever be truthful and authentic given the impossibilities in defining the words themselves.

The thesis will offer considerations for ethical verbatim practice, encouraging practitioners to critically reflect on the methods that they employ within all stages of the verbatim theatre process. An

appreciation of the form in spite of inherent weaknesses is given and all these deliberations, it is hoped, will benefit other theatre practitioners as well as scholars working within the wider field of theatre studies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Graham Saunders for his continued wisdom and guidance, without which – there would be no thesis.

I acknowledge the other theatre professionals who supported this thesis in kindly giving their time for interviews: Julia Samuels, Mark Wheeler, Cate Hollis and Helen Monks. I also am thankful for the time given by Fiona Spargo-Mabbs, especially as she was revisiting incredibly personal and painful memories within the emailed responses to my questions on the verbatim theatre piece written following the death of her son.

This thesis was also made possible by access to the extensive diaries of Max Stafford-Clark found in the archives of the British Library. The help by staff at the institution in navigating the often complex reference catalogues and getting these items from storage for me, and from those who transferred sound recordings held in the audio catalogues to CD, is also gratefully acknowledged; without their support the richness of the cases studies on Max Stafford-Clark's work would not be possible.

I feel here in this acknowledgement section of my thesis compelled to mention something more on Max Stafford-Clark, as it was during the researching and writing process that news broke, from firstly one, and then several women, who cited inappropriate sexual behaviour by Stafford-Clark, both recent and historic. I met with Max and saw his wit, his charm, his intellect and clear theatrical talent – even though he was stricken from his stroke. I also saw him interact with Gina Abolins, the Education Officer at Out of Joint who was the first to come out and formally speak about his inappropriate sexual behaviour and lodge complaints. Stafford-Clark's reputation had been known about for much of his career – whisperings and rumours – but nothing had been formally done; nothing, until the bravery and resilience of Gina and

those that followed, when some of the truth was affirmed. With their bravery, rightly, Stafford-Clark's career and reputation lies in tatters.

In using his work for my thesis, I am not celebrating him in any way. His contribution to theatre is undeniable, but whatever he has achieved in his professional careers does not, of course, excuse, explain or justify his overall behaviour.

I found the following <http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2017/10/21/max-stafford-clark> weblink during my research. Dan Rebellato had met Stafford-Clark and worked in the industry in circles close to him. Dan's words echo more eloquently and expansively than I have done here the thoughts and feelings which I have faced whilst going through the chapters researching and writing on Stafford-Clark and his work. My words in this acknowledgement are in support of Gina (who also helped briefly with this thesis early on), and for all those who followed her and spoke out, and for those that didn't ...

Finally, and on a very different note, I would like to dedicate this thesis in memory of Jasper – beloved cat who sat on my lap or close by for much of the writing.

## **Introduction**

Verbatim theatre is a form of documentary theatre that employs (largely or exclusively) testimony or researched material from the real lives of the people which give it its dramatic shape. In so doing, it is theatre that claims a degree of authority and truth (Paget, 1990a, p.1), akin to the content of news media outlets.

In starting this thesis, I set out to challenge verbatim theatre's claim that it is the most 'truthful' of theatre's forms; indeed, going further, I sought, to question whether it is in fact a form that dangerously misleads and deceives its audience with such 'truth assertions'. In so doing, I sought to open this more broadly and discuss whether truth can ever exist in performance writing, and whether it is important or otherwise for verbatim theatre to pass its own 'truth test'.

The questions I have pursued in this thesis specifically first began to form during the undertaking of my MA in Writing for Performance (for film) in 2010 at the University of Glamorgan. In my MA Critical Studies essay, I explored notions of 'truth' in films that are marketed as having narratives 'based on real events'. Specifically, I explored films that have looked at the Northern Ireland conflict. At the time, and as part of the same course, I was writing a film script for submission alongside the Critical Studies essay which imagined a scenario in which a dissident Irish republican group break the Good Friday Agreement by committing a one-off act of terrorism which the British government attempt to 'hide' as being linked to Islamic terrorist groups. My narrative was purely fictitious; the dialogue though was informed by research into biographies from key figures accused (and in many cases admitting) to violence associated with 'The Troubles'. I did not 'market' my script as 'non-fiction', 'based on real events' or a 'docudrama' of any type, however, the research developed understanding, and in some cases directly affected the dialogue I wrote.

I took the film *In the Name of the Father* (1993) as the case study for all discussions. This film had



been chosen as the central example for three reasons: firstly because of its status as 'being based on real events'; secondly because it was a film that linked closely to my own creative work; and finally, because it is a powerful and controversial film that I felt raised very interesting questions for audiences and for writers.

Jim Sheridan's 1993 film is based on Gerry Conlon's book *Proved Innocent* (Conlon, 1990) and covers the case of the Guildford Four, wrongly imprisoned for the bombings of two pubs in Guildford in October 1974 in which five people were killed and many more injured. The Guildford Four - Paul Hill, Gerard 'Gerry' Conlon, Patrick 'Paddy' Armstrong and Carole Richardson - were charged with direct involvement with the IRA October 1974 pub attacks. They were convicted in October 1975 for murder and other charges and received the mandatory sentence of life imprisonment (Richardson, a minor at the time of the bombings, received an indeterminate At Her Majesty's Pleasure sentence for murder but 'life' for conspiracy). The four were eventually cleared of all charges and released in October 1989. The Court of Appeal pronounced the 1975 convictions as being based on fabricated testimonies and that scientific evidence had been withheld by the Director of Public Prosecution.

By the time Sheridan released his film, four years after the Guildford Four were freed, the miscarriages and the mistakes of the trials had long been known and reported upon, and yet the release of the film was marked with a resurgent wave of controversy. This controversy was due in part to the freshly opened wounds associated with the miscarriages of justice, but also because of the highly political undertones of the film; the fact that it represented the IRA and dealt directly with the cinematic no-fly zone of 'The Troubles' was also an issue for some; and also, and of most interest to me for my essay, because it blurred the lines between fact and fiction in film in the ways Sheridan chose to depict events.

The film, although focusing on the trial and the fight for justice, aesthetically was intended to be about far more than simply the case itself, as the title alludes: 'I wanted to tell the father's story most of all ... in a way, I didn't really want to do the story of all the injustice. I knew the central father-son story

could be universal' (Clines, 1993, p.20). This began the controversy for me, and indeed for others. In his essay *In the Name of the IRA* Richard Grenier wrote in his assessment of the father-son theme:

The mending of the relationship between the two Conlons, with the transmutation of the son's contempt for his father into deep respect as the two share the same prison cell, is well enough done – except of course there was no contempt to begin with and that the two at no time shared the same prison cell and were rarely in the same prison. (Grenier, 1994, pp.320-321)

In reading Conlon's book, the film's source material, the first thing to note is that the title is markedly different, and so is the tone of the read. Conlon's book is about seeking justice, as the title *Proved Innocent* suggests. It carefully outlines all the torture he endured whilst being interrogated, and the struggle of collating the necessary evidence to prove his innocence. It focuses on Gerry Conlon as a person and he admits frankly his own failings as a boy growing into a man. It also has some references to his family and to 'The Troubles' overall. However, the book's central issue is definitely not linked to a discussion or a resolution of the father-son bond. Sheridan's choice to put them in the same cell provided a way to explore the father-son bond that he had chosen as his theme, and this worked well, as one critic pointed out, 'Shockingly, Conlon's father, the incongruously named Giuseppe, is not only convicted but is imprisoned in the same cell with his son, which provides the film with a strange, emotionally potent, unanticipated extra dimension' (McCarthy, 1993). This comment doesn't show understanding that these filmed scenes were constructed for their aesthetics and emotional effect on the audience, and that they were fictionalised. Grenier argues that with this creative decision, and with other 'fictionalised' parts of the film: 'Sheridan falsifies every single known fact of the case and then calls on us to judge this film as a dramatic work and – as Sheridan says of his movie – as being true, if not to the detail then to 'the spirit' of the events' (Grenier, 1994, p.320).

The film publicised itself as 'based on a real story' (indeed in America it was at first advertised on posters as 'a true story' which was then changed), and my Critical Studies MA essay sought to pull apart all the other ways in which there could be questions about whether Sheridan could be accused of misleading (and then undermining his work) whilst adding melodrama and narrative to 'facts'.

Ruth Barton defends Sheridan, and indeed any use of the 'based on' tagline, asserting that it does not suggest it is as being a documentary (as a faithful as possible a representation of reality), nor even a docudrama (a dramatisation of actual historical events) and therefore grants itself the freedom to have more artistic/dramatic license and to fictionalise events in order to produce an aesthetically 'better' or 'more effective' (film) outcome rather than a more 'factual' or 'accurate' one (Barton, 2002, p.170).

Steve Lipkin, in 'Defining Docudrama: In the Name of the Father, Schindler's List & JFK' (1999) refers to the film directly when he asserts '*In the Name of the Father* ... with a moral perspective incorporated within its melodramatic narrative structure, strikes a moral pose free from the ethical concerns usually applicable when a documentary builds its position from indexical imagery' (Lipkin, 1999, p.371). Lipkin argues that a docudrama begins with known events and figures. There will be, he says, published accounts and testimonies (in this instance Conlon's book *Proved Innocent* for example) and an audience is then given these with the addition of melodrama because, alone, these actual documents are not rounded enough or are incomplete or insufficient in offering us a clear account of the subject. The melodramatic narrative produces a clear moral perspective which Lipkin says is ethically free from rebuke because it has not labelled itself as a 'documentary'. Lipkin celebrates the docudrama genre and specifically Sheridan's film in that they 'argue melodramatically for the worth of thought about their subjects. They offer alternatives to the kind of sober discourse about history that would be the province of the documentary' (Lipkin, 1999, p.380). Unlike Barton, Lipkin asserts *In the Name of the Father* to be a docudrama, and agrees with the critics that there are distortions and changes to facts within the film, but argues that this is reasonable within this example and indeed the form.

I did not agree with this assessment and argued that the film's 'inaccuracies' (and there are many others) meant the film was right to be criticised ethically as 'violating the warrants that allow docudramas to offer arguments by analogy' (Lipkin, 1999, p.42). I also felt it was an example subscribing to Derek Paget's general assertion that postmodernism manipulates for some definitive versions of 'the truth'.

This initial limited academic discussion of 'truth' in representation and performance writing has continued to be a background 'white noise' to me. Then, through my daily work as a teacher, I encountered verbatim theatre, which, by utilising actual words of real people, claims to be even more 'truthful' than the 'based on' taglines used in film.

My own use of verbatim theatre within a school context is not driven by 'a search for the truth' or a desire for my students to offer new 'truths'. Using verbatim with my students has proved to be the most effective way of getting them to develop devised performances and to evidence in this work some social, moral, cultural and political links, as per examination requirements; it also allows them to complete research and apply it in an original way which is another core requirement of their courses and examinations. Putting the performance outcomes together through research, and by obtaining direct testimonies in some cases, has built the narrative and characters in pieces they have then performed successfully for assessment and allowed them to write richly in evaluating their work thereafter.

Considerations of 'truth' in representation, and when editing, are not something that my students have had to debate/research in academic terms as it is not required within their level of assessments, however it has meant that the questions I tentatively explored (and by no means resolved) at Masters level have never gone away. This brings us to here, now, and this thesis. The questions also seem especially relevant because, just as I have been doing more amateur verbatim theatre work through my education profession, so too it has grown as a form overall. This thesis also explores why this is the case.

Derek Paget, who has written extensively on documentary theatre and docudrama on film and television, has provided a bridge into this thesis from my previous critical essays. Paget proposes that

writing a 'true story' or one 'based on real events', is an attempt to persuade us to consume such work with a promise of fact that is meant to 'buy' our attention. He states that labelling this work thus will lead to both a suspension of disbelief and a compelling of belief within an audience. I can identify with this and it was what drew me to discuss such ideas within my MA. I have felt myself drawn into work by the label and the promise of 'truth'. I have also then felt deceived when I have informally researched further after seeing a film and realised that lots of it was fictionalised; sometimes I have had a sense of indignation that the producers, writers *et al* have 'got away' with such misleadings, or bias. Paget describes the pursuit of 'facts' within work in the twentieth century (and since) as a 'fetish' (Paget, 1990a, p.3). Jacques Ellul expands upon this in '*Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes*'; 'modern man worships 'facts' – that is, he accepts 'facts' as the ultimate reality ... he believes that facts in themselves provide evidence and proof, and he willingly subordinates values to them' (Ellul, 1973, p.xv). Again, it is these ideas that drive this thesis, a search for facts, for truth – the truth about verbatim as well as the truth about the very nature of 'truth' itself.

Specifically, on verbatim theatre, the playwright David Eldridge, discussing the form in *The Independent* said: 'It's like the reality television of the theatre, marketing its authenticity when actually such work is as subjectively edited and put together as any work of fiction' (Taylor, 2011, n.p.). As a writer myself, the concept of editing someone else's words is, to me, fraught with potential dangers in misrepresentation, in distortions of truth, and this drove my enquiries.

David Lane, in support of Eldridge asserts:

Problematically, verbatim theatre often carries a promise to present the unmediated truth, 'not merely a version but the version of what occurred', a promise that it cannot hope to achieve. ... The necessity of creating an effective dramatic journey for an audience means that the structural choices made are at the service of the drama – the art – not a sense of objective truth Verbatim

theatre's creators then present only another 'version' of the truth ... (Lane, 2010, p.66)

Again, such critical positions on the inherent problems in the verbatim form with regards to truth drove my proposal for this thesis and were the initial academic readings and research that I drew upon.

The thesis begins with an attempt to clearly define and then separate verbatim theatre from other forms of docudrama and documentary theatre, pulling together and critically reflecting upon research in this area. I hope to have demonstrated that it is not a new phenomenon and has stylistic nods still to political theatre, beginning with George Büchner's contribution, before then discussing Erwin Piscator and the technologies his theatre used which have fed into verbatim's style of presentation and staging. This then leads into an exploration of the Living Newspaper which I discuss in terms of its Russian origins and its emergence in America with the Federal Theatre Project and how governments used and reacted to the form. I also discuss Theatre Union's use of the form in Britain, and, with it, Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl and their work in Theatre Workshop where they developed the celebrated mix of documentary and verbatim piece *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963) that incorporated elements of verbatim texts that were used alongside rehearsal material and background research.

Paget suggests that the evolution of verbatim theatre stems from both the portable tape-recorder and the provincial initiatives of five British theatre practitioners during the 1960s and early 1970s: Peter Cheeseman, Chris Honer, Rony Robinson, David Thacker and Ron Rose. Of these five, Cheeseman, in his position as director of the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent from 1962, was the first to use documentary techniques to gather primary source material from which play texts were generated. It is his work that forms the next part of my discussion of the history of verbatim. The examples I have chosen from the 1990s include an in-depth analysis of Anna Deavere Smith and her headset method of performing the material she researches. In the same decade, Tricycle Theatre and their tribunal verbatim work is analysed as a body of work amongst my primary corpus, with discussion herein of Richard Norton-Taylor's impact

on the form, including his work *The Colour of Justice* (1999) which is said to have influenced writers such as David Hare to consider using the verbatim form (also discussed as a primary case example in Chapter Three). Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project's *The Laramie Project* (2000) is the next primary case study discussed at length and serves as the start to the analysis of verbatim theatre in the new millennium.

Having established what the verbatim form is, and where it came from historically, Chapter Two discusses notions of 'truth' and 'authenticity' and 'ethics' which the form claims are integral to its DNA and are part of its appeal. The chapter begins with the proposition that the current popularity of verbatim is due to it being seen as a relevant platform for debate in our politically unstable society and a desire overall for authenticity, drawing in research from Ellen Redling, amongst others. I examine how representations, from reality TV to fake news, build mistrust and fuel the desire for something 'real' and 'authentic'. I use *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (Shulze, 2017) as a framework for this chapter because its author, Daniel Shulze, appears to 'fetishise' over 'truth' and has a curiosity about authenticity and the potential relationship between reality and representation. I examine the history of the words 'real', 'truth' and 'authentic' and their meanings and outline how complex the search for these in performance, specifically verbatim theatre, will be.

Chapter Three starts then to test the theoretical ideas from Chapter Two in practice by analysing Max Stafford-Clark, and his verbatim work with Joint Stock and Out of Joint Theatre Company. Using both Stafford-Clark's published diary extracts, and original research from his unpublished diaries held in the archives at the British Library, together with testimony from workshops and research on Stafford-Clark, David Hare and Robin Soans, and wider critical commentary, the chapter outlines how Out of Joint's verbatim performances come together and assesses Stafford-Clark's particular directing style of the verbatim material. *The Permanent Way* (2003) is used as a primary case study to examine the methodologies; critical reception of the production and its process of development are then also

evaluated. Here, most significantly, the central questions of the thesis - on 'truth', 'authenticity' and 'ethics' – as outlined in Chapter Two, are examined through *The Permanent Way's* editing and methods of representation. The chapter highlights the challenge of negotiating 'adherence' to these concepts whilst creating verbatim theatre; these challenges are then analysed further in the thesis through other primary and secondary case studies.

Chapter Four then moves to examine verbatim theatre within schools where young people are sometimes the co-creators of the work and certainly its main audience. I explore briefly the context of how drama in education became theatre in education and how verbatim theatre later emerged from this. Prominently I include examination of verbatim theatre playwright Mark Wheeler, and his production *I Love You Mum I Promise I Won't Die* (2017) which is taken as a primary case study. Primary research interviews with Wheeler, who fuses verbatim with his own imaginative writing and staging style, reveal the challenges he has faced in his working method, and what he thinks of the verbatim form; notions of 'truth' and 'authenticity' within it are also discussed. Those he has represented and included testimony from have also been interviewed, notably Fiona Spargo-Mabbs, whose son's tragic death is the story told in *I Love You Mum I Promise I Won't Die* and who commissioned Wheeler to write the verbatim play so that others might learn from her son's death which was a result of a drug overdose. Her insight into the process, and especially the editing and decisions on representation, offer a great deal of insight into the ethical and moral challenges practitioners balance when using other people's words for their drama. This is also picked up and critically explored in my interview with verbatim practitioner Julia Samuels and her role as Artistic Director of young people's theatre group 20 Stories High; the company's 2012 verbatim project *Tales from the MP3* is analysed as a further primary case study. Adding to the discussions from Chapter Two of concepts such as 'truth', 'authenticity' and 'ethics', the form's use in schools is considered, developing ideas of the role and position of the audience in verbatim theatre. Whether the audience are misled in the form, how passive an audience should be when being shown 'truth' in performance and



perspectives on the audience in general from practitioners such as Brecht and Boal *et al* enrich the discussions and critical debates here that were first touched upon in Chapter Two. The chapter then finishes with discussion of Voices of the Holocaust theatre company's *Kindness: A Legacy of the Holocaust* (2021), (a co-collaboration with the company's Cate Hollis and Mark Wheeler) where its methodology in coming together is analysed again alongside ethical considerations in representing real people. The primary case study is also used to add to the debate as to whether verbatim can/has been an agent of change, which is first considered in Chapters Two and Three.

In bringing the thesis to a conclusion with further primary case studies including discussion of Alecky Blythe and Dominic Cooke's *London Road*, in Chapters Four and then Five, I do not propose that the lack of being able to live up to the claim of being totally 'truthful' is the death of the verbatim theatre form, rather, like academic Carol Martin, I assert that as long as limitations in levels of truth are acknowledged there is still a future for the form. This idea occupies much of Chapter Five where I bring the analysis right up to the present examining a number of final primary case studies, including DV8's *To Be Straight With You* (2008), and Nadia Fall's *Home* (2013), together with primary research from an interview with LUNG theatre company's Helen Monks on LUNG's verbatim work and methodologies. In doing this, I discuss the 'aesthetic variables' (Garson, 2021, p.IX) that continue to emerge in some present-day verbatim pieces and their connections with the central debate on 'truth', 'authenticity' and 'ethics'. Whilst celebrating much of these, I do propose, most crucially, that, whilst truth cannot be an 'absolute', it must always be a prevailing consideration for all involved, in order to preserve the integrity and integral function of verbatim theatre, namely:

Done right, verbatim theatre can involve us all on an immediate, human level, in stories that are happening all around us, in reality, every day; stories we might think are not our responsibility but which in fact affect all of us. Verbatim theatre

... [can] help raise all kinds of questions that we desperately need to be asking as a society. (Blank & Jensen, 2010, n.p.)

## **Chapter One – the challenge of defining the documentary theatre genre and separating verbatim theatre from within**

Attempting to define the documentary theatre genre poses challenges. The multiple terms used for documentary practices (documentary theatre, theatre of testimony, non-fiction theatre, tribunal theatre, among others) and the wide variety of methods employed by artists in this field make any clear-cut definition of the form difficult (Soloski, 2013, pp.10-12). Within this complexity sits verbatim theatre – one of many types of theatre that respond to and represent real people and events (Wake, 2010, p.6). In this chapter, I shall seek to clarify the roots of documentary theatre and how verbatim theatre is distinct within the ‘documentary theatre’ umbrella, arriving at a series of criteria for clarification of each. I shall also be plotting where verbatim’s history started, demonstrating that whilst it is currently popular as a form, it is not ‘new’ and it is ever-changing.

### **An initial definition of documentary theatre**

To begin, though many definitions are complex, the one between documentary drama and documentary theatre is relatively simple. Derek Paget clarifies the distinctions, asserting that:

Documentary theatre refers to the one segment of documentary drama production, comprising those pieces of work written, devised or compiled first and foremost for theatrical presentation. (Paget, 1990a, p.42)

To help further in a clarification and identification of documentary theatre, Paget offers a list of purposes it serves. He proposes that such theatre might reassess international/national/local histories and potentially investigate contentious events and issues in these contexts. It could, alternatively,

celebrate repressed or marginalised communities and groups, bringing to light their histories and aspirations. It might disseminate information, employing an operational concept of 'pleasurable learning' (the idea that the didactic is not, in itself, necessarily inimical to entertainment). Finally, Paget suggests documentary theatre may also serve to interrogate the very notion of 'documentary' (Paget, 2011, pp.227-28). Another academic with interests in the genre, Carol Martin, offers some similar analysis to Paget in her article 'Bodies of Evidence' (2006), but also some further useful considerations whilst critiquing the genre. Her observations/definitions suggest that documentary theatre might potentially reopen trials, can create additional historical accounts, or reconstructions of events. She acknowledges that documentary theatre might intermingle autobiography with history, and, similarly to Paget, she proposes it might potentially analyse the operations of both documentary and fiction. Her final categorisation is that it exists to elaborate the oral culture of theatre in which gestures, mannerisms, and attitudes are passed and replicated via technology (Martin, 2006, pp.12-13). This last point alludes to Martin's central distinction and belief that documentary theatre is a form where the use of technology is key to the transmission of knowledge (Martin, 2006, p.9), whether this technology is explicitly visible or invisible in the final performance:

Those who make documentary theatre interrogate specific events, systems of belief, and political affiliations precisely through the creation of their own versions of events, beliefs, and politics by exploiting technology that enables replication; video, film, tape recorders, radio, copy machines, and computers. (Martin, 2006, p.9)

If these criteria (which inevitably leave something out) seem unsatisfactory then the somewhat broad (and vague) definition given by Joel Bernbaum (2010) can also be considered: that documentary theatre is theatre based on, inspired by or dealing with factual information.

Melanie Moore, in her 2013 thesis (alongside writing her own verbatim theatrical play text), observes that implicit in the genre is the playwright's belief or impulse that something in the document or archive is 'missing'. The act of writing a documentary play, through whatever methodology is chosen, then serves to complete the archive that the playwright perceives to be lacking in a particular perspective or analysis (Moore, 2013). Cyrielle Garson, in her 2021 book *Beyond Documentary Realism*, in talking about verbatim theatre-makers, observes that they 'have very little knowledge (or no knowledge at all) as far as a specific issue is concerned, and, as a result, they interview people in the hope of finding something that may contradict their own bias' (Garson, 2021, p.5). I do not agree with this as an absolute and, as shall be explored in Chapter Two and case studies thereafter, sometimes the verbatim theatre-maker is actually looking more for testimony that supports their bias, either deliberately, or unconsciously. What I do agree with, and this shall be demonstrated in case studies within the thesis, is Garson's assertion that if a verbatim theatre-maker is seeking to avoid bias it is impossible to achieve such a zero-position in practice. This aside, the definition in what drives these projects and their research is still useful for both verbatim, and, I propose too, for documentary theatre makers. For instance, tribunal verbatim playwright and *Guardian* journalist Richard Norton-Taylor has maintained that:

a dramatisation of [trial] proceedings ... provide[s] a more effective focus for public engagement with the issues than coverage in the press. [the playwright] can, in the way he shapes his plays, make more of a polemical intervention than he is able to do with his journalism. (Luckhurst, 2008, p.209)

Moore suggests that in order to present their argument artistically, a documentary playwright must tackle important questions, to ensure they have a complete understanding of their archive and remain 'faithful' to it. These questions require a documentary playwright to address what the materials are that are being used to create their text. Moore then proposes that the writer considers how the

archive being used to construct the documentary theatre form is organised, and what the method is behind the selection of materials and documents. The playwright should then examine what their own position is with regard to their chosen material, and whether they will be able to present their argument objectively and to substantiate their viewpoints. The style of the play, how they dramatise the verbatim language and how to maintain suspense when the subject is already a known event, are other questions Moore proposes for consideration.

As these questions suggest, the documentary playwriting process exists under a tension between creativity and respect for the facts, within which each playwright/production creates their/its own boundaries. This is a key area of contention in the form, leading to the questions of 'truth' which lie at the heart of this thesis, and which will be discussed at length in Chapter Two, and then tested throughout the subsequent chapters and in the case studies therein.

There are many other criteria that have been proposed, and it would be possible to tie oneself in an unhelpful knot in attempting to visit all potential viewpoints in seeking a 'definition'. A much more effective way forward is to simply draw a line by saying that whilst not totally perfect, those offered thus far within this thesis provide enough clarity to give a sense of the genre and its parameters (and indeed allude to potential controversies to come).

Specifically then, we move now to verbatim theatre within the umbrella of documentary theatre and again towards some potentially useful definitions and examples.

### **Verbatim theatre: definitions and hybrids**

A verbatim theatre play includes dialogue that can be traced to existent archival transcripts, either in the public domain (such as court records, television interviews, print media) or in the theatre makers' own archives (e.g. recorded personal interviews). As transcripts are a form of document, a verbatim play can therefore be termed 'documentary', but a 'documentary' is not necessarily verbatim, unless it utilises a traceable text for at least part of its dialogue (Moore, 2013, p.4).

Verbatim 'is understood as a theatre whose practitioners, if called to account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue, in the manner that a journalist must, according to the code of ethics, have sources for a story' (Luckhurst, 2008, p.201). Verbatim theatre, therefore, does not so much 'describe what the play or performance is about but *how* it is made' (Garson, 2021, p.3). It is, as Hammond and Steward frame it in their book *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (2008), 'not a form it is a technique; it is a means to an end' (Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.9). There are different hybrids within, each with its own definition, and these are being ever added to, contested and subdivided.

In her thesis, Moore attempts to offer useful categories (Moore, 2013). She begins with proposing the previously mentioned category – tribunal verbatim plays – which use as their only sources official transcripts of judicial proceedings which are then edited. Though this would suggest that many words in tribunal verbatim plays are initially of aural origin, the playwright will likely cite the court or evidential transcripts as a secondary source; therefore, tribunal verbatim is primarily text-based. This category was especially evident in America in documentary plays like Donald Freed's *Inquest* (1970) and Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1971) (Paget 2011, p.152). Within the UK, it came to prominence through the Tricycle Theatre Company and their work with Norton-Taylor (1994–2012). Paget does not agree that the tribunal documentary style is in fact verbatim. He clarifies the writing and production methodologies to explain this:

In tribunal theatre, the 'plays' are edited transcripts ('redactions') of trials, tribunals and public enquiries. These constitute the basis for the theatrical representation ... [whereas] in verbatim theatre, the plays are edited interviews with individuals. (Paget, 2009, in Forsyth & Megson, 2009, pp.233-234)

In making the distinction, and separating tribunal completely from verbatim, Paget asserts he is doing so not for any negative reason, nor is he making a judgement about one's veracity or gravitas over the other, simply that the formal properties of tribunal are linked more to documentary theatre of the past and are very different in his eyes to verbatim. In discussing these properties, Paget argues that tribunal plays must feature realistic acting and mise-en-scène, whilst verbatim theatre embraces the past styles of documentary theatre with its fluid use of stage space and the more 'open' expectations of the actors (Paget, 2009, in Forsyth & Megson, 2009, p.234). David Lane, supporting Paget in making tribunal distinct from verbatim, qualifies the difference technically between the two clarifying that the interviews in verbatim plays – unlike the documents used in tribunal theatre – are not objective. Lane argues that the truth in verbatim theatre is presented through the interviewee's own narrative – the way the interviewee hears it and wants it in turn to be heard by the eventual audience. In addition, Lane believes the interview format and the process of obtaining information, the casting and the juxtaposition of scenes, creates a structure that has an agenda (Lane, 2010, p.67). Themes rather than sequential narratives dictate the structure in verbatim, and therefore Lane asserts that verbatim is more susceptible to criticism of manipulation in its narration.

Daniel Shulze, whose book *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make it Real* (2017) will be used at length in Chapter Two to provide much of the basis for the debate on 'truth' and 'authenticity', also separates tribunal as a verbatim hybrid, leaving it instead as a documentary theatre hybrid. He does so by arguing that tribunal qualifies for a distinction from verbatim because 'verbatim ...

frequently takes more liberties with the use of its source material in terms of adding, cutting and editing' (Shulze, 2017, p.192).

The optimistic objective of tribunal verbatim plays might be 'an artistic act of remembering injustices ... producing a lasting effect in the audiences that witness them. Perhaps the plays may even be able to reach people in the system that matter and can actually effect change' (Moore, 2013, p.27). However, though tribunal verbatim certainly has positive intentions, editing legal transcripts into a work that is not only dramatically interesting but also accessible for an audience is one of the major challenges in this form of theatre. The play must be truthful, but it also must hold attention – the primary objective of any play to which it must be subservient. Whereas court proceedings can be lengthy, plays are restricted in theory by time, so the editing of legal transcripts must occur to condense information for the audience. Peter Weiss's play *The Investigation* (1965) is an early experimentation into verbatim theatre territory, and tribunal verbatim specifically, as it used transcripts from the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963–65) for its dialogue. Reflecting on the challenges in making the large body of documents accessible and engaging to an audience, Weiss observed the strength of this sub-category to be that 'all non-essentials, all digressions [can be] eliminated to lay bare the basic problem', creating a play that engages in a way that is impossible in a courtroom: 'the spectator can be put into the place of the accused or of the accuser; he can become a member of a committee of enquiry; he can contribute to the understanding of a complex situation or provoke opposition' (Weiss, 1971, p.43). Weiss described tribunal verbatim theatre as an effective way to communicate facts from legal proceedings that may have been manipulated by a biased mass media reporting to a critical audience. However, as shall be discussed throughout this thesis and in depth within Chapter Two specifically, editing from an archive for performance can also involve subjectivity and bias and therefore the audience can be just as deceived as someone receiving information through the mass media. Furthermore, returning to the criticism of Lane that tribunal should



be separated from verbatim because verbatim theatre is overall open to more criticisms regarding objectivity in the way its interviews and the testimony are obtained, this is also untrue. I do agree that tribunal is the form that is endowed to the greatest extent with what Susanne Knaller called 'object authenticity' (Funk *et al*, 2012, cited in Shulze, 2017, p.206). The documents in use in tribunal are not personally validated, they are instead validated by an external, outside authority. In the gathering of multiple perspectives – the sources are objects that are deemed authentic, hence 'object authenticity'. However, the archive documents used in tribunal theatre cannot then be edited objectively, and are therefore just as susceptible as any other verbatim theatre to criticisms of manipulation in the narration; archives invariably have subjectivity within the testimonies, due to the misrememberings and bias (conscious or otherwise) of the initial speaker (which will again be addressed further in this thesis). Furthermore, editing this type of material, which has not been directly gathered by an interviewer for a verbatim project (as it is from an archive) I recognise is more difficult as one is not aware of the speech patterns and rhythms that were naturally present – these will be absent as concerns during the editing. The end result may therefore have some limitations which directly gathered and edited material (as in the cases of participatory or expository verbatim, sub-forms which will be discussed presently) does not in terms of representing a person.

I therefore assert that whilst it is clear that there are distinct differences in tribunal works, including them under the 'verbatim theatre' umbrella (and above that the canopy of 'documentary theatre') works for categorisation purposes and for the consideration that they are a hybrid form, open to scrutiny regarding 'truth', as will be discussed presently.

### **Literary and historical verbatim sub categorisation**

The next category that Moore proposes is 'literary verbatim', with *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2006) as her key example. Paget states this example is a 'true verbatim play' (Paget, 2011, p.233) which seems odd as it is a play developed from the documented writings of Corrie (the subject in question). The writings are predominantly the 'exact words' of their original author creatively edited to develop narrative structure, but they were not taken from interviews with Rachel who had died prior to her diaries (the documents used for the play-text) being published; this seems to be in conflict with Paget's assertions that verbatim will be from aural sources at some point. Aside from this, the sub-category is a useful distinction.

A further interesting ethical issue is brought out by this sub-category concerning matters of consent. As many forms of verbatim rely on a process of interviews (which imply consent on behalf of the interviewees), there are issues in presenting a personage when they are unable to give their consent, for example when a subject is presented posthumously. This ethical debate also links to the issues of concern when people are alive and interviewed who then later disagree with how they are presented in the resulting verbatim work, for as playwright Robin Soans acknowledged, it is easy to use/misuse actual spoken words to be 'titillating an audience at someone's expense' (Soans, in Hammond and Stewart (eds), 2008, p.36). The 'question of whether verbatim is inherently exploitive or voyeuristic' (Hammond and Stewart, 2008, p.12), will be addressed further in Chapter Two and then within case studies thereafter in this thesis.

### **Expository and participatory verbatim**

Another sub-category that Moore proposes is 'expository verbatim' where plays are constructed from recorded interviews carried out by the playwright or a collective theatre company. An example is

*London Road* by Alecky Blythe (2011), which looks into Ipswich's community response, in 2006, to the murder of five prostitutes by the serial killer Steve Wright. Another example is Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003), which focuses on verbatim testimony in the wake of a spate of fatal railway crashes in the UK in the late 1990s and 2000s. Both examples will be discussed at length as primary case studies later in this thesis. Expository is an expressly aurally-based form of verbatim. Its authors creatively edit aural transcripts of the interviews to generate the play-text. This is in contrast to another sub-category, 'participatory verbatim', where the original interviewees are not thereafter featured as characters in the script. The term 'expository verbatim' is borrowed from documentary film theorist Bill Nichols. Nichols defines an expository documentary film as one in which the director will edit the documented scenes to support their point of view or argument, but will not foreground themselves as a physical presence in the documentary itself (Nichols, 1991, p.34). Nichols highlights that 'the expository mode addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history' (Nichols, 1991, p.34). In the theatre, this requires performers to portray their interviewees testimony.

The term 'participatory verbatim' (also derived from Bill Nichols' definitions of modes of documentary films), involves the documentary's author foregrounding themselves as participator/subject in the documentary; this is in contrast to expository verbatim where the actors/performers/collaborators will foreground themselves as scripted characters in the performance. As such, actors will portray both interviewees and interviewers in a participatory verbatim play. Often the interviews in both participatory and expository verbatim are consolidated by a single author or dramaturgical team, whose role is to piece everything together (Paget, 1990a). Out of Joint Theatre Company and Alecky Blythe work using similar interview and editing processes, such as in Blythe's play *Little Revolution* (2014). However, as will be discussed within analyses of their work, in these practitioners' works the actors/creators are continuously featured as characters in the script. As the process of interview is constantly on display, the 'interviewer'

characters are imbued with the ‘possibilities of serving as mentor, critic, interrogator, collaborator, or provocateur’ (Nichols, 1991, p.116). However, with actors as characters, the criticism could be that ‘we are constantly being reminded that this story is being mediated; that what is being presented is not simple truth’ (Bottoms, 2006, p.62). Interestingly, one of the aspects Paget celebrates in verbatim is that it offers actors a greater share in the means of putting the production together, in a quasi-Marxist sense – offering an ensemble method of working where the differences and distinctions between roles such as designers, directors and performers are blurred or totally lost. The actor in verbatim is viewed by Paget as a kind of instrument transmitting lived experience (Paget, 1987).

I would like to propose that expository and participatory are the purest of the verbatim hybrids in that the person or persons working with the testimony collected it themselves and with the knowledge that it was for a theatre piece, and that the speaker/interviewee was likewise clear in the understanding that they were being interviewed for the intended purpose of their words potentially appearing in a performance spoken by an actor. Because the interviewers and interviewees knew/know, from the outset, that the intention is to take the words into a theatrical performance, this for me adds a level of clarity. It does not mean though that this produces a more ‘truthful’ or ‘authentic’ end product, and it does not mean this category is ‘better’ than others.

Many verbatim plays already exist that make categorisation difficult because they also appear, from their development methodology and DNA, to straddle more than one of these or any other proposed subcategories. For instance, Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, (1997), employs tribunal, literary and participatory elements as it transitions between scenes of Oscar Wilde's trials, his correspondence and the acting company's contemporary interview with a living Oscar Wilde expert, respectively. Furthermore, this is by no means an exhaustive list, because it is ever-changing,

reflecting the fact that verbatim theatre is ever-evolving, which will be especially addressed within Chapter Five.

If these are then the definitions, or are at least helpful starting points towards working definitions of documentary theatre and verbatim theatre, the next task is to see where these forms emerged and the initial theatrical historic waves they made.

### **The first documentary theatre?**

It is not possible to provide an exact date for the beginnings of documentary theatre. It is possible to acknowledge that 'dramatic representation has been used as a medium of communicating contemporary events for quite some time' (Bernbaum, 2010, p.19), and that:

From its origins and throughout its history, Western theatre has engaged, represented, and/or attempted to affect the course of history. Phrynichus and Aeschylus wrote plays on the Persian wars when they were still fresh in the memories of their auditors ... late in the [sixteenth] century Elizabethan playwrights began to exploit contemporary crime stories. During the French Revolution hack writers issued dramatic accounts of Marat's death within a month of its occurrence ... (Favorini, 1994, p.31)

Therefore, the date of documentary theatre's (and indeed docudrama's) beginnings is that of theatre's beginnings – one and the same – and from the start deeply entangled with politics, technology and an oppositional or questioning attitude towards mainstream media (Garde, Mumford, Wake, 2010, p.11). Documentary theatre is sometimes inevitably political due to the content of the documents used to create the performance. In some cases, such as the controversy over the cancelled New York premiere

of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, discussions about documentary works revolve around the content of the documents rather than the play itself (Felton-Dansky, 2006, n.p.). It can then become tempting to understand documentary theatre as forsaking aesthetics for the immediacy of facts. However, whilst some productions do 'suffer' theatrically because they are too much about the facts, and the political (as shall be discussed later, for example in evaluating of Tricycle Theatre Company's tribunal works), successful documentary theatre and its practitioners consider the historical documents equally with the aesthetics and the way they are communicating these to the audience. For example, Piscator (who will be discussed at length presently), believed that documentary theatre could engage through an audience's aesthetic judgment as much as through its moral indignation.

### **Georg Büchner – a documentary theatre pioneer?**

As documentary theatre is entwined with theatre's origins, picking an initial focus for pioneers, or figures who pushed the boundaries that eventually led to verbatim is complex, and subjective. For some, in tracing documentary theatre's history, Georg Büchner (1813–37) is considered a reasonable 'pioneer' worthy of reflection. Büchner was a medical scientist and a left-wing political activist who pursued his interest in social order, health and justice through writing drama scripts (and literature documents) closely based on documents from recent history.

*Dantons Tod*, 'the most penetrating and most complex exploration of politics in German Literature – and certainly in German Drama' (Reddick, 1993, p.93), was one of Büchner's few plays to be completed (in a bowdlerised version) whilst he was still alive, and as John Reddick observes, this meant it is one where he was able and willing to mount a specific defence of his artistic position (Reddick, 1993, p.60).

Büchner, whilst under suspicion and scrutiny, and actively planning many revolutionary uprisings, wrote *Dantons Tod* in his father's house in Darmstadt in early 1835: 'No writer in any language has treated

the French Revolution more vividly or more penetratingly' (Reddick, 1993, p.210). It was published later the same year, having somehow been passed by the censors.

The action of the play covers a crucial period of thirteen days during the last violent throws of the Revolution. The many sources Büchner used to form the work were manifold and not all have been traced, but the main one was Carl Strahlheim (pseudonym for Johann Konrad Friederich) *Die Geschichte unsere Zeit* (Stuttgart, 1826), (a part-work of 120 numbers grouped into 30 volumes, plus numerous supplements and special numbers) which Büchner's family circle read frequently whilst he was growing up (Holmes, 1995, p.11). The second inspiration and source for Büchner was Louis Adolphe Thiers' *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (Paris, 1823–4; 10 vols.). These were not simply sources for background understanding and information – more than a sixth of *Dantons Tod* consists of quotations, either verbatim or in paraphrase; a reader wishing to see this for themselves need only follow the Thomas Michael Meyer's edition of the play which in footnotes painstakingly identifies all the known sources and indicates whether they are a direct or paraphrased. The lead character was 'inspired by' Georges Jacques Danton (1759–94) a lawyer and powerful orator who briefly became Minister of Justice, with a love of money (he was suspected of embezzlement), who identified with the Indulgents and was regarded as a threat by Jacques Hébert and was duly arrested, condemned to death and immediately guillotined on 5 April 1794.

Prior to its release, Büchner wrote to his parents seeking to minimise his own creative role in writing the play, asserting he was simply reproducing the realities of history and in so doing he had no option but to faithfully and rigidly stick to the facts whatever they may be (Reddick, 1993, p.63). Büchner's defence of his play – or more accurately of himself as its author – 'is a case of special pleading, even to the point of a downright lie and we should not let ourselves get taken in by what is essentially a smokescreen' (Reddick, 1993, p.63). This is not the criticism it appears to be; Reddick is instead crediting Büchner with more than merely holding up a mirror to historical reality and considers him as not being just a neutral scribe but instead as having a great deal more positive political intent regarding his choices

of what to reflect from the original sources he used. As Reddick states, 'Both in what he chooses to show and in the way he chooses to show it ... there is no pulpit-preaching or tub-thumping, to be sure, but Büchner points the finger and bids us to see it in all its garish fraudulence' (Reddick, 1993, p.81).

*Lenz* (1836) is another celebrated example of his work, a novella which might be seen as having early methodologies akin to the literary verbatim category discussed earlier in this chapter. For this short story, Büchner used documentary evidence from a pastor's diary by Jean Frédéric Oberlin (texts which were subsequently published by friends of Büchner in 1831), to form the narrative and some of the prose in a story about Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, a friend of Goethe, who suffered from mental disorder and was sent Oberlin's vicarage in the Steintal. In this example there is also evidence of the aesthetic being as important as the 'facts'. As Hamburger observes: 'Büchner's creation of poetic realism combined the accurate documentation of facts with an imaginative interpretation of character for he hated idealism in philosophy and Romanticism in literature' (Hamburger, 2008, p.viii).

### **Piscator – embracing the developing technologies to advance documentary theatre**

Büchner's innovation in the way he constructed his theatrical works using documents and first-hand observation, afforded realism on the stage and a discussion of contemporary issues otherwise 'unvoiced' from those generally marginalised in society. His belief was that 'a dramatists' supreme task was to get as close to a history as it actually happened' (Richards, 1977, p.117). However, though for some Büchner is a pioneer in the history of documentary theatre, in the 1920s Piscator's political theatre embraced the developing technologies of cinema to move the genre on, making him arguably a greater figure within the form and one whose innovations more closely link to what has then become entwined within verbatim theatre.



Art and politics were two separate roads which ran parallel for a long time ... art for art's sake could no longer satisfy me. On the other hand, I could see no meeting point for these two roads, at which point a new concept for art would emerge, activist, combative, political. (Piscator 1960, cited in Rorrison, 1980, p.17)

Along with extensive research, slides and films were used prominently within Piscator's work to address social issues. For example, Piscator's first production at the Volksbühne was *Flags* (1924) by Alfons Paquet (1881–1944) a respected journalist, essayist and travel writer. This historical play was based on abortive campaigns among immigrant workers in Chicago in 1886 who were calling for an eight-hour working day. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, a violent confrontation took place between police officers and labour protestors in Haymarket Square, Chicago during which a bomb was thrown by an individual never formally identified, resulting in returned random gunfire by police and subsequently deaths on both sides in what became known as the Haymarket Affair or Haymarket Massacre. The event created a backlash against immigrants and labour leaders. The production outlined the events by starting with slides of historical figures projected on a screen behind a proscenium arch whilst a balladeer (Fritz Hanneman) with a pointer stood below and sang comments in the form of rhyming couplets. Two further screens on either side of a proscenium arch projected text commenting and enlarging upon the action. Titles were projected, exclamations, newspaper cuttings and telegrams added to the realism of the events depicted, or at least, their parallel relevance to matters in Germany at the time. Piscator's intentions were to fuse audience and stage action and turn the performance into a public meeting. His aesthetics in this first attempt perplexed many of the audience (Rorrison, 1980, p.68). Nevertheless, it was a ground-breaking stylistic moment in theatre history per se and in the history of documentary theatre specifically. It was the start of Epic Theatre:

it involved the continuation of the play beyond the dramatic framework ... this automatically led to the use of techniques from areas which had never been seen in the theatre before. (Rorrison, 1980, p.70)

Piscator's long and international career offers insight into the aesthetic workings of this broad field in part because of his deep influence on the genre. Piscator taught multiple generations of German and American theatre artists (he was a mentor to Bertolt Brecht, Judith Malina, Tennessee Williams and Harry Belafonte, among many others), and he played a central role in producing the most important post-war documentary plays in West Germany (Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*, Peter Weiss's *The Investigation*, and Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*). Moreover, the central questions that preoccupied Piscator in the post-war period – how theatre can restage and mobilise history; how can theatre represent atrocity; how can theatre open avenues of identification without erasing the specificity of suffering – remain relevant today.

Most of Piscator's post-war documentary productions fall into one particular genre: the documentary trial play, based on the transcripts of a historical trial, and had methodologies that link into tribunal verbatim, as identified previously in this chapter. Piscator restaged trial transcripts to show how atrocity can be presented and understood differently in theatres than in courtrooms (Arjomand, 2016, p.55).

### **Living Newspapers**

Another major movement in the history of documentary theatre was the emergence of the 'Living Newspaper' with a direct link in this form to Piscator, utilising his epic scenic progression, and his technical innovations: multi-level sets, projections, loud-speakers and an ironic juxtaposition of live stage image with projected image. The first of the form to use the name was in Russia with the Soviet Living Newspaper or *Zhivaya Gazeta* movement which largely took shape during the Russian Civil War of the 1920s, during

which time both the government and the opposition used the theatre (and specifically the Living Newspaper), as a way of communicating their messages and generating support, often doing so theatrically as a way of overcoming the difficulties of communicating with a largely illiterate audience (Mally, 2008, p.4).

However, the Soviets did not invent the idea of acting out the news. One can find satirical investigation of political life in British music halls, American vaudeville and the skits incorporated into central European cabaret. These did not, though, utilise the Soviet format that tried to re-create the structural form of a newspaper, using headlines, international news, local news and letters to the editor all acted out onstage. Nor were the other examples directly supported by the central state.

The Soviet Living Newspaper was therefore an original eclectic mix, part broadsheet, part music hall and part political rally. Front-line traveling theatrical troupes on the Bolshevik side began acting out the news by composing short sketches that roughly followed the structure of a newspaper, incorporating local, national and international news. In the early 1920s, the Moscow School of Journalism began its own Living Newspaper troupe called Blue Blouse (*Siniaia Bluza*) named after the workers' shirts that performers wore. Blue Blouse developed a basic format for performances that was widely copied. Typically, performances began with a parade of the 'headlines', followed by eight to fifteen short sketches on a wide variety of topics ranging from international affairs to complaints about local factory management. The actors carried exaggerated symbolic props to identify the role they were performing – a top hat for a capitalist or a large red pencil for a bureaucrat. Due to the style, troupes did not need sophisticated stages or lighting, in fact, they categorically shunned the illusionist theatre around them from the likes of Stanislavski and aligned themselves to the emerging works of Meyerhold instead: 'Blue Blouse categorically rejects any decorative and realistic set designs. There will be no birch trees or little brooks ... [Blue Blouse] is not a photograph, but rather a construction site' (Mally, 2008, p.8). This meant

they could perform almost anywhere, including cafeterias, clubs, and outdoor settings, connecting the messages to a wider audience.

In the mid-1920s, the Moscow Blue Blouse was incorporated into the cultural division of the central Moscow trade union organisation. The success of this highly visible, professional, living newspaper troupe sparked emulation among local clubs and factories with amateur groups emerging throughout Moscow and eventually throughout the Soviet Union. This led to not only international and national news as the target for satire, but also much smaller, local issues and figures as the subject of the sketches.

The Soviet Living Newspaper was a strange combination of political and artistic forms. It combined modernist experimentation with official political speech. These uncompromising messages from the single-party state could then be undercut by other skits where state officials were figures of fun, or by humorous songs and limericks where official language was openly ridiculed leaving viewers to make their own meaning from the fragmentary nature of the structure/juxtapositions. Whatever the outcome of the resulting opinions/taken meanings, 'the contradictory nature of Blue Blouse skits, their ability to praise and mock simultaneously, made them potentially dangerous' (Mally, 2008, p.9). This subversive nature led to the Soviet government ending its 'use' of the Living Newspaper in 1932, instead supporting art forms which had clearer communist values that would supposedly appeal to greater audiences (Mally, 2008, p.9). With its decline in Russia, the Living Newspaper then began an upsurge in the United States.

Between 1935 and 1939, the American government provided the Federal Theatre Project with large sums of funding for the production of a wide range of plays across the nation. Hallie Flanagan, a professor and playwright at Vassar College, was National Director, and playwright Elmer Rice initially working alongside planning the content and focus of the organisation. Utilising the talents and expertise of out-of-work journalists and theatre professionals (left unemployed by the depression), from its

headquarters in New York City, the Federal Theatre Project's initial work saw it create issue-based productions, including regional Living Newspaper performances that were tailored to the specific issues of the region in which the work was playing. These 'spoke to the hopes, concerns and fears of millions of Americans outside the principal metropolitan areas' (Bernbaum, 2010, p.22).

The Federal Theatre Project had strict guidelines and core principles which specified that:

Authenticity should be the guiding principle ... some of the most fascinating and also dramatic statements are to be found in the daily columns of the press. Assemble a wide, firm foundation of factual material and upon this can best be built the architecture of good theatre. (Mally, 2008, p.17)

As a result of such guidelines, the words spoken on stage were often therefore comprised of direct quotations from newspapers and many journalists were involved in writing the scripts not just in collating the sources. Hallie Flanagan acknowledged 'the entertainment value of the fact' (Witham, 1989, p.78) and upheld accuracy to the degree that there were few calls of 'misquoting', though other problems did follow.

*Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936), is one of Federal Theatre Project's best-known and successful works, however this was in fact a replacement for an earlier Living Newspaper project by Federal Theatre Project whose production had been prevented by the direct intervention of WPA administrator Harry Hopkins, perhaps even by the then President Roosevelt himself, for fear of offending Mussolini. Created under the 'managing editorship' of Arthur Arent and the regional directorship of Elmer Rice, *Ethiopia* (January, 1936) – which examined the invasion and occupation by Italy of the east African nation – differed from later Living Newspapers in that it relied almost exclusively on verbatim excerpts from political speeches of world leaders regarding the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. It was also not heavily interlaced with

non-factual 'creative' scenes, as were its successors, nor did it contain the signature 'voice of the Living Newspaper' – the anonymous and disembodied voice that would comment on the action. In its writing, impartiality was maintained and this was achieved by ensuring 'only occurrences admitted to by all parties were dramatised ... no claim was given without the answer of the opposing party' (Folino-White, 2015, p.197). However, in spite of this impartiality, *Ethiopia* was never performed. It was the use of actual words spoken by heads of state and the impersonation of these people which the federal bureaucracy took most exception to. WPA Assistant Administrator Jacob Baker wrote to Hallie Flanagan after seeing a rehearsal, ordering that no one impersonating a ruler or Cabinet officer shall actually appear on the stage. Though Flanagan argued that scenes were factual and not caricatured in any way, the project was prohibited, and as a result Elmer Rice resigned (Fisher Dawson, 1999, p.61).

The Living Newspapers which followed therefore avoided international issues entirely, although some domestic public figures were subsequently characterised with their own words. Later scripts relied very little on such devices or invented subterfuges like having members of the Supreme Court appear in silhouette as they spoke (for example in *Triple-A Plowed Under* [Favorini, 1994, p.36]). In addition, the national office of the Federal Theatre Project insisted upon full documentation and proof of factual accuracy.

A prominent example of Federal Theatre Project's work dealing with issues within America, and the south specifically, was director Joseph Losey's (who had been in Soviet Russia with Piscator) aforementioned *Triple-A Plowed Under*, an account of the Agricultural Administration Act that paid farmers to ruin their own crops. The Agricultural Adjustment Act was the U.S. government's first attempt at national social control of agriculture but was invalidated by the Supreme Court thirty-two days after its inception. *Triple-A Plowed Under* tells the story of the farmer's plight before and after the Act's implementation. The play presents a series of short, stylised vignettes to deliver a wealth of information in a cohesive manner,

covering the key events, such as the post-WWI surplus and devaluation of crops, farm foreclosures, auctions, the deliberate destruction of crops to increase demand, the devastation of drought, the organisation of farmer-consumer cooperatives and the joining of farmers with workers to combat greedy middlemen.

When the staff of the Living Newspaper were not documenting factual information, they worked with dramatists to create scenes that dramatised certain issues. These scenes were footnoted as 'creative' and often hinged on the implementation of differing rhetoric. For example, in scene 16 of *Triple-A Plowed Under* titled '*Drought*' a stylised depiction of the effects of the relentless drought afflicting the Midwest was portrayed. A staccato dialogue between two voices, the first asking for the weather report and the second announcing in foreboding repetition: 'Fair and Warmer' until the scene climaxes in the resigned exclamation by the farmer who cries 'Dust!' alongside a projection displaying images of dying cattle. Rhetorically, this scene evokes the inescapable advance of meteorological circumstances (footnoted to an article in the *New York Times* from August 12, 1934 calling 1934 the driest and hottest year on record) through its mechanical and repetitive quality. Herbert Halpert, refers to this scene in his Activity Report on the Writing of Living Newspapers:

An example of the need for this understanding between the dramatist and the research worker is to be found in in the Living Newspaper's production of *Triple-A Plowed Under*. One sequence called for exhaustive information on drought conditions in the Middle West. Days were spent culling the news columns and other sources. The resulting scene ... was hailed as one of the most effective in the play. (Halpert, 1934, n.p.)

Playbills for the New York and Chicago productions of *Triple-A Plowed Under* augmented the Living Newspaper's journalistic frame (Folino-White, 2015). In the accompanying programmes, articles about the process of creating the work, and indeed Living Newspapers as a form, with detailed research and editing methods, were outlined. Under the heading 'Dramatised News Now Offered in Famous Plays' one section in the programme discussed the forty researchers who worked on the play's topic and the ways in which the fifteen dramatists then turned this into scenes. There were bibliography listings outlining the articles, government reports and books from which *Triple-A Plowed Under's* scenes were derived. Furthermore, the programmes (which were updated weekly) featured stories of critical praise for the work and the theatrical form and its use of real lives and real words. In spite of this, the issue of direct quotations, and criticism of 'misrepresentation' by some officials presented in the works, remained problematic for the Federal Theatre Project throughout its four-year span.

Although Living Newspapers changed significantly once they migrated to America, they shared crucial elements with their Soviet predecessors: they addressed vital contemporary events; they integrated filmic techniques, including slide shows, music and sometimes film clips; and they employed a disjointed, episodic style of presentation. In addition, they avoided the conventions of the traditional proscenium stage and made use of stereotyped characters instead of figures with psychological depth. The other similarity that was shared was that both ended when their sponsoring governments (no doubt with the controversies of the form in mind) decided to move their focus, and funds, elsewhere.

In Britain, the Living Newspaper trend within documentary theatre also had its time and place, and interestingly had so again recently in 2021 with the Royal Court Theatre using the format to overcome the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic theatre restrictions, as shall be explored in the conclusion to this thesis. In terms of the past, it is interesting to note the example of Theatre Union's *Last Edition: A Living Newspaper Dealing with Events from 1934–1940* (1940), which Ben Harker refers to as 'a significant but



critically neglected intervention into the living newspaper genre' (Harker, 2009, Forsyth & Megson eds., p.26). In his piece, Harker writes that the term '*living newspaper*' implies that 'official print media was either inert, moribund or already dead' and goes on to praise Theatre Union because 'like contemporary attempts to expose and contest the economics, tone and content of the newsreels shown in British cinemas, *Last Edition* was committed to challenging the dominant media's construction of the real' (Harker, 2009, Forsyth & Megson eds., p.26). This too was in part the Royal Court's objective; it judged that there was so much uncertainty exacerbated by the pandemic that the Living Newspaper format could, as it had before, prove an excellent format to debate and engage the audience, aesthetically and politically.

### **Oh What a Lovely War**

Formed in 1936, Theatre Union was a popular British theatre group (its name implying support for trade unionism and a united political front) formed by Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl and whose key players were committed to combining communist politics and theatrical innovation (Harker, 2011, p.24). From its base above a furniture store in the centre of Manchester, and later in All Saints Church, Ardwick, the company saw its prime purpose as re-connecting with the working class:

The theatre must face up to the problems of its time; it cannot ignore the poverty and human suffering which increases every day. It cannot, with sincerity, close its eyes to the disasters of its time. (Theatre Union Manifesto, cited in Leach, 2006, p.35)

Theatre Union's production *Last Edition* had a method of creation that was 'overly democratic' (Harker, 2011, p.38) with the entire company, numbering around a dozen or so, involved in the research. The piece was constructed chronologically around recent history as represented through the press. Words from newspapers were used alongside created scenes which MacColl would write (and Littlewood would adapt through rehearsals), often taking the factual style of news and juxtaposing it with real human stories which the press alluded to but ultimately didn't include; 'We were using a whole lot of different techniques inside the framework of a straightforward presentation of facts' (MacColl, cited in Harker, 2011, p.29). MacColl later commented that the performance was stylistically an 'anthology of everything we had ever done in theatre' (MacColl, cited in Harker, 2011, p.39). The show was extremely popular, but caused controversy and after a few performances it was closed by the police and fines were issued for Littlewood and MacColl. Following this, Theatre Union began to lose members and new groups were formed by its leaving members. The central creatives, Littlewood and MacColl, sought new styles and directions, but still within forms highly relevant to these discussions, as they went on to form Theatre Workshop, with which Littlewood then went on to develop *Oh What A Lovely War* (1963).

This new company still retained Theatre Union's aims:

If theatre is to play an effective part in the life of the community it must face up to contemporary problems and at the same time revive all that is best in theatrical tradition ... Theatre Workshop is an experimental theatre whose aim is to show to the widest public, and particularly to that section of the public which has been starved theatrically, plays of artistic significance. (Leach, 2006, p.49)

Politics remained at the heart, but the company's intensively trained actors – who could use every aspect of their bodies and voices to dance, sing and act adopting theatrical influences from throughout theatre

history from Ancient Greece to commedia – performed alongside complex and demanding innovative staging and design elements. Most famous of all their innovations and projects, *Oh What a Lovely War* ‘transformed English theatre post-World War Two by making available a European documentary theatre style of production, which had more to do with figures such as Meyerhold, Piscator and Brecht than with anything English, and which was to influence profoundly the new 'Fringe' of the 1960s to 1970s’ (Paget, 1990b, p.118).

The genesis of this ground-breaking play about the First World War was Charles Chilton's radio programme *The Long Long Trail*, heard first by Gerry Raffles (then Theatre Manager at Stratford East, Theatre Workshop's base, later to become Littlewood's partner) and first broadcast in 1961. Chilton had gone looking for the grave of his father who had been killed in France during the war. He found no grave, just a wall with his father's name on it along with 35,942 other names of soldiers who had died during the Battle of Arras. The death of so many in such a small area, and the lack of graves for the vast numbers affected, led Chilton to make *The Long, Long Trail* as a tribute to and a narrative about the men, not the officers. *Oh What a Lovely War* was born of Theatre Workshop's collaboration with Chilton and developed from his basic research. Paget observes:

nobody involved was an academic, and they were engaged in a most unusual project for the English professional theatre: the compiling of a documentary play ... There was never any thought of plagiarism; this was a theatre company working within a very tight schedule of less than two months (and without a writer) to devise and produce from scratch a factual play which opposed orthodox views of the Great War in particular and war in general. (Paget, 1990b, p.121)

The way that this process then acknowledged the sources was in the first public performance, where the programme:

carried a brief list of names and agencies which constituted the play's claim to a 'basis of factual data'. Like the Methuen Appendix, this list mixed primary sources (Haig, Ludendorff, Joffre) with secondary (Liddell Hart, Tuchman, Wolff); the accompanying programme notes also contained editorial confusions. (Paget, 1990b, p.121)

The three most important source books used in rehearsals were Leon Wolff's *In Flanders Fields* (1958), Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (1961), and Barbara Tuchman's *August 1914* (1962), acknowledged as so in the published play's Appendix (Theatre Workshop, Chilton, 1963, pp.110-11). Other sources were also used; the 1916–18 trench newspapers, for example, are quoted directly in the '*Christmas 1914*' scene (Theatre Workshop, Chilton, 1963, pp. 43-54), and 1930s texts by H. C. Engelbrecht, F. C. Hanighen and Philip Noel-Baker provided basic information for the '*War Profiteers*' scene (Paget, 1990b, pp.120-121).

Theatre Workshop often worked in ways that saw the company collectively doing research, with no one ultimately taking credit for the script in use, and though it might have historical sources, Littlewood disliked historical dramas, therefore although historical documents formed the basis of the research the intention was not to produce a history play. How much the intention was to produce '*authentic*' work that was attributable to texts is something which Paget discusses in detail in his *New Theatre Quarterly* article: "'Oh What a Lovely War": The Texts and Their Context', (1990), attempting to trace the sources inspiring the drama and then how these sources were used in practical terms.

The final product, therefore, is a mixture of both of different people's inputs and of source material used. There was a script, of sorts, by the first performances, with Chilton's notes, the books listed, and

satirical songs inspired by those Chilton had found from his work in BBC Radio Light Entertainment. These were mixed together with hours of improvisations by the company and material derived from further texts they had researched and brought forward. The resulting play was/is, as it sounds from this list, a medley of different styles because of the collaborative methodology in its construction. Juxtapositions – Pierrots performing scenes set against giant projections of First World War soldiers; scenes of battles followed by advertisements for items such as ‘Carter’s Liver Pills – for Active Service’; ‘facts’ flashed by a rolling news banner offering statistics on casualties – were all contained within a literal frame of fairy lights (Leach, 2006, p.161). Weiss argues juxtaposition is an essential dramaturgical device within documentary theatre, offering the ability to highlight conflicts of opinion to make a ‘suggestion for a solution, or an appeal, or ask basic questions’ (Weiss, 1971, p.42). All the devices and elements could have created an eclectic mess, but Littlewood’s genius was to make the contrasts work: ‘Theatre Workshop were in no way interested in the exploration of style or form as such, but were driven to seek the most effective means of communicating something important. The material, and its social function – that is, its effect on the spectators – drove its technique’ (Leach, 2006, p.162).

Theatre Workshop were a left-wing touring group with radical style, which meant it was somewhat of a surprise how popular and immediately successful, *Oh What a Lovely War* was. As well as a West End run, there was success at an international festival in Paris as well as a New York season; many English repertory theatres produced the play during the 1960s (six of them in 1965 alone), and in 1969 it was made into a commercial movie which still enjoys a considerable reputation. Paget observes that:

In common with many people of my generation, I was enormously impressed by *Oh What a Lovely War*. Its Brechtian/Piscatorian 'collision montage' style produced an effect which took my breath away: the force of the show's critique of the First World War made me completely rethink my youthful ideas about

'patriotic warfare', and about what 'theatre' was. The show was, for me, a brilliantly conceived and executed introduction to an essentially European theatre tradition till then largely marginalised in the United Kingdom. (Paget, 1990b, p.244)

Success though led to perhaps 'unexpected' problems, firstly court cases over the vexed question of '*authorship*', with many wanting to claim the work as 'theirs' in some way, or to assert their work had been taken without permission. In spite of attempts to acknowledge everything that had proved useful in the development of the work, cases were successfully proved, such as Alan Clark in suing the company in December 1963 having discovered that his book *The Donkeys* was being used – without his permission; subsequent book publications and indeed theatrical programmes were then forced to include and acknowledge directly his name and book. The haphazard noting down of sources was one area that 'cost' the Company, another was the extent to which Littlewood would encourage actors to improvise and research to add new material. This 'development' of a script would go on beyond the first performance, to ensure that the acting remained 'alive' and 'in the present' (Littlewood's key intention with acting), this caused the company to be in contravention of Section 15 of the Theatre Act of 1843 (the Lord Chamberlain's power of censorship – 1737 to 1968 – dictated that all scripts should be submitted for examination prior to performance, and not only what was said but actions would also be under review and only what was licensed was then allowed for public performance).

*Oh What a Lovely War's* 'authenticity' continues to be debated; however, interesting though such discussions are, with its development process being such that it was, there can be few concrete conclusions in such debates. This means that whilst the play can be considered documentary theatre, its place within the hybrids of 'verbatim theatre' – as a fusion of literary and historical verbatim (which some categorise it as) - remains questionable because its link in terms of specific texts containing specific

people's testimony/words is unclear. Interestingly, authenticity, though perhaps 'lost in transcription' was striven for in acting terms, for example, those playing soldiers were put through long sessions of drills with serving sergeant majors both during the rehearsal process and during the West End runs. Even long after the play had been formed, Littlewood continued to strive for the actors to present the work in an authentic manner. Just the day before her death in 2002, she granted permission for Theatre Clwyd to perform the play with the injunction that there be 'no bloody acting' – for Littlewood, acting was representationism – the opposite of 'truth' (Leach, 2006, p.93), a point that will be returned to in Chapter Two.

Debates aside, what is certain is that *Oh What a Lovely War* inspired a wave of positivity for a new style of theatre, as seen throughout the decade and beyond; it is here that verbatim theatre begins to emerge as a distinct form under the 'documentary theatre' umbrella in Britain and in communities where those who might otherwise be silent or marginalised started to be given a platform to engage and inform the audiences.

### **1960's and 70's verbatim in Britain – embracing new technologies in the form to represent marginalised communities**

Paget suggests that the evolution of verbatim theatre stems from both the portable tape-recorder and the provincial initiatives of five British theatre practitioners during the 1960s and early 1970s: Peter Cheeseman, Chris Honer, Rony Robinson, David Thacker and Ron Rose. Of these five, Cheeseman, in his position as director of the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent from 1962, was the first to use documentary

techniques to gather primary source material from which play texts were generated. Cheeseman directly credited Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop – especially *Oh What a Lovely War* – and the documentary film movement in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s as being the inspiration for his work.

From the outset, the relationship between dramatic narrative, community identity and self-esteem was identifiable in the body of work from the five British practitioners. In 1964 Cheeseman initiated a series of documentaries created for The Victoria, his professional repertory company in Stoke-on-Trent. Through these documentaries Cheeseman was determined to explore a relationship with a 'coherent community in a battered landscape to cement our relationship with North Staffordshire people by telling the stories of their trials and achievements', doing so because 'no other agency was providing this kind of food for their self-respect' (Wilkinson and Anderson, 2007, p.28). The distinct style of the Stoke documentaries therefore derives from their highly specific and localised subject matter, again derived through a creative process involving a group rather than a single author; however, unlike *Oh What a Lovely War*, Cheeseman's company's process had a self-imposed rule that 'The material used on stage must be primary source material ... If there is no primary source material available on a particular topic, no scene can be made about it' (Wilkinson and Anderson, 2007, p.28). Other characteristics included a distinct establishing of the actor-audience relationship, in effect begun long before the performance. Cheeseman insisted his actors, who came from all over England, steep themselves in the East Midlands accent, often going so far as living with the local residents. In performance, objectivity was fostered by having each actor play several different roles, and by having the transformations from character to character made in full sight of the audience. Actor/narrators would quote their sources, and taped voices of the real people interviewed were played during the production as 'voice-over', with the actor then assuming the role and playing the scene. The intended effect by Cheeseman was not to create an audience of believers, but an audience of listeners (Favorini, 1994, p.37):



One of the things wrong with our society is that too few people have a sense of history. We have lost in our society the sort of natural structure whereby old men pass down knowledge to the young in a community ... In this sort of atmosphere it seems to me that our obligation is to show people ... that they do not stand alone in the present but are part of a historical perspective. (Cheeseman, from interview with Favorini, 1994, p.xvii)

When, in 1973, the British Steel Corporation declared its intention to close down inland steel mills, including the newly-renovated works in Stoke-on-Trent, the Victoria Theatre, urged on by Ted Smith and Bill Foster of the Shelton Works Action Committee, joined with the local populace in opposing the decision, creating *Fight for Shelton Bar*. Produced in 1974, the documentary provided a colourful and accurate picture of the steel-making process, as well as coverage of the political decisions being made at both local and national levels. Nightly updated with reports documenting the latest developments in the negotiations, the play became a rallying point for the community.

Though refusing to accept any authorial credit for the plays created under his leadership, Cheeseman did not deny that the inevitable arrangement and editing involve subjectivity and personal judgment. But he did intend that the compositional pains taken by his company give decent protection against his productions being considered politically narrow, naïve or at worst, deliberately false and misleading, asserting that the multiplicity of voices preserve the contradictions inherent in historical events (Favorini, 1994, p.37).

Britain in the 1970s, in general, had dramatists using theatre as a political platform, indeed in many cases, a political weapon. The decade was filled with events to 'rage' against: initially a Heath government presiding over growing turmoil with rising crime and unemployment, the three-day week, Northern

Ireland's Bloody Sunday where paratroopers killed 13 demonstrators, the 'winter of discontent' which saw the Wilson-Callaghan's Government battling the chaos left behind of Heath's term in office leading to IMF loans. All of which saw writers, such as David Hare, begin to emerge and rise in popularity and output. However, though Hare would eventually cross over into seismic examples of verbatim theatre, it was generally neither his nor the style of the time in this decade, which might seem ironic given the form suits politically turbulent times. The decade was of note instead for the rise in work by previously under-represented sectors of society such as women's theatre groups which proliferated. Caryl Churchill, a key voice and figure, started the decade with *Owners* and ended it with *Cloud Nine*. Meanwhile, Mustapha Matura, Michael Abbensetts and Tunde Ikoli opened doors to a new generation of black British writers. However, by the end of the decade 'there was a prevailing sense of impotence. British theatre had used every possible means – epic, satire, social commentary, historical metaphor – to analyse the state of the nation. But had anything really changed?' (Billington, 2006, n.p.).

### **1980s Britain and theatre: hard times**

Into the 80s in Britain, the Thatcherite decade coincided with the dominance of the musical which theatre critic Michael Billington argues is no coincidence as it is a form that combines celebration of individualism with sentimental uplift (Billington, 2006, n.p.). Critic, Martin Esslin, in an essay written in 1980 on British theatre, said the decade was notable only for the increased array of 'shoddy entertainment for tired businessmen – and footsore tourists' (Esslin, in Trussler, 1981, p.vii). During this decade, verbatim theatre was again consigned to smaller venues and to tackling more 'local' issues/themes, and once again, Cheeseman, Honer and Robinson, Thacker and Rose continued to provide the decade's major examples. *The Rose between Two Thorns* was Thacker's first entirely verbatim play performed at a conference on documentary theatre held at Milton Keynes in 1980. Paget describes this

project, and *Cheshire Voices* (directed by Christopher Honer) as 'road/community shows' in which civic repertory theatres would serve their particular locality and region with a willingness to go into their communities, tape recorder in hand, and interview 'ordinary people'. Like *Oh What a Lovely War* it was work that was both fun as well as dealing with history (Paget, 1990b, p.320) and which incorporated a structure that made use of forms such as songs.

Though the decade may be reflected upon by some critics negatively, as academic Graham Saunders observes, in terms of women's theatre there was a period of sustained growth. As the playwright David Edgar noted, taking the output of new plays at the Royal Court as an example, eight percent were by women between 1956 and 1980, however, by 1989 this had risen to 38 percent (Edgar, 1999, cited in Saunders 2015, p.28). One of the women playwrights who emerged during this prosperous time was Louise Page who developed a literary historical verbatim play on one of the major events of the 80s – the Falklands War of 1982. The first half of *Falklands Sound/Voces de Malvinas* (1983) was based on the book *A Message from the Falklands: The Life and Gallant Death of David Tinker*, which featured letters and poems from the 25-year-old Lieutenant as compiled after his death by his father Hugh. Tinker was killed in action in the final days of the Falklands war when Argentine navy technicians fired three land-based MM-38 Exocet missiles at *HM Glamorgan* on which Tinker was serving. Due to outstanding evasive tactical steering, only one of the three missiles hit the ship, and due to the same high levels of tactics and heroism thereafter, the vessel was not destroyed nor sunk, though 14 were killed and many more injured. In the play, Tinker's moving story is told by his father, Hugh, whose simple narration and 'replies' to his son's letters within the piece guide the audience through David's life whilst outlining how the father attempts to make sense of his son's sacrifice. It opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London, in June 1983 and, after a national tour, was revived in the main theatre in December 1983 with a new cast. The original production was directed by Max Stafford-Clark and featured Paul Jesson and Julian Wadham. The small cast compiled their research during May–June 1983 and Page then acted as writer/editor: 'everyone was

surprised by the honesty with which people talked to us [in interview], not only about their opinions of the war, but also the details of their lives which lead them to hold those opinions' (Royal Court publicity document, 1983, cited in Holderness, 1992, p.174). The premiere used a minimalist 'epic' staging technique, affording the end of the first half a 'Brechtian' style. The actor representing Tinker moved to the back of the set from the chair he'd been sitting in downstage throughout the first act and stood against the backdrop which represented an English rose-covered cottage window looking out on to sunlit trees. Isolated by a single spotlight, he then recited the names of the 14 killed aboard the *HM Glamorgan* (including Tinker himself). This direct address was followed by silence and the fading of the light eventually leaving the actor in silhouette against the window. A moment where 'the facts were eloquent enough ... rationality and feeling were balanced dialectically in a moment both moving and informative' (Holderness, 1992, p.174). The second half moves into using the 'voices' of people involved in the war but not actually fighting: a Falkland island teacher, a journalist, a serviceman's wife, an Argentine woman living in London, a British businessman forced out of Buenos Aires. Including these characters, who were not literally involved in military action/combat themselves, allows for a historical and political perspective, representative of a much wider constituency which provided the verbatim base. In terms of staging in the second half, actors addressed the audience in a series of interwoven monologues directly from a static curve of spot-lit chairs with the window vista showing a gloomy Falkland's landscape; 'not a word is invented; there's no editorialising ... the play ... reminds you of the human realities behind the headlines ... it is high-class theatrical journalism ...' critic Billington gushingly wrote (Billington, 1983, p.14). To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Falklands war, Louise Page's 1983 play was revived at the Finborough, where once again the critics were positive and once again pointed to the construction giving it emotional depth and also authenticity as Tinkers' story is told simply, with honesty and without sentimentality or embellishment.

The other major event of the decade was the 1984–85 miners’ strike and this was the focus for verbatim plays such as *The Enemies Within* (1985) which saw Thacker (by this time at the Young Vic, London) collaborating with Ron Rose. The play was researched entirely in the Yorkshire coalfields. This, together with *The Garden of Eden* (Peter Cox 1984, revived 1985) opposed the predominant media image of miners as ‘the enemy holding the country to ransom’ (in Thatcher’s speech to the backbench 1922 committee, July 1984). During the miner’s strike, Thacker housed two Sunderland miners who were fundraising in London and learned from their first-hand experiences. Both he and Rose were aware, from their connection to the communities, that the true stories of the miners were not being heard or represented by a biased media. In the months after the strike, *The Enemies Within* premiered at the Young Vic and consisted of verbatim accounts of interviews between Thacker and members of mining communities conducted at Doncaster College. Many had been wary of talking to the actors, already having suffered at the twisting of their words by the media. The theatrical production helped break down mistrust. Actress within the project, Barbara Peirson, recalled ‘One thing that we heard over and over again from people was that they never again would believe anything they saw on television. The stories they were telling us weren’t getting through in the media at all’ (Dibbets, 2009, n.p.).

The reception for both *Enemies* and *Garden* was predictable, arguing these were not plays at all:

‘[The] regurgitated accounts of picket-line campaigns and hardship at home come across about as moving and monochrome as a sack of nutty slack ... The co-directors Peter Gill and John Burgess have tried so hard not to dramatise that there seemed little reason for these actors and actress [sic] to be sat on chairs repeating words at second hand, when their force lay in the authentic tones of the original’.

(Murdin, 1985, cited in Paget, 1987, p.335)

In December 2009, 25 years after the strike ended, *The Enemies Within* was staged for the first time in South Yorkshire at The Crucible Theatre in Sheffield and then at The Octagon Theatre in Bolton (where Thacker was by now artistic director), with most of the original cast still involved. With distance, further reflection, understanding and a less singularly biased press the work was received much more favourably:

The use of actual language of the miners, their wives and the police ... brings out the true depth of feeling that still resonates in the affected communities. (Mosely, 2009, n.p.)

Thacker said of the work, and specifically the participatory/expository verbatim form, that he loved the fact that each word has been spoken by someone interviewed, though he acknowledged this makes for a labor-intensive rehearsal process in which every word has to be first transcribed. This working method, laborious though it was, was always fueled by the knowledge that 'one-in-ten interview throws up someone who is a natural poet and speaks with a kind of joy about the past [events] that is unmistakable' (Thacker, interviewed in Paget, 1987, p.322). Memory, though, does not constitute pure recall; 'the memory of any particular event is refactored through layers of subsequent experience' (Thacker, interview, in Paget, 1987, p.322). Thacker reflects further, saying that 'people's memories ... are very coloured by their present experience...' (Thacker, interview, in Paget, 1987, p.327); this also feeds into the point made earlier in the chapter about tribunal testimonies having no greater veracity than other testimonies used in verbatim theatre. Each member of the cast carried out up to seven interviews, and then, once transcribed, the material would all be read aloud. In the run-up to performance, Thacker and Honer recall they would mark the scripts determining why they wanted to keep the material or what story a testimony was telling. Occasionally, they would break from this methodology and improvise the staging of the work, just to see them 'aloud', and then determine whether to keep or reject the primary source material. The script for performance might be undergoing refinement with just a week to go. The

interaction with community that these plays, and indeed verbatim, often has, brings a sense of responsibility which Cheeseman and the others were highly aware of. People's thoughts and feelings were laid open for an audience, and often with their name still attached. Rony Robinson said it was vital that one's own attitude towards the material or themes should not come out, if they did, it comes across as patronising, 'middle-class actors taking the mickey out of working-class people' (Robinson, in Paget, 1987, p.329).

*The Enemies Within* and *Falklands Sound* did not just play in metropolitan contexts but also in front of, and into, the communities who were most affected by or at the heart of the verbatim testimonies. As an example, Thacker made a point of inviting mining communities to watch *Enemies/Garden* in London and arranged tours to naval bases for *Falklands Sound*.

### **Anna Deavere Smith and headphones in verbatim performance**

Representing communities and their issues/concerns has played a major part in the history of verbatim; this is also found in the work during the 1990s (and beyond) of Anna Deavere Smith. In 1992, Smith (an associate professor of drama at Stanford University), introduced a new form of verbatim with her play *Fires in the Mirror*. The play was the thirteenth part of her ten-year oral history project *On the Road: A Search for American Character* which Smith described as a personal quest 'to learn something about the intersections between language and character' (Smith, 1994, p.67).

The idea for the project started in an acting class exercise where Smith took to the streets to try to find 'an antidote to the sound of movie-character speech and anchor-person elocution' (Clines, 1992, n.p.). It then grew to become the personal project for which Smith travelled throughout the United States, tape recorder in hand, talking to people and then turning the recordings into one-woman theatrical performances where Smith would listen to the testimonies then step onto 'stage' and play all the characters. *Fires in the Mirror*, and indeed all of the work produced by Smith as part of this project,

combined journalism and drama in order to examine not just the racial tension and violence in key areas across America, but also much broader themes including religion, gender and class identity as well as the historical conflict between these communities in the United States; 'I wanted to do something – I didn't know what it was – that had to do with listening to people and trying to cause peace' (Clines, 1992, n.p.).

*Fires in the Mirror* was linked to the events in 1991 in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. On August 20 a car from the motorcade of the Lubavitch branch of Hasidic Judaism jumped the sidewalk and pinned two black children against a window grate, severely injuring seven-year-old Angela Cato, and killing her cousin Gavin, also seven. With a history of Black-Hasidic tension, Crown Heights erupted into violence after rumours circulated that the ambulance first on the scene tended only to the minor injuries of the Hasidic driver and his passengers and delayed treatment for the two black children. Within hours of the violence and unrest starting, 29-year-old Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish student visiting from Australia, was pulled from his car by an angry mob of about 20 black men and stabbed. He died the next day at Kings County Hospital. Rioting began and lasted for four nights, perhaps the worst racial disturbances in NYC since the 1960s.

Smith distilled the interviews she recorded just after the unrest had subsided into monologues, each one providing an important and differing view on the events in Crown Heights. These monologues were re-enacted by Smith in her award-winning one-person play. Reflecting on the process she used in obtaining these verbatim testimonies, Smith realised:

this approach could serve to mirror a community that was interested in looking at itself ... to mirror what they were going through and particularly communities where people were having difficulty saying things to one another or where people felt silenced. (Smith, 1992, in Clines, 1992, n.p.)



Such reflections remind us of Paget's assertions that verbatim has the power to reflect the silent and the marginalised.

When Smith performed her play and the monologue verbatim testimonies she had gathered, her technique involved a thorough commitment to re-conveying not just the precise words, but also to depict the revealing gestures and half-silences of those she interviewed.

Most audacious in her one-woman show ... is that the characters' monologues, so hypnotic with the meter, anger and hope of survival, are the true words of real people. The utterances this tough performer marshals so poetically have been excerpted verbatim off the tape recorder that Ms. Smith wielded like a sharp-edged shovel in the hard turf of Crown Heights last winter. (Smith, 1992, in Clines, 1992, n.p.)

Smith believed that there is as much information embedded in how someone speaks, as there is in what they are saying, a principle which others following in her footsteps using the headset technique have subscribed to (Oades, 2010, cited in Garson, 2014, p.61). Certainly, the head-set technique affords the actor the opportunity to hear the exact idiosyncrasies of an individual's speech patterns whilst in the very moment of performing it to the audience, offering both the actor and audience an engagement with speech material that was, and still is, extreme; and the compositional technique offers a near perfect adequation with the spoken real language, the headphones serving as authenticating devices. Some argue that the purest moments within this form of verbatim are 'when [the interviewee's] syntax starts to fall apart, their grammar starts to fumble, they lose words, sometimes they go off words, sometimes they make sounds that have nothing to do with words' (Smith, 2006, cited in Garson, 2014, p.55). To this end, deviations from ideal/grammatically correct speech are preserved rather than deleted in the theatre's reconstruction. However, technical virtuosity associated with the reproduction of what is heard through

the headsets is not enough in itself to be considered 'authentic' in representing the real person. Performers have also to articulate in flesh/visual terms the impression that is experienced when they put on the headphones; as Smith has outlined:

The point is simply to repeat it until I begin to feel it and what I begin to feel is his song and that helps me remember more about his body ... My body begins to do the things that he probably must do inside while he's speaking. I begin to feel that I'm becoming more like him. (Smith, 1993, in Martin & Smith, 1993, p.57)

There is of course more to consider than the simple migration of recorded speech to the performer's headphones, static to dynamic form; indeed, the process is complex. According to Tom Cantrell, actors in headphone-verbatim experience what he has called 'alienation from self' (Cantrell, 2013, cited in Garson, 2014, p.59) as the particular demands of the form crucially entail for them an alienation of their own self-consciousness as actors.

Smith presented the testimonies she gathered in a non-linear, non-narrative structure with little in the way of theatre conventions i.e., no staging, no clear fourth wall (Forsyth & Megson, 2009, p.142). However, here again, juxtaposition was used to deliver meaning and to provoke reflection on a particular line within the audience: 'the power of juxtaposition is harnessed by Smith to generate "cause and effect sequences" and to suggest "theories for explaining events" that on first sight she appears to only be documenting, but which we discover are mediated by her skills as creative collator, organiser and performer of these verbatim accounts' (Young, 1990, cited in Forsyth & Megson, 2009, p.143).

Though the methodology of performance marks another important development in the history of verbatim, once again, the result was not devoid of controversy with critics observing that the creative use of personal and source material was misleading, distorting, manipulative and exploitative.

A particularly interesting version of the play, not using Smith or the headphone performance method of being 'in-role', instead employing staging that might have been a nod to Piscator's traditions, was that of the Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis (1996, prior to that of the City Theatre), in which a larger cast undertook the roles originally created and performed by Smith. The City Theatre's own intimate performance space was set up proscenium style for the production. Two large trapezoidal slabs, painted to look like brick walls, were hung at angles upstage and suspended a foot from the floor, which was itself a raised trapezoidal plinth. Four video monitors flanked the stage playing intermittently silent illustrations of the Crown Heights with black and Jewish traditional music underscoring throughout.

The production amplifies the 'historical' vibrato of the material, the video context functioning like film in the works of Piscator. The City Theatre production thus emphasises the information component over the story-telling component ... thereby converting via a bank of monitors a 'hot' medium into a 'cool' one.

(Favorini, 1996, p.105)

Smith's methodology inspired other verbatim practitioners thereafter, either directly, or indirectly, such as Alecky Blythe, who will be the focus of later chapters. Many saw Smith, and indeed the wave of verbatim utilising headphones, as 'cutting edge' (Cantrell, 2013, cited in Garson 2014, p.53) and as a way to carry 'verbatim theatre to a new level' (Dorney and Gray, 2013, cited in Garson 2014, p.53).

### **Verbatim in the 1990s - The Tricycle Theatre Company & Tectonic Theater Project's developments of the form**

The next major point in verbatim theatre's history was the work in the 1990s that took place under the artistic direction of Nicolas Kent, of The Tricycle Theatre, specifically working with the tribunal verbatim form. Tricycle Theatre opened in 1980, though the company actually began in 1972 with founders Ken Chubb and Shirley Barrie establishing the Wakefield Tricycle Theatre Company in a pub's

back room in King's Cross. The company is credited with championing the voices of many Black and Irish artists, and for commissioning work by then little-known names such as Olwen Wymark, Paines Plough, and Anthony Minghella amongst others. Kent oversaw his role from 1984 through until 2011, and in spite of fires and a funding crisis (the latter eventually bringing about Kent's departure), the company is still in operation today.

Kent says of the company's verbatim work that it was 'for getting across a political message' (Stoller, 2013, p.134) and that it could do so more effectively than sound-bites on television that Kent said didn't afford people an opportunity to grapple with the issues. Together with his long-time collaborator, journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, Kent produced work that was a combination of edited versions of enquiries and the Tricycle's own investigations which earned the company a reputation on London's political theatre scene at the time. The starting point was the 1994 work *Half the Picture* linked to the Scott Arms-to-Iraq enquiry which Norton-Taylor had been writing about within his role for the *Guardian* newspaper. The enquiry was linked to a court case (which later collapsed) into arms-related weapons and machinery (the Matrix Churchill trial, 1992) which Britain had reportedly sent to Iraq without telling parliament when Saddam Hussain was a 'friend' of the West. Norton-Taylor had been writing articles for some months when Kent came forward and said that he thought there would be merit in pulling all the material together into a theatrical form. Though Norton-Taylor says he was uncertain initially how this might work out or be received, he did indeed go back to source material and edit from the transcripts what he felt were the most important parts. In total this meant pulling together over 70 hours of evidence given by ministers, government officials and civil servants. The title was taken from testimony from a former Foreign Official who said that answers to Parliament might be half the picture (Stoller, 2013, p.136).

Norton-Taylor describes the process of collaborating with Kent as like that of a journalist allowing his work to be 'subbed'. Actors playing the roles, including William Hoyland as Prime Minister John Major,

had just two weeks of rehearsal to get their portrayals right. The cast would spend hours studying tapes; Hoyland recalls 'there were certain things I did replicate, like he has a very unmoving upper lip, just an odd way of talking and if you get that right you're halfway there. But I wouldn't try to absolutely imitate him because I found that – and I think we all did – very restricting' (Stoller, 2013, p.137). The work could more accurately be considered a cross between tribunal verbatim and the historical drama/verbatim sub-categories, for, as well as containing word-for-word dialogue from hearings, there were also monologues written by playwright John McGrath, representing real and fictional people. These included, for example, a Matrix Churchill office worker who tried to blow the whistle on the firm's exports and a Kurd's perspective on Saddam's atrocities. Of these additions and their effect in terms of undermining the credibility of the project, Norton-Taylor reflects: 'It certainly detracted, in the sense it diluted the specific point about having the edited transcripts of what was actually said ... at the time, I thought it was quite effective, but if we started over again, we wouldn't have the extra stuff' (Stoller, 2013, pp.139-140). In spite of the concerns over potential 'diluting' additions, critics were broadly positive in their reception of the work:

The result of these editing labours is a powerful, concentrated piece which works not just as a devastating argument for the reform of Whitehall and its smug culture of secrecy, but also in theatrical terms. (Taylor, 1994, n.p.)

In 1996 Norton-Taylor edited *Nuremberg War Crimes Trial* for the Tricycle, and Kent followed soon after by editing and directing *Srebrenica*. Three years later, Norton-Taylor edited *The Colour of Justice: The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (1999) which he considers the company's best tribunal verbatim play. The play followed the events of April 1993 when Stephen Lawrence, whilst waiting for a bus, was assaulted and fatally stabbed by a gang of white youths. The police investigation that followed was then flawed to such a degree that no one was convicted of the crime in spite of the identity of the attackers being common knowledge. Many years of activism followed, eventually resulting in Home Secretary Jack Straw

calling for a public enquiry. Norton-Taylor's play is clear in outlining the extent to which deeply embedded racism in the police force affected its investigations of Lawrence's murder. Racism was evident from the moment the police arrived at the crime scene and failed to administer first aid to Lawrence who was at this point still alive and fighting for his life. Once again, the company were tireless in striving to ensure 'we don't want anyone to in any way question anything we do as not being truthful. Because once you do that, you've lost the battle. What we say is, this is what happened. Make your own mind up as to whether people are behaving well or badly' (Stoller, 2013, p.153). Almost 11,000 pages of transcripts were edited to a hundred pages of play script. Fifty-six days of evidence-giving – a welter of allegations, admissions and rebuttals – condensed into two and half hours of drama.

The accurate re-creation was reflected in the editing process, the acting and all the staging, including the mise-en-scène. During the production's run the company noted 'more than any other, the piece brought in people who didn't go to the theatre' (Wheatley, in Stoller, 2013, p.154); this has been noted before as a feature of verbatim theatre: its engagement with unexpected audiences who often have an investment in some way with the material and its place within their community, their social, political and everyday spheres. *The Colour of Justice* won numerous awards and accolades.

In discussing how the Stephen Lawrence case managed to capture the attention of the public so monumentally, and how theatre becomes so entwined with such cases in general, Janelle Reinelt identified elements that must be present. Firstly, the event must be of significant gravity to the well-being of the nation or a significant proportion of the society that constitutes the audience; secondly, the event must attract a critical mass of public attention; thirdly, the event must take a recognisable form, either as ceremony, a ritual or else have unfolded in a form of narrative that can be apprehended in terms of protagonists and plot (i.e. Aristotelian); and fourthly the event must have been perceived by the public as the symbolic staging of other, recognisable features of a national or local story. Events that fit this

description are candidates for being treated by documentary theatre makers generally, and tribunal verbatim makers specifically in provoking the critical and ethical imagination of the society in question (Reinelt, 2006, pp.74-75).

Other significant Tricycle projects include *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry* (2003) and *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (2005). Overall, looking at the landscape of the Tricycle's output, Norton-Taylor reflected:

Our tribunal plays for the Tricycle are taken from long-running public inquiries (10 years in the case of *Bloody Sunday*) that are treated quite superficially or incompletely in the mainstream media. Twenty-five thousand words have more impact than 250; and they become stronger still when actors are speaking them on a stage before a live audience. (Norton-Taylor, 2011, n.p.)

Norton-Taylor was asked if writing a tribunal verbatim production was in fact a creative act, to which he replied:

true I do not think up a story, nor do I write dialogue. The choices I must make are different from those of a writer who begins with a blank sheet of paper. Editing – as in writing verbatim drama – may seem more of a craft than an art. (Norton-Taylor, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.130)

David Hare, in reflecting on the work says:

Norton-Taylor in his faultless act of organisation and selection, has done precisely what an artist does. By Picasso's great criterion, he didn't paint a tribunal of a racist crime. He painted the anger you feel when you look at a tribunal. (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.130)

The Tricycle's work continues today, with the company in Kilburn High Road where they started, still proud of its verbatim traditions and offering theatre that confronts contemporary issues in a unique way.

Just after *The Colour of Justice*, another major verbatim piece, this time from America, was developed and performed, which still continues today to be of great importance in the history of verbatim theatre: *The Laramie Project* (2000).

On October 1998, Matthew Shepard was found on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming, bound to a fence and beaten beyond recognition. The crime gained national attention and the town and its inhabitants found themselves under intense scrutiny. In 2000, the Tectonic Theater Project premiered their play about the incident and its aftermath at the Ricketson Theatre in Denver, Colorado. In the months between the incident and the premiere, the company, led by Brecht devotee Moisés Kaufman, visited Laramie six times, carrying out more than 200 interviews and five workshops. They then performed the work with eight actors playing more than 60 characters. In terms of the staging, it was and is often since in revivals, minimalist; sparse stage with wooden floors, wooden chairs and six screens – one large standing upstage with five further television-sized screens around the space. The images on the screens is/was often of a sky; clear blue, or sometimes with grey clouds. At other times the screens show/ed close-ups of the actors' faces, for example in the original production during an enactment of a media conference, an actor stood with his back to the audience yet they could see his face on the screens. In its first showing outside of Laramie, Australian theatre group Company B and director Kate Gaul, as well as conducting further interviews, added two long pin boards that framed the back walls of the stage covering them with maps, newspaper clippings and postcards, as well as a large picture of Shepard that hovered above the stage area throughout. The effect of the pin board additions was that, prior to the performance, the audience could actually go onto the stage, freely but specifically 'uninvited', viewing it as further research for them to read and internally deliberate upon as part of the evening's experience, and the



picture throughout reminding them further that this was not fiction, but factual, with a fatal consequence for the main 'protagonist'. The original production was critically acclaimed – even receiving a two-minute standing ovation when it played in the town of Laramie. Amongst those who praise the work are some who refer to the way it was constructed and the 'authenticity' this offers the audience. For example, Kaufman named his interview subjects in this and his other works; this is not the case for many verbatim plays, as shall be especially explored (and by some 'criticised') in Chapter Three looking at the rise and body of work from Out of Joint Theatre company. During his work on *The Laramie Project*, Kaufman also developed a personal methodology for presenting and indeed 'performing' the interview materials which he and the company pulled together, which he referred to as 'moment work' and which again critics praised the work for and in some cases credit its authenticity to. 'Moments' are short sequences of action, based on raw interview text, that have been isolated and developed in rehearsal so as to foreground theatrical imagery as a complementary means of storytelling, on a par with verbal content (Kaufman, 2001, cited in Bottoms, 2006, p.64). Kaufman defines 'moment work' in the introduction to *The Laramie Project* as:

A method to create and analyse theatre from a structuralist (or Tectonic) perspective ... A 'moment' does not mean a change of locale or an entrance or exit of actors or characters. It is simply a unit of theatrical time that is then juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning. (Kaufman, 2001, p.16)

Kaufman is also credited with presenting the gathered material here, and indeed also in the highly successful preceding work *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1998), with explicit textual reflexivity i.e. Kaufman and the company examine and openly explain in the work their own beliefs, judgments and practices during the research process and how these may have influenced the research. For example, the opening narration notes the precise date on which Tectonic Theater Project members first travelled to Laramie to conduct interviews, and states that 'the play you are about to see is edited

from those interviews, as well as from journal entries by the company, and other found texts' (Kaufman, 2001, p.5). The company's working process in generating text for the play thus became/becomes an explicit part of the play's narrative, with the various tensions and misapprehensions engendered by their presence in Laramie being explored, self-critically, alongside the Shepard story itself. The inclusion of this style invites the audiences to question the role and assumptions of the interviewers-actors and writer-director Kaufman in creating the participatory verbatim piece, as well as scrutinising the words spoken – often just 'everyday' turns of phrases potentially filled with unacknowledged, hidden prejudice – which are from the interviewees.

A particularly clear demonstration of the play's approach is provided by a telling sequence of the afore mentioned 'moments' in the second act. In one speech, an actor playing Sherry Johnson, the wife of a local highway patrolman, is shown questioning why the case of a Laramie police officer who was killed at almost the same time as Matthew Shepard warranted 'just a little piece in the paper', while Shepard's was blown up into international news (Kaufman, 2001, p.64). There is a serious question here about the extent to which the news media were guilty of sensationalising the Shepard case because of its homophobic 'hate crime' angle. This speech is immediately followed by a 'moment' in which two Tectonic Theater company members, Leigh Fondakowski and Greg Pierotti, are seen clearly (because the presentation style is participatory verbatim) reluctantly going to conduct an early morning interview with Father Roger Schmit: 'So here we go: seven-thirty A.M., two queers and a Catholic priest' (Kaufman, 2001, p.65). This is the first explicit acknowledgement in the play of the homosexual orientation of many of the Tectonic company members, and by including it here it raises the uncomfortable question as to whether they too – like the media – are simply in Laramie to capitalise on something they have a vested interest in pursuing. It also openly reveals that company members made a prejudicial assumption that Father Schmit would offend them with negatively judgmental views on Shepard's homosexuality. Schmit's

words are then spoken, but the conversation is not about condemning gay people but the verbal habits of the homophobic: 'every time you are called a fag, or you are called you know, a lez, or whatever ... Dyke, yeah, dyke. Do you realise that is violence? That is the seed of violence?' (Kaufman, 2001, p.66). Following this, the next short sequence/moment shows townsman Andrew Gomez, using the very language Schmit has just referred to and condemned, whilst reflecting laughingly on the violence that Shepard's attackers might encounter in jail 'Why did you kill a faggot if you're going to be destined to be a faggot later' (Kaufman, 2001, p.67). Such openness and juxtapositions are what many have credited the work for in the verbatim landscape.

The process of developing this and other work shows that Kaufman initiates work through his hunches, but he does not know exactly what the piece will entail until the company has explored it through extensive workshopping of the 'moments'. This methodology creates authorial tension: Kaufman's process leads to him needing collaborators to create a piece, while also needing to control the direction of the work's overall development. Kaufman developed practices to address these tensions both for *Laramie* and in subsequent work. The hunches that he starts projects with lead Kaufman to create what he calls his 'organising principle' – a tool against which the work is measured to determine whether or not individual 'moments' fit the scope of the overall project and what should be included in or excluded from the final performance: 'The most important thing for a director to say is, this is our organising principle' (Kaufman, 2002, in Brown, 2003, p.18). The 'organising principle' which Kaufman generated for *The Laramie Project* was that of a town looking at itself in the year after Shepard's murder. During the early developmental workshops, Kaufman established through-lines specifically for *Laramie*: the story of Laramie, Matthew Shepard's story and the story of the company. Like the list of forms, the 'organising principle' and the through-lines were posted in the workshop space as a constant reminder to the company. Kaufman elaborates on the effectiveness of this technique:

Then you can turn to somebody and ask, 'Where does that Moment fit in the through-lines? There's no room for it'. So you are educating a group of actors about how to tell a story, and you are being very clear about what story you think should be told. But it is very important that everyone agrees on the organising principle, then you spend two years peeling away what that organising principle is and how you want to present it. (Kaufman, 2002, cited in Brown, 2003, p.19)

As the director of a collaboratively created project that spanned such an extensive period of time, Kaufman had to be very clear about the 'organising principles' in order to lend objectivity to his decisions regarding which 'moments' to include and which to let go. Referring to the creation of *Laramie*, he continues:

When you have fifteen people in a room who have all conducted interviews, who have invested themselves over the course of a year in their characters and their interviewees, unless you have a very strong organising principle, how do you determine what text makes it into the play and what text doesn't make it into the play? (Kaufman, 2002, cited in Brown, 2003, p.19)

### **Out of Joint/Joint Stock**

At the same time as *The Laramie Project* was making its impact on verbatim theatre, Out of Joint Theatre Company was overlapping with its reputation for verbatim productions. The company began in 1993 as a partnership between Max Stafford-Clark and Sonia Friedman. Previously Stafford-Clark had enjoyed great success with Joint Stock which had been founded in 1974 by himself, David Hare and David Aukin, in close association with former artistic director of the Royal Court, William Gaskill. Joint Stock

established a reputation for pioneering new writing, including several female playwrights, for example starting the careers of Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker, and the aforementioned Louise Page.

Each of Joint Stock's productions including *Fanshen*, *Epsom Downs*, (1977), and *Cloud Nine*, (1979), were created using what became known as 'the Joint Stock method' (Bolton, 2015, p.116). This process had elements associated with Theatre Workshop's style. There would be three-to-four-week workshops where the company would explore an agreed central idea through a mixture of research, improvisation, acting exercises and discussion. Following this, the playwright within the project was given a further ten weeks in which to write a play script. This copy would then be workshopped for five additional weeks and revised as a script ahead of a final performance run. This meant that actors contributed to the making of and not just the performance of the play (as with Theatre Workshop etc.). Into this working method, in 1976, struggling for ideas on what to do as their next project, the company made its first steps into verbatim theatre:

We started work with Jeremy Seabrook ... and the play just wasn't coming, and Bill said well let's do a verbatim show and nobody even knew what that was but Bill had done a show some years earlier at the Royal Court which had been based on transcripts. Then David, an actor in the company, came in with a newspaper cutting and said well let's do a show about this ... (Stafford-Clark, 2008)

This was the starting point for *Yesterday's News* (1976), Joint Stock's third production overall and its first verbatim project. This example will be discussed in Chapter Three, together with an overview of Joint Stock's other works. The chapter will then move on to the verbatim work which Out of Joint went on to develop in the late 1990s and early 2000s (the company also worked on non-verbatim projects during this time). As will be seen, Stafford-Clark and Out of Joint Theatre Company's work under the

'verbatim' heading (not all their work was verbatim) made great impressions upon the landscape and history of verbatim theatre during this period. As well as celebrated, under the 'verbatim' heading their work has, though, also caused controversy, including in regard to discussions on truth and authenticity. This is why I have chosen the company and Stafford-Clark within my primary corpus: to offer a perfect opportunity to celebrate verbatim theatre and how it continued to evolve leading up to the millennium, whilst also analysing the potential pitfalls, through a case study scrutiny of one of Stafford-Clark's most celebrated verbatim plays, in his collaboration with David Hare: *The Permanent Way* (2003).

However, before looking further at case studies and the development of verbatim from its past to the present (and beyond), it is important to foreground more clearly the overall contentions with regards to 'truth' and 'authenticity', and the ethical debates which threaten to undermine the form.

## **Chapter Two – wrestling with ‘truth’, ‘authenticity’, ‘real’ and ‘facts in verbatim theatre**

I watched a film – *The Impossible*, 2012, – about the tsunami on 26 December 2004. It began ‘the following events are based on a true story...’ (*The Impossible*, 2012). The words then faded away, except for two: ‘true story’. To me, this suggested these words were the ones the creative team wanted the audience to focus on, to be reminded of throughout the following 90 minutes. ‘Whatever you see is truth’ was the message I felt these words communicated: ‘it happened in the way you are about to see’ is what I expected as a result. As a consequence, according to Paget, this was also saying: ‘this [film] has more validity because it is truth’, for, as he states, ‘the promise of truth provides a cultural passport to credibility and then this buys our attention and compels belief’ (Paget, 1990a, p.3). With the film’s opening I was again struck by why truth seems so important to us; why we as humans search for it, cling to it and find such comfort in and, as noted before, appear to ‘worship’ facts (Ellul, 1973, p.xv).

This fascination, this need for ‘facts and truth’ that, Ellul, Paget *et al* believe that humans crave, drove me to start this thesis – as outlined in the introduction – and to investigate the verbatim theatre form because it labels itself as offering ‘truths and facts’.

Throughout the verbatim’s history, when discussing how verbatim theatre performances are put together, the complex and often thorny issues of truth and facts keep raising their heads. These issues threaten to undermine the form of verbatim theatre for some. But is a quest for truth viable or indeed important? And if so, what exactly is the quest? When we say words like ‘truth’ ‘authentic’, ‘real’ and ‘fact’ – what is it that we actually talking about? Paget calls it a ‘conceptual jungle’ to attempt to fine tune definitions (1990a, p.2). Paget also argues that no information can ever be context-less because it exists

in a void where there is always some form of mediation. This mediation Paget refutes as it cannot ever be objective, because objectivity can only exist in a politics-free society, which is an impossibility. The only thing objectivity can do it seems is serve in helping to identify levels of distortion.

This chapter, whilst taking heed of Paget's warnings on semantics, will attempt to arrive at useful definitions within the conceptual 'truth' jungle, though like Alexander Sesonske in his article 'Truth in Art' in *The Journal of Philosophy* 'I can make no pretense of solving the problem of truth in art' (Sesonske, 1956, p. 345).

I shall be using *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (Shulze, 2017) as a framework for this chapter. Like me the author, Daniel Shulze, has a curiosity about authenticity and the potential relationship between reality and representation. His book analyses the culture of authenticity in relation to theatre by examining three types of performances: intimate theatre, as seen for example within the work of Forced Entertainment; immersive theatre, as exemplified by Punchdrunk; and finally, documentary theatre, with examples from Robin Soans and David Hare. His theories propose that our culture is desperate for 'authenticity' (and indeed he says we should do away with the inverted commas), and not only as a postmodern nostalgia. He argues that we are at a time when the real and representation is being renegotiated once more and that audiences appear to be 'in search of first-hand experiences which they find lacking in their everyday life' (Shulze, 2017, p.253). I shall be looking in discussions at the link between the words 'authentic' and 'real' that Shulze uses, and what this means in regards to 'truth', and where 'facts' lie – and what this all means in relation to verbatim theatre as a form.

### **Attempting definitions of 'truth' and 'authenticity'**



Theodossopoulos, like Paget, warns about trying to arrive at singular absolutes with regards to defining truth, and specifically 'authenticity', it being 'a mission impossible' (van de Port 2004, cited in Theodossopoulos, 2013, p.341). He points out the complexities that lie ahead in defining authenticity:

anthropological scholarship is moving in the direction of acknowledging the existence of plural, multidimensional authenticities ... [writing] about authenticity as verisimilitude, authenticity as genuineness, authenticity as originality, and authenticity as the authority to authenticate. (Bruner, 1994, cited in Theodossopoulos, 2013, p.340)

Theodossopoulos then acknowledges that this polysemy affords an invitation to understand authenticity within one's own sphere of understanding and to apply one's own meaning to suit. This, of course, then means that one has distorted 'authenticity', thus moving it away from any certainty of that which it was.

At all turns in history, authenticity has strained at the leash to be defined, resting now in a 'paradoxical position between subjective legitimisation and objective certification' (Funk *et al*, 2012, cited in Shulze, 2017, p.39).

The word 'authentic' derives from the Greek *authentikos*, which has a number of meanings which then distil to mean whole and complete. In Latin the word *authenticus* becomes much narrower in its meaning and more to do with not being a forgery – it refers to documents believed to be written by authorities themselves (Dietschi, 2012, cited in Shulze, 2017, p.15). In his book *Sincerity and Authenticity* – based on a series of six lectures given at Harvard University in 1970 – Professor of Philosophy Lionel Trilling points us to another meaning, which Shulze does not; the negative of the origins of the word

'authentic' – *authentico* – in Greek to mean 'to have full power over' (Trilling, 1972, p.131). This reminds us that the pursuit will not only be clouded by semantics, but could also be a negative.

Daniel Dietschi maintains that authenticity was not an issue for philosophers or those in classical antiquity such as Plato, or Socrates, who subscribed to a notion of having an inner knowledge which is inspired by truth itself. This means in its origins, authenticity was not up for debate because everyone had it within them to be able to judge fiction, from lying (Dietschi, 2012, cited in Shulze, 2017, p.15).

The historical position begins to unravel in the Renaissance according to Shulze. Scientific discoveries of the time – for example by Galileo – began to rationalise the world. This meant that there was a growing realisation that many things, including society itself, were a manmade construct and therefore not divinely made. Though this was the time when 'authenticity' began to be questioned, the word 'authenticity' doesn't appear in the English language until the eighteenth century, when it also arrived in German and French. 'Sincerity', which Trilling uses alongside 'authenticity' in his discussions, he notes as entering the English language in the first third of the sixteenth century, deriving from the Latin word *sincerus* and initially taking the same meaning as the Latin – clean, or sound or pure. It could refer not just to persons, but also to material and immaterial things. For example, with wine – the sincerity of it meant not that it had some moral quality, rather that it had not been adulterated. In terms of 'sincere doctrine, religion, or Gospel' one would be saying that it had not been tampered with, falsified or corrupted' (Trilling, 1972, p.13).

What this etymology indicates, according to Shulze, is that, until the Renaissance, authenticity and any confusions over what it actually meant were not considered necessary or significant enough to warrant a specific word attribution, though it was evident in 'discourse'. For example, Shulze points to the literature of Shakespeare where Polonius says to Hamlet 'to thy own self be true' (Shakespeare, Act One

Scene Three, line 78, in Thompson, Thompson, Kastan, 1997) which would seem to relate in some way to Plato's notions of an inner knowledge inspired by truth. Schiller, in line with classical philosophers, wrote: 'Every individual human being carries within him, potentially, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being, and it is his life's task to be in harmony with the unity of this ideal' (Schiller, 2016, p.93). Trilling goes on to discuss the battle, that if it is our best self it isn't all of our self, because our selves coexist with another self which might be less good in a public moral regard, but which is more accurately our true self: 'if sincerity is the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self, this state of personal existence is not to be attained without the most arduous effort' (Trilling, 1972, pp.5-6). When a writer (or indeed any artist) is laying forth a truth from themselves, it is not in fact from them, for they are a persona within their own work. Are we all offering personas rather than authenticities and truth? Finally, if we do achieve an authenticity that is true to ourselves, will it be to the destruction of others as the origins of the word might indicate?

These questions, Shulze notes as truly arising in the decades of the Enlightenment, where an increasingly literate public sped up the discussions. Unlike before, there was a public sphere of discourse and people knew more about the world and thought of others. In knowing others, there began the realisation of the rupture between one's true self and the one shown as a public persona. Theodossopoulos chooses to pinpoint the late seventeenth century as the period when philosophical interpretation started to look at 'authentic' in terms of the representation of the inner Self, 'as this can be discovered and defined by Oneself, challenging previous perceptions of authenticity that were determined by social hierarchies and social relations' (Theodossopoulos, 2013, p.341). The rise of an understanding or notion of 'society' meant a diminishment in individuality; a decline in individuality is then a decline in authenticity – authenticity being something that can only be achieved as an individual. Thus, the debates became greater, the search for truth and authenticity rose, and the formal qualities of

the term are formed: individuality rather than collectivity and 'emotion and truthfulness rather than rationality and truthfulness' (Shulze, 2017, p.21). It becomes noted at this time how societal pressures lead one's self towards conformity and a 'normalisation' (whatever this means). Rousseau, for example, determined that society was the very thing that destroys our authenticity, because our sentiment of being depends upon the opinions of others. In the Enlightenment, and especially in the Romantic era, through voices such as Rousseau's, being authentic came to mean searching further inwardly to discover a repressed inner child untainted by society and its pressures to confirm and comply. Charles Guignon notes of Romanticism that it started the trend for 'a nostalgia for an earlier state ... by turning inward and hearing the inner voice of the true self ... our access to the source being not through cognitive reflection, but by feeling' (Guignon 2004, cited in Shulze, 2017, p.21).

By the twentieth century Sartre was advocating in *Huis Clos* – 'Hell is other people', and with it, the dehumanisation of authenticity.

The commonplace belongs to everybody; it is the presence of everybody in me; in me, it belongs to everybody; it is the presence of everybody in me. In its very essence it is generality; in order to appropriate it, an act is necessary, an act through which I shed my particularity in order to adhere to the general, in order to become generality. Not at all like everybody, but to be exact, the incarnation of everybody. (Sartre, 1944, cited in Trilling, 1972, p.103)

Mankind, thanks to the works of Darwin *et al*, in no way could place himself at the centre of the universe or creation, nor could mankind view the inner self as being free from exterior erosion and moulding. Mankind became more certain that what is called 'self' is a construct by forces external. Only a century before this time, there seemed a core that was free and incorruptible, but that time had passed

with science and psychoanalytical inquiry, and so it leads to that which we can recognise today – a past which mankind longs for, believing that was a golden age of truth and authenticity, a past which mankind tries to preserve in antiquity, and a feeling of loss and being lost.

### **Postmodernism and discussions of authenticity**

Another major historical time-frame for debating authenticity was the 1960s when postmodernism emerged. It is during this time that the notion of a golden age, which mankind wanted to go back to in terms of self and authenticity, was judged to be forever lost, where the postmodern world recognised that it was constructed, far from nature and natural processes, and the promise of authenticity was therefore a paradox because it is itself a mediated construct: 'Not only has the real disappeared in modern life, but also the notion of truth has become more and more obsolete, and postmodernism has de-centred "self" – so there is no core to be true to' (Guignon, 2004, p.120). This meant that instead of a singular self, multiple constructed identities were determined to exist in its place. Shulze argues this new understanding could have been potentially cleansing: 'when mankind comes to terms with the fact that the subject, the world, the languages we speak and basically everything around us are constructed and in themselves meaningless - a new and true history can begin' (Shulze, 2017, p.25). However, postmodernism did not have this affect, indeed Shulze proposes that the success of documentary (including verbatim) categories of performance today is directly because authenticity is a major force for audiences as a result of a turning away from postmodernism (Shulze, 2017, p.25).

There is a further complicating argument that we must also acknowledge within discussions; that should we find the real, it would not be real enough for us anymore. Sherry Turkle gives the example of Disneyland's Animal Kingdom where visitors complained about the real animals not being as good as the robotic ones (Turkle, 2011, p.4). This then links to de-realisation of reality which follows the thoughts and

work of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard and his concept of simulacra. Here simulacra is used in terms of its more modern meaning and not its original meaning from the sixteenth century where it entered the English language to mean a representation of a superior kind such as a statue of divinity. By the nineteenth century its meaning had become synonymous with inferior representations, usually of an image, lacking the quality of the original. Rather, though, than reject the inferior representations, because authenticity today is elusive and reality is representation that has no depth, we are left instead to accept simulation: 'the real itself is constructed by the simulated which, in turn, is a copy of the real, resulting in a Möbius strip of simulations that make up the totality of our contemporary reality' (Tomlin, 2018, p.28). The simulacra neither attempt to deceive, nor hide reality – rather they maintain that reality is not relevant to the current understanding of our lives and because all conceptual positions operate within the simulacra, there is no position from which things can be accepted or denied 'there is no 'outside' position from which to mount a critique as the oppositional act is always already commodified as a consumable image of itself (Tomlin, 2018, p.27). Such are the experiences of the 'consumers' lives that are themselves so artificial, that, in turn, we accept this. The only deceit of the simulacrum, according to Jean Baudrillard, is that it doesn't conceal the truth, it only conceals that there is no truth to be revealed anymore (Baudrillard, 1988, p.102). As Liz Tomlin points out, any representation – say for example verbatim theatre – that purports to model itself on a corresponding reality is then questionable as it has no ultimate origin or basis on which it can validate itself (Tomlin, 2013, p.29).

### **Deliberately 'faking it'**

Adding to the complexities (and the drive) for the 'authentic', 'real' and 'truth', we also need to consider the deliberate 'false' that does not admit to being 'false', which Shulze recognises when he says

‘that for the past two or three decades a feeling of fakeness and deception in almost all areas of cultural production has surfaced’ (Shulze, 2017, p.8). This can be attributed to, for example, the rise in reality TV shows since the new millennium – especially reality gameshows such as *Big Brother*, where the participants are ultimately competing for a title or a prize. Annette Hill in *Reality TV: Factual Entertainment and Television Audiences* (2004) tells us that at the heart of the debate about reality TV there is, once more, a paradox: ‘the more entertaining a factual programme is, the less real it appears to viewers’ (p.57). ITC/ BSC (2003) research into audience trust in the accuracy of factual genres revealed that 89 per cent of viewers of nature and wildlife view such programmes as just as accurate as news (Hill, 2004, p.62). This is apparently because audiences have confidence in the presenters of natural history programmes and news bulletins, often perceiving them as ‘friends’ and authoritative figures, and as such, they are trusted to present facts in a truthful manner (Hill, 2004, p.62). Compare this to reality gameshows where audiences believe that members of the public are encouraged (often for fame and monetary gain) to ‘act up’; here there is only a 20 per cent trust in the accuracy of what is portrayed as honest. In the ITC/BSC 2003 survey 73 per cent thought stories in reality TV gameshows were made up, or at the least exaggerated, and only 12 per cent of stories about real people were thought to be real in such formats.

When one considers it, why would there not be exaggeration leading to ‘fakeness’ when celebrity and money could be the reward? *Big Brother* in 2000 was Britain’s first major TV reality gameshow which then spawned many imitators. The series, which was marketed at first as a social experiment/documentary rather than ‘entertainment’ was a major hit, due in no small part to Nick Bateman aka ‘Nasty Nick’ – the pantomime villain – who, infamously, deliberately deceived and manipulated his housemates so as not to be voted off. His expulsion from the house was then followed by interviews on daytime TV and radio shows, in newspapers and magazines, all of which made him one of the first reality TV gameshow icons. Nick is a great example of how being ‘fake’ can be lucrative, and with his success inspires others, and as a consequence, the audience is more likely to assume that

'fakeness' is the norm in such formats. *Flatmates'* (C4, 2000) executive producer Tim Hincks rebuts some of these arguments by arguing that reality TV creates a format where real life is shown, but things happen more quickly due to the environment and the intensity of the situation. However, as the ITC/BSC survey proves, audiences do not agree. The only exception to this is the hidden camera reality TV format which is viewed as more 'true to life' according to Hill's research. Even though hidden camera programmes involve a high degree of construction, where people are set up and filmed without their prior knowledge or consent, the very fact that they do not know they are being filmed means that audiences believe that the action they are watching is less fake and more authentic. As consumers, we the audience have a different mode of engagement in response to reality programmes compared with documentary programmes. We have a different level of trust and belief in the levels of 'fakeness'. Hill observes:

Reality gameshows have capitalised on the tension between appearance and reality by ensuring that viewers have to judge for themselves which of the contestants are being genuine. In fact, audiences enjoy debating the appearance and reality of ordinary people in reality gameshows. The potential for gossip, opinion and conjecture is far greater when watching reality gameshows because this hybrid format openly invites viewers to decide not just who wins or loses, but who is true or false in the documentary/game environment. (Hill, 2004, p.70)

Another example of 'fake-ness' that may be driving the search for authenticity is fake news. This is not a new issue, as Ellen Redling points out in her 2018 article 'Fake News and Drama: Nationalism, Immigration and the Media in Recent British Plays'. Redling notes, for example, that in 1930s Germany, the media were employed to spread anxieties, such as a fear of foreigners, which then drove nationalism. The difference now, according to Redling, is 'the wide-ranging effects of the enormous digital revolution which leads to an ever-increasing amount of data that people are dealing with on a daily basis – as well



as social bots and trolls driving fake news via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms' (Redling, 2018, p.89).

Fake news enables certain movements, such as far right-wing populist groups, to gain momentum quickly. An example that Redling refers to at length and which most are familiar with would be in respect to Donald Trump, his administration, and the election campaign which saw him win office in 2016. 'Fake news' here is referring to fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organisational process or intent. Those producing 'fake-news', the outlets that push it, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news could be seen to have hybrids and overlaps with misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people). One study evaluating the dissemination of prominent fake news stories estimated that the average American encountered between one and three stories from known publishers of fake news during the month before the 2016 election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p.227). This is actually likely to be a conservative estimate because the study tracked only 156 fake news stories. Another study reported that false information on Twitter is typically retweeted by many more people, and far more rapidly, than true information, especially when the topic is politics (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018, p.1148). Knowing how many individuals encountered or shared fake news is not the same as knowing how many people read or were affected by it. Evaluations of the medium-to-long-run impact on political behaviour of exposure to fake news (for example, whether and how to vote) are essentially non-existent in literature (Lazer *et al*, 2018, p.1095). What is known about our reading of news is that individuals tend not to question the credibility of information unless it violates their preconceptions or they are incentivised to do so. If this is not the case, individuals may accept information uncritically, because it pleases them (desirability bias), or because it is more familiar. People prefer and indeed, consciously or unconsciously, seek out news and information that confirms their pre-

existing attitudes (selective exposure). Individuals will then view information consistent with their pre-existing beliefs as more persuasive than dissonant information (confirmation bias). This means a fake news story will spread and not necessarily be checked by those readers who agree with its content on some level. Adding to this, people tend to remember information, or how they feel about it, while forgetting the context within which they encountered it. This means that fact-checking of the source can be difficult because a person will recount what they remember but not give the listener a chance to examine the source as it will be forgotten. The ‘authenticity’ of the news will be reduced in the retelling, even if it wasn’t fake news in the first place:

Call it misinformation, fake news, junk news, or deliberately distributed deception, it has been around since the first human whispered the first malicious gossip. But today’s technologies, with their elaborate infrastructures for uploading, commenting, liking, and sharing, have created an almost ideal environment for manipulation and abuse – one that arguably threatens any sense of shared truth.

(Waldrop, 2017, p.12632)

As Redling warns, it is a major danger to underestimate fake news and its power. Even when it might seem too fantastical to believe, such news can and does have serious consequences. It also shows us the lengths someone might go to ‘in order to push through [an] agenda’ (Redling, 2018, p.88).

Fakeness pervades everything, and the subsequent consequent search for authenticity is not just within media, TV, theatre, art, literature – it is also in everyday practices. We see images that are secretly airbrushed to make us buy a look or believe in the potential benefits of a face cream (for example). Whether there are benefits or not – we have bought said cream based on something that has been falsely presented to us, something manipulated. We see images that are photoshopped, sometimes again creating fake news, fakes that we laugh at, are shocked by, share on social media, and then, as a result,

make us question any picture we see next and wonder whether it too was manipulated using a photo package. Steve Levitan – producer of the hit American comedy *Modern Family*, with its documentary/fake reality TV form – is quoted as saying, ‘audiences – maybe because of reality TV, maybe because of YouTube and the Internet – are longing for things that feel more authentic and real’ (Levitan, 2011, cited in Funk, Groß & Huber, 2012, p.243). Funk, Groß & Huber argue that there is a misdirected quest for authenticity, which some (like *Hermeneut* editor Joshua Glenn) have called ‘ugly’, and is carried out mainly by white, middle-class people seeking the ‘authentic’ in such areas as pre-aged furniture and clothing, nostalgic restaurants, organic food and holidays (Funk, Groß & Huber, 2012, p.239). These then become ‘fake authenticities’, in essence – falsities – that are unconcerned with the original that they are insufficiently aiming to emulate and instead satisfy by delivering kitsch or ‘camp’. Notice also how many food and drink outlets/restaurants add the word ‘artisan’ or offer dishes/ingredients that are labelled ‘craft’, ‘heirloom’ or ‘heritage’. All these words are claiming to offer the consumer something more authentic, something more real than the fake alternatives that they feel have swamped their lives which they are now seeking to retreat from.

‘Authenticity’ Shulze argues, is a term that becomes prevalent in certain periods historically and then is confined to marginality again (Shulze, 2017, p.14). Moments of drastic change are such times when the term is most sought and consciously mused upon, and often when there is a profound feeling of having lost something within society as a whole. In the 1970s, Lionel Trilling was arguing that the world seemed ‘lacking in authenticity’ and in his book *Sincerity and Authenticity* Trilling writes, ‘much that was once thought to make up the very fabric of culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual, or downright falsification’ (Trilling, 1972, p.11). Whether the world is actually more or less ‘authentic’ now than it was is not, according to Shulze, that important. The perception that it is *to any degree* less so, or more ‘fake’ is enough to make us wish for less superficiality in our contemporary culture. In seeking less

superficiality, we are seeking instead genuine human experiences, something that feels authentic, again (Shulze, 2017, p.36) – including within our choice of theatrical experience.

This returns us to the rise of documentary theatre, and within it verbatim theatre - part of an overall current societal drive/strive for 'authenticity': 'verbatim theatre grew in popularity across the millennium thanks to the public's distrust of politicians, journalism and respected organisations such as the BBC ... Theatre's reputation as a political and critical medium for exposing truth fed the public desire for 'real' answers providing clarity that other mediums could not provide' (Lane, 2010, pp.77-78). Interestingly, when I interviewed Julia Samuels from theatre company 20 Stories High – whose work features as a case study in Chapter Four – she remarked about the prevalence of verbatim theatre:

I don't know why but there's something probably in this moment that we're all ...  
truth feels like it's become much more ... what's the word I'm looking for ...  
subjective ... it feels like people are wanting to get to something that's as  
unmediated as possible. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

Tomlin, like Shulze, talks about the rise of documentary forms of theatre in the final decade of the last century and continuing now into the twenty-first century as a rise from a prevailing climate of scepticism (Tomlin, 2013, p.114). She looks to Stephen Bottoms and Carol Martin, who suggest that specifically the events of 11 September 2001 are central to the rise in popularity of the verbatim form, and as Bottoms puts it 'mere dramatic fiction has apparently been seen as an inadequate response to the current global situation' (Bottoms, 2006, p.57). This links to Paget's work, which also talks of heightened political times as often spurring on documentary forms and methods (Paget, 2010, p.173). Reinelt, too, talks of how living in a world of simulation, as we have been discussing, where everything is understood to be only a copy of a copy and therefore nothing is for certain, means that public performances of the

'facts' become one way in which we can hold on to the very notion of 'facts' and of building meaningful narrative, or understanding, around them (Reinelt, 2006, p.82).

It would seem that in a time of 'doom and gloom', and where we are bombarded with 'fake' and copies, rather than escaping to realms of fantasy (or 'fiction-land' as Shulze calls it, [2017, p.199]), positively we strive for the very opposite.

But does documentary and verbatim specifically offer the authentic, the real, the truth and facts that we are seeking and which it advertises (whether explicitly, or implicitly) and which its rise in popularity is based upon? Moreover, can it ever offer these things, or is it ironically adding to the problems, to the lack of authenticity, truth and the real, and instead just another example of 'fakeness'?

### **The 'real' and 'authentic' in performance**

To begin here, let us consider a paradox: how can theatre per se fit in as part of a solution to 'fakeness' and a lack of 'authenticity', where actors are pretending to be someone who they are not? Is theatre not an impossible place for anything authentic and truthful given this, or, counter-paradoxically, is the acknowledged and up-front 'fakeness' of theatre what then gives it an authenticity? Theatre acknowledges its 'deceit', and therefore is less fake? As Tomlin says in her book *Acts and Apparitions* (2013) the relationship between theatre and 'the real' has always been disputed and contested. Plato condemned all artists because he said they were imitators who merely replicated things as they existed in the real world. Though few would use the same wholly damning and limited arguments today, 'the underlying suspicion of an art form that is able to offer an illusion of the real through representation remains a remarkably consistent factor in subsequent theatrical moments' (Tomlin, 2013, p.7).

The early modernist movement of naturalism attempted 'to develop precise and mimetic theatrical representations of the real world' (Tomlin, 2013, p.20). This affected acting style and production methods. Does this mean though that naturalism was more 'fake' because it was trying to be 'more real' than, for example, the counter-theatrical movements that followed the naturalistic period, for instance, the styles of Brecht or Artaud? For example, an actor using the manifestos of Brecht will not try to create an illusion such that the audience can 'lose themselves' in the work; the *verfremdungseffekt* ensures that there is a conscious distance between the actor and the role where the audience are able to be disconnected from the narrative enough to have useful and self-aware internal dialogue about what is going on in thematic and political terms. The audience will be engaged – but not with character – rather with the issues being presented.

For an actor using Stanislavskian methods within the naturalism style, it will be very different. There will be a character with depth and no detachment to point at the illusion. There will be emotional experiences that have passed from the actor into the character to make the character appear more realistic (not real) to the audience. Is this more illusionary than the Brechtian style of acting? Is this more or less 'authentic'? Moreover, does it become less authentic when repeated i.e. is the premiere/first performance authentic but anything after in the show's run a copy? If so, does this mean the further into a run, the more mechanical (and theatrical) the performance and the less 'true' and authentic it becomes?

What then when the actor is playing a real person – as in verbatim theatre for example? Shulze's opinion overall is that an actor in the verbatim form is reduced 'with almost no creative input of their own' (Shulze, 2017, p.204), because they are not creating a role, they are instead copying a person and presenting them and their words on stage. This I immediately refute as untrue. As any actor playing a real person would testify (in verbatim or otherwise), even if a great deal is known about the person, there are still gaps to be filled just as one would if creating and playing a fictional role., and therefore Naturalistic

rehearsal exercises, Stanislavskian process and performance methods are all as relevant in the verbatim form, as will be proven in the further case studies in this thesis. This ensures that the actors do far more than 'copy' as in a caricature or in a grotesquely hollow way. Furthermore, as will also be proven through case studies to follow, in verbatim theatre, often the creative input of the actors extends into the gathering of the material, and therefore the actor's role is not creatively redundant, but is, in fact, greater (as mentioned earlier, this is an aspect of verbatim that Paget celebrates (Paget, 1987)). I do though agree that by being actor-researchers, as Shulze names those in verbatim work, this creates a contention. Actors search for an emotional truth through instinct, creativity and physicality, whereas the label 'researcher' implies science, neutrality and factuality. Shulze finds the term an 'oxymoron' – one which creates further illusions for the audience, apparently reassuring them that they are getting more 'authentic' and 'factual' an account, but potentially misleading the audience with this assurance. Case studies will look to discuss this within the next chapters.

Whilst there are matters here to be resolved regarding actors in verbatim theatre and 'truth', we need not return to Plato's damning view of actors and their profession, whose soul he thought deteriorated by identifying with the morally inferior characters that they impersonate. Nor do we have to go down the route of Rousseau who, in discussing broadly how one should be true to oneself and the idea of persona which we looked at earlier, proposed that an actor diminishes his entire existence as a person because he was in effect counterfeiting himself (Trilling, 1972, p.64) – part of Rousseau's overall belief that theatrical art falsifies the self and contributes to the weakening of society as a result.

### **Methods of 'reducing the gap' between stage and world in verbatim theatre**

The austere staging that often characterises verbatim work (and indeed many of the productions

discussed so far in this thesis) gives a sense of realism and guards against theatricality. This reduces the distance between stage and world. Another aspect which reduces the gap is referring to or referencing real world events, places and known people. Furthermore, something which I had not previously considered but which is very credible, is the use of documentary TV/film techniques in the performance and staging which Shulze compellingly argues adds to our engagement and belief that what we are seeing could be and probably is factual. Use of news broadcasts, voice-overs, captions, statistics and projections of documents all serve as signs which we decode as showing us 'factuality', an example being the previously discussed *The Laramie Project*. This further authentication of its own narrative through an atmosphere of factuality means that, as long as what is presented 'conforms to the conventions of realism' (Paget, 1990a, p.114) and seems credible, the verbatim performance will be taken as fact by the audience. With the reduction of theatricality, comes an increase in perceived authenticity – rightly, or wrongly '[verbatim theatre] strategically deploys the appearance of truth, while inventing its own particular truth through elaborate aesthetic devices' (Martin, 2006, p.11). An example of 'wrongly' would be *Three Posters* (2006), which Shulze and Carol Martin (2009) refer to. *Three Posters*, is a tribunal verbatim play that centres around a last tape by a Lebanese suicide bomber, and features actual media recordings and live performances via screen, without making clear to the audience which is which. Here we have a mix of presentation styles and sources for the audience to navigate, all leading to an ultimately unclear level of 'truth', (which, incidentally, could also make an audience mistrust any use of such staging in the future). This example is also interesting given that Shulze proposed to take tribunal out as a verbatim hybrid (as discussed in the previous chapter), because, he declared it more 'truthful' and with the sources easier to trace. This is indeed true for *Three Posters* – a member of the audience who looks closely into the sources would be able to tell which originally came from the suicide bomber, and which were live recordings by the actors. But this is not evident 'in the moment' and is obscured by the staging methods – and therefore again refutes Shulze's claim that tribunal is less open to 'liberties' in the way it presents or treats the



archive.

Another example that obfuscates would be David Hare's tribunal-historical verbatim play *Stuff Happens* (2004), which was based on the events leading up to the 2003 Iraq War, beginning in 2000 with George W. Bush's election. Here the austere set resembles a TV documentary, and where the actors multi-role the same characters as if to reject any pretence at 'being the real person' (which would be unreal, and an untruth) giving a sense immediately for the audience that what they are witnessing is 'truth'. But beneath the apparent transparency in the staging and presentation choices of this tribunal-history verbatim hybrid, is the 'deception': Hare spliced archive and verbatim material with pure fiction and used his own imagination. As a convention, if someone within the work is speaking directly to the audience, the audience are to understand that these words were directly taken from interviews or testimony. Scenes between characters were, then, 'the fiction' created to fill in backstory and flesh out narrative. 'Clearly nobody knows what happened when Blair met Bush in Crawford, Texas, in 2002 – two men went for a walk in the woods. So it's left for me to imagine what happened between [them], it's totally imagined' (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.63). The only nod to any of this 'fusion' is in the reading of the play text: 'what happened, happened. Nothing in the narrative is knowingly untrue' (Hare, 2004, author's note). This disclaimer – which most of the audience would never be aware of because it is 'hidden' away from the performative moment by being in the play text and is never spoken on stage – also does not clearly outline that what the audience are watching is a fiction/non-fiction, truth/imagined fusion. This means that the audience may well (and did) take at face value what they saw; in turn, they would leave with a biased and fictionalised version of whatever the truth was; some might later read about the fusion and potentially mistrust thereafter the verbatim form.

The sub-form tribunal-historical often includes fictitious exchanges, in the case of *Stuff Happens* the exchanges occur between politicians in the Bush administration who discuss the invasion of Iraq, these

are added because there is a limit to what the writer can access (due to secrecy acts for example) and in some cases because a person may now be deceased (in the case of Wheeler plays, for example *Hard to Swallow*, 1991 which features in Chapter Four).

The mixture Bottoms argues, is not clearly acknowledged in this example of Hare's work, and I agree that this is a fair criticism; even though Hare himself, in the introduction, calls it a play not a documentary in his introduction, uses the character 'an actor' to introduce the fictitious sections and explains the 'fictitious' scenes in the text's introduction – this does not overcome the possibility that some would, and did, think all of *Stuff Happens* was from actual conversations/testimony. Garson refers to this piece in her book *Beyond Documentary Realism* (Garson, 2021), discussing that there is almost a 'contract' between Hare and the audience formed from that which he writes in the introduction acknowledging it is not purely verbatim, and this note is reaffirmed (and thus the contract attempts to be reaffirmed) in the course of the play too. However, as Garson asserts, rather than give a sense of clarity to the performance, and to where it sits as a verbatim piece per se, instead it leaves the audience faced with 'an ambivalent dilemma' (Garson, 2021, p.142):

One horn of the dilemma being pinned down to a willing suspension of disbelief ... and the other, more prudent horn, critically confronting the extent and seriousness of Hare's intervention ... (Garson, 2021, p.144)

Garson does positively assert that there is a 'successful comic side-effect' to Hare's 'authorial interference' (Garson, 2021, p.142) with the direct addresses, and asides, working to give a *verfremdungseffekt* which is useful to the piece and for the audience. However, the criticisms that the 'blending' approach was unclear, and therefore misleading, Garson (like me) supports. This perception was enhanced by the misleadingly austere set. In 'Putting the Document into Documentary' (Bottoms,

2006) Bottoms goes as far as to use a ‘manipulation tag’ to point at Hare, and to call into question all Hare’s works in general, describing them as ‘disingenuous exercises in the presentation of truth, failing (or refusing?) to acknowledge their own highly selective manipulation of opinion and rhetoric’ (Bottoms, 2006, 57-58). Interestingly, Hare himself has subsequently criticised the verbatim form, and this will be considered further in Chapter Five. In addition, Bottoms’ damnation of Hare is addressed directly in the next chapter within the case study analysing *The Permanent Way*.

### **Testimony as an agent of bias**

As has been discussed, the archive is often used as evidence to create verbatim performance; this and evidence such as court testimony was used in *The Colour of Justice* for example. However Shulze makes a useful distinction that is quite crucial regarding truth for verbatim: testimony is always a narrative. This leads to the next contention: the person giving the testimony is giving their opinion and view – they also are editing, selecting, giving a bias (intentionally or otherwise).

To return to the idea of authenticity and persona from earlier in this chapter, in being interviewed any interviewee could be wittingly/unwittingly playing a persona, saying what they believe ‘society’ wants them to say or that which makes them appear ‘better’ in some way. This testimony is therefore a truth mediated by the speaker, with conscious or unconscious bias and misrememberings. Even before the editing has changed the ‘truth’ – in the very act of speaking the truth may have been lost (deliberately or otherwise). This can be addressed to some degree by the creative team seeking a variety of perspectives and offering different testimonies to allow the audience to weigh up the ‘truths’ alongside each other; however, this is then open to the audience/listener assigning a ‘truth’ to wherever they interpret it to be, and possibly adding their own layers of bias. As was discussed before in regards to the spreading of fake

news, we will remember what suits us and recount it in ways that we agree with and we have an inner self that is not necessarily to be trusted as a guide.

Of course, what an audience sees is verbatim, but even if the original witness came directly to the stage, it is important to remember that their testimony has already been tainted with imprecision and shaped by narrative conventions. (Shulze, 2017, p.202)

A person's (or witness's) memory is also fallible, and therefore they can only claim to offer a subjective truth. The illusion becomes greater the more one looks into it: a) an actor is speaking the words of b) a witness who may at best have been a little 'out' in their recollection, and then this has been c) edited by a creative team. Truth and authenticity have tumbled down several flights here, even if everyone was aiming for the truth. If anyone in the process was also aiming for bias, falsification or lies, then the distance from truth grows even greater.

Tomlin agrees that this is an issue within verbatim theatre, especially because there has been an increasing use of personal testimony in verbatim since 9/11 which undermines 'truth claims' further due to private narratives being less accessible to verification processes than public documents (Tomlin, 2013, p.116). Tomlin goes on: 'the shift from public information to private narratives raises the stakes for the ethics of performance because the citation of testifiers, as distinct from the citation of testimony, can too easily become representation of testifiers' (Tomlin, 2013, p.116). There is a greater risk here of subjective authority which Tomlin, like Shulze, argues can intentionally or otherwise lead to a re-writing of self. What Tomlin infers by this seems to propose greater issues for participatory or expository verbatim where the words used in the performance are not from public documents and are, rather, 'private narratives'. Once again, I refute this. As discussed in Chapter One, I do agree that information from public record, such as

the material in tribunal verbatim, is endowed with 'object authenticity' (Funk *et al*, 2012, cited in Shulze, 2017, p.206); I do not though agree that this 'object authenticity' means there is necessarily going to be less bias or subjectivity, because the testimony if, say, coming from a court record, will still be a representation of the testifier – it is still 'a narrative'.

### **Gathering testimony and editing as conscious or unconscious agent of bias undermining claims of 'truth'**

*Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair For The Crime of Aggression Against Iraq – A Hearing* (2007) by Richard Norton-Taylor, is an example of a tribunal play with an inbuilt bias. In 2007 two barristers: Philippe Sands QC (for the prosecution) and Julian Knowles (for the defence) tested the evidence of the potential grounds for an indictment of Tony Blair for the crime of aggression against Iraq whilst in office as Prime Minister. This testimony was then edited into the play by Norton-Taylor affording the audience a view into the possible criminal implications of the Government's decision to use force against Iraq and support the American-led invasion. The impetus for the play was an acknowledged biased belief that there was a case to answer, and the play serves this bias, not aiming to assign guilt, but arguing conclusively that Blair should have been indicted. Incidentally, it is interesting once more that Shulze in his book keeps returning to tribunal as the form that offers the most 'truth' of all the hybrid forms of documentary theatre, and again, I do not agree, and the bias shown in *Called to Account* highlights another reason why not.

Another play that has an acknowledged and deliberate bias would be the 2008 verbatim-tribunal hybrid play *Deep Cut*, which charts the attempts of Des and Doreen James to find the truth about their

daughter, Private Cheryl James and her death at Deepcut barracks in 1995. In putting the work together, it meticulously referenced every single section of verbatim material to its original source. However, this does not mean it is 'the truth' – it can claim to be authentic in that it can be traced, but that is all.

The aim (or bias) of the play was to try and provoke a public enquiry as the parents did not believe the inquest's verdict that their daughter – and three others at the barracks between 1995 and 2002 – had died by suicide. Though all the sources – reports from Hansard, transcripts of testimony, press cuttings – were carefully referenced, the very selection of these materials in the first place, and the editing and ordering of them thereafter, was to serve a very personal belief of the parents and the verbatim practitioner Philip Ralph.

For Shulze, issues surrounding the selection of source material is the defining area that undermines verbatim and other forms of documentary theatre's claims at truth and authenticity. In the process of selecting, or choosing who to interview, there has already been 'editing'. Whilst everything in the archive may be truthful, or validated, for example, not everything from the archive is included (and could never be due to the amount gathered and available). Through inclusion, and indeed exclusion, of words or of sources in editing, there is an exercise of power and of bias. Philip Osment, speaking about his play *Mad Blud* (2011), as will be seen in Chapter Four, acknowledged that he knew he was creating something for the audience to interpret by placing sequences next to each other in the way that he did. His own view was evident in the ordering of the material, or he at least made someone's opinion seem ridiculous and unfounded by placing a counter and more accepted opinion next to the first testimony. As will be analysed in the case study in Chapter Four, Julia Samuels in *Tales from the MP3* (2012) said in her ordering of material and indeed in gathering the interviews, that she juxtaposed material to find light and shade and was considering the audience – not 'truth' – as part of a creative objective.

The necessity of creating an effective dramatic journey for an audience means that the structural choices made are at the service of the drama – the art – not a sense of objective truth. Crafting a drama then necessarily brings with it the political sensibilities of the writer, director and production, presenting to an audience only another ‘version’ of the truth: the one they want us to hear. (Lane, 2010, p.66)

Shulze calls these the invisible politics within documentary theatre and indeed within verbatim: ‘it only selects the issues and documents it wants to treat but also brings them into an order of discourse with very particular aims’ (Shulze, 2017, p.222). What we actually then get is verbatim theatre, especially in historical and tribunal examples, shaping new histories. Neutrality cannot be absolute, even if that is what the creative team are seeking (which they are not, always, as thus far proved).

A respected practitioner discussed previously in Chapter One – Peter Cheeseman – also did not deny that bias came into his work through arrangement and editing, and that subjectivity and ‘personal judgement’ did play a part in the choices he made. The way he ‘authenticated’ the bias was through ensuring there were multiplicity of voices, with contradictory viewpoints represented through the gathering of primary material (Favorini, 2009, p.37). This created an audience of active and engaged listeners rather than one that just absorbed the work without question or active thought.

Returning to Norton-Taylor, his *The Colour of Justice*, referred to in Chapter One, included the edited testimony of 17 individuals over 69 days of public hearings, leading to 11,000 pages of an inquiry report which was distilled into a 100-page play which presents what he describes ‘as fair, balanced and rounded a picture as possible’ (Norton-Taylor, 1999, introduction). Norton-Taylor was aware that most people would not wade through the 11,000 pages of the report but felt there was a great deal he wanted more people to engage with and debate – again he was aiming for an audience who were actively involved

in the internal debates he was presenting. The source material was naturally edited, and therefore given the amount of testimony available the audience were going to only debate a narrow slice of the overall source material, as Shulze has outlined previously. Subjective editing was inevitable to provide a theatrical experience that would engage and 'entertain' (in the broadest sense of the word) the audience, and in this there was bias, though the final product was ultimately highly regarded by critics and according to Luckhurst for example, *The Colour of Justice* achieved Norton-Taylor's goal of creating discourse about the issue of racism amongst a wider audience than had been achieved through the trial alone (Luckhurst, 2008). As Moore points out in her thesis, Norton-Taylor – who admits bias in his work *Called to Account* – also admits bias in his introduction to *The Colour of Justice*, in that he was seeking to highlight in the editing the exchanges between the police and the family which showed the tensions that were evident: 'in fact, exchanges that explicitly reference these tensions comprise 37 pages: roughly one-third of the play ... this highlights Tribunal editing as ultimately creative a process' (Moore, 2013, p.26), and also a potentially biased one. It is also worth remembering that earlier I was critical of Hare, in connection with his play *Stuff Happens*, for not alerting the audience to the mix of 'real' and fiction in the work and only acknowledging this mix in his introduction to the play text which many of the audience might never afterwards read; the same criticism should also be applied to Norton-Taylor who also only alerts readers to his editing in the play text whereas the audience watching the performance are unaware.

Tomlin argues that many of the twenty-first century examples of verbatim, such as DV8 (who feature in Chapter Five); Tectonic Theater, with *The Laramie Project* (Chapter One); and Anna Deavere Smith's work (also Chapter One) – seek a pluralistic approach to their work to offer multiple perspectives and opinions, none of which claim in their own right to be authoritative (Tomlin, 2013, p.120). This results in an often-conflicting array of testimonies delivered by a singular person multi-rolling or by an ensemble.



Yet in spite of this there is still usually a dominant political perspective or objective that the audience will receive.

Here we have 'the playwright's agenda' as Clare Summerskill refers to it in her book *Creating Verbatim theatre from oral histories*, (2021, p.21). Summerskill's book reflects on verbatim theatre and oral history performance work from theory and then into how to complete such work as ethically as possible. In reflecting on the playwright and those instrumental in putting the work together, Summerskill states: 'theatre makers who create work, however much they might aspire to 'set the record straight', cannot lay any claim to objectivity' (Summerskill, 2021, p.21). Summerskill, like Paget and Lane previously, notes there is always a political or social nature to the project, and proposes: 'before embarking upon a verbatim theatre project, playwrights must identify their own aims and agenda' (Summerskill, 2021, p.47). I agree with this position, and I believe that to have an agenda is not inherently a problem, but to conceal it, either deliberately, or by not following Summerskill's advice before setting out, is ethically a problem and one that undermines the resulting project and indeed overall the form.

Summerskill also considers bias and agenda not just in the selection of what to include or exclude, not just in the editing process, but in the gathering of the testimony – in the interviews. Here she identifies that the testifier could not only offer biased testimony, but they could be led unethically to give accounts that serve the bias of the playwright/production team. She usefully identifies the imbalance of power that exists when a person is asked by a theatre-maker if they would be interviewed for a theatre piece, such as a verbatim theatre hybrid form: 'even when the playwrights gain narrators' trust with ease, they must also recognise the power imbalances in that exchange and accept that this work involves an increased level of ethical awareness' (Summerskill, 2021, p.47). Again, I agree with this from Summerskill, and think her book offers genuinely very useful ideas for verbatim practitioners regarding self-awareness and working ethically: 'consent must be secured from narrators by firstly explaining to them the purpose of

the interview and exactly how the content will be used in the future' (Summerskill, 2021, p.51). Within case studies that follow in this thesis I have uncovered instances where these biases have not been acknowledged, or where there are ethical question marks that in turn undermine claims of 'authenticity' and 'truth'. As shall be seen, I have also gathered a great deal of evidence of positive practice and processes where the practitioners have used a methodology akin to that which Summerskill proposes in order to check themselves and their work (sometimes with the testifiers, for example), proving that whilst it is not possible to be wholly 'objective', it is possible and highly necessary to be wholly ethical within the form.

### **Verbatim theatre and the responsibilities of the audience**

The final part of this discussion concerns the audience. In *Theatre Audiences*, (1997), Susan Bennett traces the history of the modern audience noting that through the seventeenth and into the mid-nineteenth century there was a steady progression of separating the fictional stage world and the audience (Bennett, 1997, p.3). With the emergence then of naturalism in the late nineteenth century there was further suppression of the participation and the imaginative capacity of the audience (Tomlin, 2018, p.171). In *The Emancipated Spectator*, (2007) Jacques Ranciere finds links all the way back to Plato in terms of passivity from the audience. This was, then, another reason for Plato to dismiss theatre, just as we saw earlier in his dismissal of actors and their craft. Ranciere summarises Plato as follows:

Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. Looking is bad for two reasons.

First, it means standing before an appearance without knowing the conditions which produced that appearance of the reality that lies behind it. Second, he who

looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator means being passive. (Ranciere, 2007, p.272)

As was noted in the discussion of acting styles and 'truth' earlier, Brecht's theories and manifestos were conceived following frustration with the passive audiences of bourgeois theatre and they have attempted to answer the criticisms of Plato rather than acquiesce with his dismissal of theatre altogether. The audience was activated cerebrally rather than physically by Brecht's work, as opposed to the experiences of the audience with the work of, for example, Artaud *et al.* Tomlin argues that the twenty-first century audience is still positioned in opposition to the implied passivity of spectator, whether it be in watching verbatim or other forms of theatre. She also discusses the use of immersive forms in terms of activating the audience which have evolved as a result of the spectator's greater desire to engage more actively physically as well as cerebrally. This is a further development following on from Artaud's and Brecht's attempts to reduce the audience's distance from the performance in order to promote critical evaluation and to connect the audience to the very centre of the performance. A bridge to both Brecht and Artaud might be the work of Augusto Boal, with his Forum Theatre where spectators can actively change the narratives they are seeing before them in order to better understand a scenario, problem or dilemma in relation to the audience's wider context of oppression.

What though of verbatim theatre? What of a model where the spectator is at a distance, does not participate or have power to change what is presented to them – what is their role and responsibility to find 'truth' in what they are being presented?

When practitioner Julia Samuels watches verbatim, she says she believes that what she is watching is (semantic issues aside) truthful, but she is aware that the work has been edited and she understands what this means in terms of process and outcome. It has been claimed that all audiences of verbatim

know and understand this. They know that what they see is a version of events – a mediated construct. However, there are counters to these claims, as we have seen with *Stuff Happens*. Another example is *Vincent in Brixton*, (2003), which explored Van Gogh's time in London. Ursula Canton interviewed students after the performance and a large number of the audience said they had learnt something about the painter as a result of the production, however, it was actually fictitious in large parts (Canton, 2008, cited in Shulze, 2017, p.226).

Melanie Moore in her thesis suggests, positively, that verbatim employs the methods of counterfactual thinking as described by Lubomír Doležel. Doležel says, through 'ascribing causality, evaluating historical figures' actions, and judging the importance of historical events' (Doležel, 2010, p.115), documentary theatre proposes counterfactual questions of the audience, thus engaging them to actively reflect on what they are being presented. Doležel and indeed Moore are clear that this form of theatre requires activity rather than passivity from the audience and is not about presentation and 'mindless' acceptance of the presented material. Moore offers some examples of these counterfactual questions inspired by verbatim theatre productions: in regards to *The Colour of Justice*, could Stephen Lawrence's murderers have been prosecuted were it not for the institutionalised racism of the Metropolitan Police? For the next chapter's case study *The Permanent Way*, audiences are left 'inspired' to debate whether the decision to privatise British Rail led to the deaths of innocent passengers and could they be considered murder victims or are there grounds to prosecute as manslaughter? 'Verbatim theatre asks its audience to face these counterfactual questions and seek answers to them as intensely as the authors of the plays' (Moore, 2013, p.22).

Bottoms argues that the processes by which verbatim plays have been formed need to be more explicitly made clear than currently occurs, in order for audiences to 'adopt an actively critical perspective on the events depicted' (Bottoms, 2006, p.61). Unlike Doležel, Bottoms does not believe this is a natural

process for verbatim audiences and instead (as was noted previously) believes that audiences can be 'gullible' (Bottoms, 2006, p.57). He also seems to have a negative opinion of many verbatim practitioners (not just Hare) in assuming they are intent on manipulating and exploiting these 'gullible' audiences.

Whilst I agree that Bottoms is right that any intended manipulation of truth or the material being presented should be acknowledged, and that it is not a necessarily a natural process for audiences to have a critical perspective unless directed in some way by the material, I disagree with Bottoms in that he fails to acknowledge and credit the independent thought of the audience to at least some degree.

Doležel and Moore, by contrast, do give the audiences credit for being alert and aware enough of the fact there is fiction within verbatim and especially historical verbatim productions. Like an argument in an essay, historical verbatim supports what is true with a surrounding narrative that is fictionalised to an extent but still grounded in factual research. The audience should be, and for the most part is, aware that there is a dialectical two-and-froing between fictionalised and non-fictionalised scenes '[only] naïve readers' remain unaware and believe it is all non-fiction' (Doležel, 2010, p.124). The fictionalising is not about deliberate misleading, so much as filling gaps that cannot, in spite of everyone's best intentions, be filled because of the limitations of the archive. Reinelt puts it well when arguing that documentary theatre as whole contributes to a search for knowledge and understanding whilst making an aesthetic form and experience out of its materials (Reinelt, 2006, p.81). Reinelt isn't claiming here that documentary theatre (and within, verbatim theatre) presents an absolute truth, nor is she criticising it for not doing so, instead she celebrates that whilst it cannot effect social change by itself, it is a contribution towards this end and that aesthetics and reception as 'entertainment' will have been behind some of the presentation decisions.

Another element Bottoms fails to legislate for or acknowledge is the audience's own bias. Like the writers, their own pre-existing cultural knowledge and politics come into the performance space, and whether they acknowledge it or not, the audience will have a bias that will affect how the material they see presented is then mediated by them. As was also noted earlier in regards to fake news, individuals are more likely to accept information uncritically if it pleases them (desirability bias), or because it is more familiar; people prefer and, indeed, consciously or unconsciously, seek out information that confirms their pre-existing attitudes (selective exposure). This is something that no verbatim practitioner can legislate for, nor should they, and it shows that, even if it were possible to produce a totally un-biased, un-mediated performance, the experience would still be 'biased' and 'mediated' due to the pre-existing cultural and political conceptions the audience bring with them. Rather than being 'gullible' and 'easily manipulated' by verbatim practitioners who are deliberately trying to mislead (Bottoms, 2006, p.57), audiences are potentially agents themselves of biased manipulation. There is though, no need to look for 'blame'; acknowledgement of shortcomings is enough, and the form remains positive, if flawed, by the 'truth' limitations it cannot escape.

Bottoms also fails to recognise the valid point that Moore makes in her thesis, and which practitioners have said to me in interviews to be featured in due course, that verbatim writers are still playwrights, and therefore they should be allowed to serve artistic intentions as well as serving truth, indeed, we the audience want it of them – we want to know what happened but we want to be shown it in a theatrically engaging way. Sesonske argues that the presence of 'truths' in any art form contributes positively to the aesthetic experience of the audience (in whatever form 'audience' is in relation to whichever 'art' is being 'viewed') (Sesonske, 1956). It is possible to also assert that when truth is being offered to us in the arts we are not just having aesthetic experiences, but also cognitive ones.

## Early conclusions

Wrangling with definitions of 'truth' and 'authenticity' is every bit the minefield that Paget *et al* warned. Whilst the tangle is inescapable, and semantic absolutes impossible, what is clear is that verbatim theatre cannot present an objective truth or it would not succeed as art – and it must succeed as art to be effective as a theatrical spectacle. Verbatim theatre serves two masters: truth and art, and it will always exist in a delicate state between the two. An interesting perspective from Alexander Sesonke, in recognising that the discussion of truth and art has been a philosophical problem since Plato first speculated about art and society, discusses art and truth in relation to science, where there is absolute truth and facts. He outlines that there is a belief that art cannot ever be connected to truth because if one says in any way that it is then one is implying that the function of art is to 'discover and disseminate truths – that art is a method of obtaining and communicating knowledge' (Sesonke, 1956, p.346). This cannot be, as the function of discovering and disseminating truth belongs to science. Therefore, if art is concerned with truth it becomes a competitor to science, and this encroachment for some cannot be tolerated, or even contemplated. The opposing argument is that if we say art isn't concerned with truth then we are saying instead that the function of art is to give pleasure, to entertain only, which then contradicts the esteemed place that art occupies in human interests and the importance of arts in our cultures (Sesonke, 1956, p.345). Therefore, some assert we must say that art is concerned with truth to hold such a valuable and valued place in our societies and cultures. Sesonke suggests that it is better to separate the contentions thus: it is not a function of art to disseminate truths, that does not though mean that truth should not be aesthetically important in art. Art does not have to be 'knowledge' or 'pleasure' – it can be both.

The relationship between or mix of art and truth is not though, in my opinion, an undermining tension, but it is one that the leader of the verbatim project needs to be aware of and acknowledge – to

themselves in the first instance, and then to others within the process of putting the piece together; to some degree they should also make the audience aware of that there might be decisions in the way work is edited or presented 'for the sake of art' or 'for the sake of political bias' rather than 'for the servitude of truth'.

As shall be further demonstrated in the case studies, this acknowledgment is not always made, either due to a deliberate attempt to deceive the audience, or (more often) due to ignorance/lack of self-awareness, both of which lead to questioning the form with regards to 'personal integrity and ethical vigilance' (Summerskill, 2021, p.58).

The next chapter will investigate the areas of concern raised in this chapter through the primary case study *The Permanent Way*.



### **Chapter Three – the work of Stafford-Clark within the verbatim form**

As outlined at the end of Chapter One, in discussions of the early development of verbatim theatre, Joint Stock and Max Stafford-Clark especially have become synonymous with the form, and yet the company and its director's link to verbatim began unexpectedly (in 1976), and only as a result of other projects at the time failing to come together.

Bill Gaskill, co-founder of Joint Stock, had confidence in the form and way of working because he had used it previously in his 'play' at the Royal Court, *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* (1959) which was based on transcripts of the Hola deaths and the subsequent enquiry.

The Hola massacre (as it was titled) took place as part of the Mau Mau uprising against British colonial rule at a detention camp in Hola, Kenya. The Mau Mau was deemed a terrorist organisation, dominated by Kenya's major ethnic grouping, the Kikuyu. Kikuyu extremists created an uprising against the colonial authorities in response to what they saw as the theft of their land by white settlers. As with many extreme groups, they declared that anyone who was not with them was against them, which meant they also declared war on many other Africans who did not share their demands; indeed, Africans and

non-conformists from their own tribal group were amongst the biggest casualties killed during their terror campaign. The group started a nationalist uprising which quickly turned into an ethnic civil war. The Hola detention camp, in eastern Kenya, was established to house detainees from the Mau Mau terrorist organisation and its supporters, classified as the most uncooperative in complying with a 'rehabilitation process'. In the camp prisoners were subjected to a programme of systematic abuse that prison guards had apparently been authorised to inflict in order to break the will of the prisoners and to get them to submit to the authority of the colonial government.

The improvised performance, which Gaskill brought together with Keith Johnstone, specifically explored the events on 3 March 1959 when 11 Kenyans were reportedly bludgeoned to death by British colonial forces at the camp, and many more suffered life-changing injuries due to their beatings. The deaths were at first recorded as due to the Kenyans drinking contaminated water until a report came out in *Time* magazine which prompted a full enquiry and revealed the true circumstances surrounding the deaths. *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* saw a group of black actors, who had been together for only a week, improvise the evening's performance based on documents (including the official enquiry) which they had explored in rehearsals. Gaskill and Johnstone also took part in the 'performance' often appearing in the interludes for some form of comic or pointed 'aside' on the preceding segment, sometimes parodying the guards from the camp.

Many critics were to some degree negative in response to the production, saying it was a strange mix where it was unclear how much of the dialogue was ad-libbed and how much, therefore, the work linked to 'real' facts and testimony, and where overall improvising documentary was shown to be a blend that did not work. However, there were moments where interesting material was created, and almost every published review at the time also acknowledged this. These included moments where the actors read from the official transcript whilst the others mimed what was being read aloud; here 'document and improvisation fused' (Young, 1959, p.11) and that while 'this attempt at something quite new was not

successful doesn't at all mean that it was a wasted effort. I hope they will carry on experimenting with this awkward but potentially very effective form' (Young, 1959, p.11). Other critics of the work and its blend of fact and improvisation, noted in spite of the flaws that if it sent the audience home to study the facts, then it was worthwhile (Hill, 1959, n.p.).

### **Joint Stock's first verbatim piece - *Yesterday's News***

*Yesterday's News*, (1976), tells the story of Costas Georgiou, aka 'Colonel Callan' who had 'recruited a mercenary army to fight on the side of the rebels in Angola against the government, and he'd recruited a number of people who had been ex SAS and ex paratroopers ... and it became a nine-day newspaper wonder' (Stafford-Clark, 2008) with Georgiou murdering 24 of his own men, for which he was executed (after the play had been performed). It was David Rintoul, an actor at the time with Joint Stock, who first drew the company's attention to a press clipping about the mercenary who shot his own people in Angola; with the company struggling at the time for inspiration 'Bill said, "let's do a story about that"' (Stafford-Clark, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.47). Gaskill was then the rallying voice in the 1970s for the others, and without whom Joint Stock and Max Stafford-Clark may never have added to the landscape of verbatim as they did.

The company worked like journalists once the stimulus article had been found; another of the company's actors, Paul Kember, had actually formerly been a journalist at the *Liverpool Echo*, and through his contacts the company got an interview with the person who had recruited the mercenaries 'which was the interview everyone in journalism wanted' (Stafford-Clark, 2008). To their surprise, the recruiter was perfectly willing to talk to the theatre company. This spurred on further detection work, and the unearthing of fruitful contacts with rich testimonies. For example, the company found the journalist who had first covered the story, and a school-girl whose boyfriend had been one of the volunteers. Then the biggest *coup des grâces*; 'through Ken Cranham [who had been talking to a taxi driver] we also found two

of the mercenaries who then came to see us' (Stafford-Clark, 2008). David Hare and Stafford-Clark met one of them in a local pub:

He said 'how much money have you got?' So we said 'a tenner,' and he said, 'well, I'll think about it, I may come or I may not.' So, we went back ... suddenly the rehearsal door burst open ... he'd kicked it open with his foot, and the other [he'd phoned his mate] went around kicking open all the other doors ... and then they sat down, and they talked for three hours ... (Stafford-Clark, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.48).

Stafford-Clark recalled that they opened up to the point of boasting 'like a wine connoisseur would discuss different years of wine ... they talked to us and they talked to each other and we used it absolutely in the performance' (Stafford-Clark, 2008), giving details of how they'd plan and executed their ambushes to cause the maximum fatalities, which Stafford-Clark described as 'horrible, but compelling' (Stafford-Clark, 2008). Once the interview was done 'we knew we had a show then' (Stafford-Clark, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.48). This reveals a contentious issue within verbatim/documentary theatre – that of the risk of voyeurism, or of sensationalism; this will be returned to presently.

In terms of the methods for collating and arranging to meet each contact on this and other projects, Stafford-Clark reflects that 'what I've found about verbatim ... it takes quite a long time to find the story within the subject, but once you've found it things move remarkably quickly' (Stafford-Clark, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.49). The method by which *Yesterday's News* came together had the hallmarks therefore of Stafford-Clark's subsequent verbatim pieces in that the company spoke to all sides and allowed themselves to 'be surprised by it' (Stafford-Clark, 2017). It was also indicative in that the company didn't use tape recorders, and in not using them Stafford-Clark says 'I don't think we're ever

purist verbatim' (Stafford-Clark, 2008). However, in a workshop in 2017, Robin Soans, whose work with Stafford-Clark and Out of Joint included the verbatim play *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) countered this when he said: 'My way is notebook and pen; I feel gadgetry puts people off. Note taking is unthreatening. [the person] is much more likely to relax' (Soans, 2017, in Stafford-Clark and Soans, 2017).

After the collation of material for *Yesterday's News*, the actors had a five-week rehearsal period where they would improvise and try and 'impersonate' the characters as well as what they said. This again has been the usual methodology for Stafford-Clark and it has been suggested this makes a verbatim play a democratic process, where under his direction the actors are given the freedom to take possession of the material and characters; this will also be discussed further presently.

Though the production was the company's, and Stafford-Clark's first verbatim project, Stafford-Clark has always used research to some degree in his work, for example the non-verbatim project by Caryl Churchill *Mad Forest* (1990 – which Stafford-Clark directed) features a twenty-minute section which was the result of research that she and students from Central School of Speech and Drama gathered by visiting and talking to people in Romania.

Verbatim is, according to Stafford-Clark, a research tool:

I mean really what a verbatim play does is flash your research nakedly. It's like cooking a meal but the meat is left raw; like a steak tartar. It's like you're flashing the research without turning it into a play. The hard thing is to turn it into dialogue, to make the transition between somebody talking to the audience and drama.

(Stafford-Clark, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.51)

Interestingly, when asked by Hammond 'would it be possible to make a verbatim play without a writer present?' Stafford-Clark replied conclusively "no, impossible" (Stafford-Clark, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.53) suggesting a creative and editing process rather than a simple presentation of

exact testimony, which will be explored in more depth presently, along with other contentious issues within verbatim generally, such as authenticity and truth, in Stafford-Clark's *Out of Joint* and Hare's *The Permanent Way*.

Following the success of *Yesterday's News*, the company and Stafford-Clark embarked on another verbatim project that year – *Fanshen* (1975) which was also the start of collaborations between Stafford-Clark and Hare. The production was inspired by William H. Hinton's 1966 book *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* which described the land-reform campaign as part of the implementation of Communism during the Chinese Civil War conducted from 1945 to 1948 by the Chinese Communist Party in 'Long Bow Village' (the name used in the book for Lucheng Village, Shanxi). Hinton lived in the village in spring and summer of 1948 and witnessed the scenes described in the book and recreated earlier events based on local records and interviews with participants. The book was lengthy – over 600 pages – and initially the actors, together with Stafford-Clark, Gaskill and Hare, struggled to find their way into understanding, from their privileged Western positions, what the events must have been truly like for the Chinese people within the narrative. The method for getting clarity on Chinese life, politics and culture was through workshops where each actor would research around a certain section of the text then give the others lectures on their learning. Endless discussions would then be had on meanings, exercises like hot seating and status improvisations took place, but still it proved difficult 'the material is very remote and impersonal' wrote Stafford-Clark in his diaries (Stafford-Clark, 1974, vol. ii, n.p.); 'begin with T'ai Chi/Very nice ... still the same basic problems: a) lack of familiarity with text and material; b) totally alien nature of Chinese. Trying to be them when you can bring nothing of your own cultural associations to the exercise'. 'English acting depends a great deal on the nuances of class difference and suddenly none of that matters' (Stafford-Clark, in Ritchie 1987, p.111). Still by September (having begun mid-August with the workshops) Max Stafford-Clark reported that the 'main difficulty is finding some way

of getting into subjects that we don't have much instinctive sympathy for and understanding of' (Stafford-Clark, 1974, vol. ii, n.p.). Stafford-Clark talks of the process getting easier only when Hare began to write some scenes. These workshops proved to be a breakthrough and Stafford-Clark has commented, 'I recall the rehearsal period as being Joint Stock at its best. The group had become politicised by the material and infused with purpose' (Stafford-Clark, 2007, in Roberts and Stafford-Clark, 2007, p.37). However, they also continued to be fractious and sometimes negative because 'David was right. All technique comes from content and endeavoring to rehearse without the play will always be an arid enterprise' (Stafford-Clark, 2007, p.34). By the end of the workshop period, Stafford-Clark reports 'David Hare's pellucid and uncluttered script passed several scrupulous inspections by William Hinton and was deemed sufficiently optimistic about the process of Communism. It provided us with both story and style, and Bill and I began to attack the text with a sense of direction' (Stafford-Clark, 2007, p.37). This evolved the working method of the company, and years later, when Hare and Stafford-Clark were discussing a possible project in a 2002 meeting, it was this methodology and style that both knew they would be committing to should things progress.

### **The Permanent Way**

In 2001 Stafford-Clark read an article in the *Guardian* that writer and journalist Ian Jack subsequently turned into a short book called *The Crash That Stopped Britain* (2001) which examined the Hatfield rail disaster that took place on 17 October 2000. Jack, in his book, outlined the decline in the British railway system, including its safety record under privatisation. The Hatfield crash happened when a GNER InterCity 225 train bound for Leeds from Kings Cross travelling along the East Coast Main Line derailed just south of Hatfield station as a result of the left-hand rail fracturing as the train passed over it. This metal-fatigue-induced derailment resulted in the death of four people and more than 70 were

injured. The immediate aftermath saw huge delays caused by hundreds of speed restrictions imposed by Railtrack (which was replaced by Network Rail in a Government intervention into the crumbling privatised industry). This was by no means the worst train disaster in terms of fatalities that had occurred thus far under privatisation (Southall, 1997, seven dead; Ladbroke Grove, 1999, 31 dead), but it had a huge effect on rail services and the way that the privatised rail companies had to operate and invest thereafter. At the time of writing his book, Jack had none of the 'positive outcomes' to reflect upon as a result of the tragedy, only the fatalities, and his was a damning indictment of how privatisation was directly accountable for the decline of Britain's railways and the deaths in the subsequent crashes.

During a meeting in November 2002, Stafford-Clark and Hare made it clear that if a mutually attractive catalyst could be found they would like to work on a project again having worked successfully together on *Fanshen*.

Hare entered into conversations with Stafford-Clark having become dissatisfied with aspects of contemporary theatre, including its lack of political 'bite', and what he saw as the increasing power of the director in comparison to writers. An antithesis and reaction to this for Hare was 'verbatim' theatre work at the time, such as Richard Taylor-Norton's previously discussed work *The Colour of Justice* (1999), of which Hare observed:

...laid before a live audience all the subtleties and intricacies of British racism, with a clarity which I had never seen emulated by television, documentary nor newspaper. The play seemed not just a rebuke to the British theatre for its continuing drift towards a less and less important subject matter. It also exposes other forms by the sheer seriousness and intensity with which it was able to bring the theatre's special scrutiny to bear. (Hare, 2002, n.p.)

Knowing this, Stafford-Clark sent Jack's short book to Hare and then this was the mutually interesting starting point for a project together. Hare recalls:



Max had the unlikely idea of a new project based on the recent history of the railways. Eager, as always, to sell me on the prospect, Max pointed out that, however terrible the result, the lucky playwright would nevertheless at the end be able to claim that they were the author of the best play ever written about the privatisation of British Rail. It would not, he said, be a crowded field. (Hare, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.129)

Uncertain whether he could write on so unlikely a topic, Hare said he would enter into a workshop period, though he committed no further than this initially. Early the next year, 2003, Stafford-Clark and Hare – along with Assistant Director, Matt Wilde – assembled a troupe of actors (including Pierce Quigley, Bella Merlin, Lloyd Hutchinson, Sally Rogers, Nigel Cooke, Matthew Dunster, Maxine Peake, Paterson Joseph and Peter Wright), some of whom he had worked with before, to explore this starting point through further interviews and research to see if there was sufficient material for it to become an extended project. Stafford-Clark, in a pre-show talk at The National Theatre, recalls:

We had a two-week workshop which was really a research period not just David but the actors me and my assistant director, 11 or 12 of us in all, so for that two weeks we were maybe more like journalists than like actors talking to people who were involved at every level. We didn't know, and the decision came about as we were doing the research, that it would be a verbatim play and would depend much more on the direct testimony of the people we talked to than we realised at the time. (Stafford-Clark, 2004, n.p.)

In groups of two or three – sometimes with Stafford-Clark and/or Hare, sometimes with tape recorders, often without – the actors set off to interview a wide range of people who had been involved

with the privatisation or had encountered the railways in some way since their privatisation in 1991. The interviewees included union leaders and heads of train operating companies, as well as survivors and those bereaved from the four major train crashes that had occurred between 1997 and 2002. Some interviews took place in The National Theatre Studio in Waterloo, and some turned out to be interviews conducted with the individuals in their own home; during one rush-hour on 4 February, the actors were at Waterloo Station asking commuters what they thought of the train services. Actors even donned red uniforms and spent the day serving in the buffet car and clipping tickets on a train travelling up the West Coast Mainline in order to gain further testimony and insight. One of the actors, Bella Merlin, recalls:

A unique aspect to the process is that the writer and the actors develop a delicate and nuanced relationship. It requires a creative team with an openness, an innocence, and the awareness of a kind of metaphorical empty space into which the information they are about to uncover can flood. (Merlin, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.124)

Each day the actors would return from the interviews and encounters to feed-back that which they had gathered; Ian Jack also came along in the early days to offer ideas and listen to the testimonies. Most of the interviews were an hour or more in duration, and in some cases the actors spent the whole day in the company of some of the subjects. Upon return they were encouraged by Stafford-Clark and Hare to recall in character:

If three people had interviewed the Chief Executive of Virgin Trains, then those three – regardless of age or gender – would adopt that person’s appropriate physical stance and vocal tone and answer questions asked by the rest of the group. (Merlin, 2003, p.2)

These recollections in character, and any subsequent improvisations, meant that potentially a great deal of primary material gathered by the actors was then condensed to about twenty-five minutes. One of the researcher-actors, Dunster, called this 'theatre distillation' and upon which Merlin reflects 'we were determining to a large extent what we considered to be theatrically interesting enough to feed back to Hare in the first place' (Merlin, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.125). In this way, Hare (as the primary writer) was presented with the actors' 'filter', sieving as Merlin describes it, or interpreting. In the process the actors, along with Stafford-Clark, noted that vocal, physical and psychological details became as important in the construction of the play as the factual information itself. Merlin goes on to discuss how Hare would heavily notate the improvisations with as much on idiosyncrasies in speech patterns as the facts, and would then probe the actors to respond to areas that were interesting to him, and they would obligingly respond further in character. The construction of this and indeed any of Out of Joint's verbatim projects, Stafford-Clark describes again as a democratic methodology in that the actors take possession of their characters; thus, the collation and embodiment process is directly connected. He also notes that the actors can then become protective of the people they are portraying and the material from their testimonies, and this can be advantageous to a director and the actor; furthermore, Stafford-Clark suggests actors would search out a character they identified with and could therefore possess more readily. The whole process, and dynamic, with the actors centrally involved, was a practice that drew Stafford-Clark and Hare in:

I'm more drawn towards plays that need an ensemble. And *The Permanent Way*, if you recall, was in a very real sense created by the actors: they assembled the material; they brought the research to David. So, you're creating an ensemble, and the ensemble is creating the ensemble play: I suppose that's the way of looking at it. (Stafford-Clark, 2004, n.p.)

For actors, it was, an exciting process too; as Merlin says: 'We were Hare's hunter-gatherers'. From the very beginning we were literally shaping the drama with our own bodies in a deeply psycho-physical way' (Merlin, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.125). This is a common feature of verbatim theatre, as discussed by Paget, in his 1987 *New Theatre Quarterly* article: 'verbatim theatre offers its actors a greater share in the means of production, in the Marxist sense – it offers an ensemble way of working' (Paget, 1987, p.318). Paget goes so far as to say that this methodology is a fundamental precept of the form offering actors the unusual and welcome opportunity to not be simply interpreters but instead makers of the work.

Yet how democratic Stafford-Clark's method actually was in practice is not entirely clear. There are no testimonies from actors who explicitly question Stafford-Clark's methods or counter the 'democratic process' claim. However, in looking closely at testimonies from actors, it is clear that, ultimately, Stafford-Clark worked as one would expect of a director: he had his vision, and led projects towards that vision. This 'vision' may well have been influenced by others, including the actors, but is doubtful that they could have ever changed the course of the production if it was not in-keeping with Stafford-Clark's overall aims and objectives (and potentially with it – bias – as discussed in Chapter Two). It is also evident in reading Stafford-Clark's diaries that changes were made as was seen necessary by him or the writer during rehearsal. Furthermore, annotations on the scripts used in the rehearsal process do not allude to a democratic process – they again allude to a director, and a vision, with some collaboration along the way.

Either way, going into the project, Hare was acutely aware of this methodology having seen it first-hand already with Stafford-Clark in the development of *Fanshen*, and he was highly encouraging of it as a practice, regarding it (just as the other actors did) as a natural part of their function as actors. Hare saw it as Stafford-Clark giving the actors' 'status and dignity' (Hare, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.129) and it meant that they were empoweringly recognised as more than 'simply vessels into which the author can pour his stuff' (Hare, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.129). Significantly though, Stafford-Clark asserts that

this in no way diminishes the role of the writer, and Hare went into the venture with the self-imposed ambition of achieving the same successes as with the piece that had most inspired him to return to the verbatim form, *The Colour of Justice*:

It is true, of course, that the dialogue in *The Colour of Justice* was, as it were, 'found'. Norton-Taylor, like a sculptor who works from given materials, did not actually have to waste time in the tedious business of giving characters lines, any more than the sculptor sifts rusting iron or degrading driftwood. But in his faultless act of organisation and selection, he had done precisely what an artist does. Norton-Taylor did not paint a tribunal of a racist crime. He painted the anger you feel when you look at a tribunal. (Hare, 2002, n.p.)

Interestingly, Norton-Taylor did not work within the same collaborative methodology as Stafford-Clark and Hare did with the actors. After each rehearsal, Hare would go away and began to condense yet further and knit what he had heard from the actors or what he had gathered himself into a structure, whereas Norton-Taylor pulled *The Colour of Justice* together independently through transcripts and interviews he conducted directly.

Though the material collation methodology was collaborative, Hare recalls:

For the first four days I sat trembling in some personal panic, going home each night in despair after listening to testimony of those who had seen their favorite industry dismembered by an irresponsible Conservative government bent on ideological mayhem. (Hare, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.129)

Whilst in agreement with much of Ian Jack's sentiments, and 'buoyed' by Stafford-Clark's enthusiasm for the source and themes, Hare's 'personal panic' was also in part because he did not

intrinsically want to write a play about the railways, or privatisation; though it made for an impassioned article/short book, he questioned whether it could become a play. Hare had no idea about what he might do in terms of structuring plot or characters. In the early stages therefore, he had to trust that the material would guide him as to how to possibly shape it into a verbatim performance piece.

The specific 'hook' that cemented his understanding of the material and the belief that it could indeed become a play arrived when, according to Stafford-Clark, they both met and interviewed one of the highest profile survivors from the Potter's Bar crash, the novelist Nina Bawden, whose husband died in the crash.

David is overwhelmed by her sense of loss. I think it is a relief 4 her to talk. It's fun to be working with David again who has a zest and appetite 4 it. (Stafford-Clark, 2003, March, n.p.)

In her interview, Bawden talked about the difference between the attitude of the bereaved and the attitude of the survivors. According to Stafford-Clark, Hare was struck by the desire in the survivors to put behind them what happened, whereas those who had lost loved ones wanted to go on investigating and find justice. In his own writings about the process, Hare reflects differently upon this 'eureka' moment:

At the end of the week the bereaved mother of one of those killed in one of the train crashes came to speak to us. Within a few minutes I began to feel a stirring, a disturbing subterranean wave of energy. In that moment something extraordinary occurred. (Hare, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.129)

Whichever of the two, it is clear that it was the testimony of those directly affected – the bereaved and the survivors – that were the hook for Hare. The ‘war’ between these people then led to the metaphor, which is essentially about ‘deciding what is necessary suffering and what is unnecessary suffering’ that pulled Hare fully into the project and gave him the clarity in believing it could be a successful verbatim play (Hare, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.58). Within this there are ethical questions which often surface in verbatim projects (and indeed others that are ‘based on real events and real people’) which was mentioned earlier in the thesis: are those putting the work together – writers, directors, actors – potentially voyeuristically looking in on and exploiting the suffering of others? Is the verbatim form as a whole ‘inherently exploitative or voyeuristic’ (Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.12)? Is there a risk of, as Soans warned previously: ‘titillating an audience at someone’s expense’? (Soans, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.36)

### **Verbatim and voyeurism**

Many verbatim performances have some form of suffering, often loss within them; there is maybe tragedy; there is frequently injustice – all potent elements for drama per se, and those putting the work together know this and are asking their ‘subjects’ to re-visit some of (if not all) the worst moments of their lives in order to draw words that can then be used by an actor for the purposes of entertainment (in the broadest sense of the word). As Hare alludes, it is only when the testimony pulls out the very deepest of the emotions that the best material comes to light. Often the person asking the questions may need to push the interviewee to get the ‘richness’ that will work on stage. Is this ethical? One could argue that the people talking could stop at any point, that they are willingly taking part, but would an emotionally vulnerable person do this? It is my opinion that the interviewer should exercise a duty of care and stand

aside from the work even when in the middle of gaining testimony to consider whether it is in the persons' best interest to talk openly. However, would they do so if it means compromising the work they already have an (emotional/financial) investment in putting together? Certainly, there seem to be few, if any, scholarly accounts in which those who have put together verbatim projects have said that they stopped the interviewee because they felt uncomfortable for the person and that they recognised it was contrary to the person's mental/personal well-being to continue or to use their words. Hare has also acknowledged that people are more willing to open up and trust 'theatre people' (Hare, 2008, in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p.70) than say a journalist asking the same types of questions, which means he would be aware of the potential to exploit. This is what Summerskill referred to (Chapter Two) with the imbalance of power that the interviewer should be aware of and the need for them (in being aware) to act ethically in the best interest of the interviewee even if it means not asking a particularly triggering question that would serve their production - their 'art' well - but might be to the detriment of the interviewee when shown on stage at a later date.

There are then also ethical debates regarding the audience who then 'consume' the emotions in the performance. Are they too being voyeuristic?

Hare's 'wave of energy' that he felt at hearing bereavement details when pulling together testimony for *The Permanent Way* could be seen as voyeuristic in relishing the testimony from a bereaved mother, realising that from it he could put a commercially successful production together that the audience would buy into. However, this might appear harsh and unfounded, and one would be justified to conclude that his reaction was more likely because he had found his way into the material that would enable him to put a production together that would serve a positive moral and ethical purpose in openly discussing the fatal shortcomings of Britain's railway privatisation. It is also unfounded to conclude per se



that audience's consuming real people's emotions in theatre are being voyeuristic more than they would be if say, watching the news.

### **Editing, re-writing and recontextualising**

After the two-week period, Hare took the material that had been gathered collaboratively and edited, organising it into a working script. Hare has described the verbatim 'writer's' role as to provide channels for other voices to be heard, with minimal filtering by the writer's imagination, like that of 'witness': 'What my attitude is, is hardly relevant. What matters is what they've got to say' (Hare, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.118). In terms of process, Hare is very clear that in creating a verbatim play 'there is no difference between the writing of a good documentary play and the writing of a wholly imagined play' (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.59).

Though Hare argues that his attitude should be 'hardly relevant' in the final edit, in contradiction is the admission that the idea for his editing in *The Permanent Way* was to lead the audience in a certain way, through the material, with the message here being that the failure of the railways was indicative of the fact there was failure throughout the country due to Blair and his government. All the time in his editing and shaping of the work, he sought to address a 'vulgar misapprehension' in that 'the misunderstanding of documentary theatre is to think that it is just about presenting a load of facts on stage' (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.59). This re-shaping, or sculpting that Hare makes reference to, Stafford-Clark has sometimes referred to as 'recontextualising' the lines spoken by others 'for reasons of length, or whatever'. In a workshop in 2017, speaking about verbatim, Robin Soans said he/the company used only about seven per cent of the material they researched and the testimonies they gathered. When asked directly 'would you change something?', in the same workshop both Soans and

Stafford-Clark replied instantly 'yes' with Stafford-Clark joking about never letting truth get in the way of a good story, and Soans qualifying this slightly by stating that he would 'amend so they [the subject] don't talk rubbish so as not to alienate the audience ... in the interest of time and for the veracity of character I do edit' (Soans, 2017, Stafford-Clark and Soans, 2017, n.p.).

In September the material developed thus far for *The Permanent Way* was brought back into rehearsals and worked together with Stafford-Clark and the company into a basic performance: 'I ask if David intends to be in rehearsal the whole time "yes it's such fun having a play in rehearsal" he responds. Hmm I shall be a bit intimidated I expect' (Stafford-Clark, 2003, September, in Stafford-Clark, Oct 2002–17 March 2004, n.p.). Initially, Stafford-Clark, though impressed by the material and testimonies and pleasantly surprised that it had remained as 'verbatim' as it had, was wary of how it was potentially going to be structured 'The basic problem for me is that it's all monologues. And that's become overused' (Stafford-Clark, 2003, September, in Stafford-Clark, Oct 2002–17 March 2004, n.p.). This is not how the final play turned out due to further exercises and re-writes.

### **Stafford-Clark's verbatim directing methodology**

At this point it is interesting to pick up more about the way in which Stafford-Clark directed and the actors worked, which demonstrated how he tried to address potential debates about 'truth' within the work. In rehearsing the text that Hare presented, the actors were not doing impersonations; Stafford-Clark acknowledges this is often where things would start when the actors had returned from the initial interviews, but during rehearsals and then performance 'you are trying to capture their spirit in some way' (Stafford-Clark, 2008, cited in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.65). Actuality, observation and accuracy – a standard part of actor's training – is what Stafford-Clark has always said he is looking for in

the process of rehearsal into then performance. To this end, a lot of work is done on actioning a text. This rehearsal process involves finding a transitive verb (I *threaten*, I *enlighten*, I *prepare*, I *reassure*, for example) which sums up the intention behind a line of text. It must always be something that you are actively *doing* to the other character/s on stage – or, in the case of *The Permanent Way*, to the audience.

For example, in a speech from the Second Bereaved Mother with the actions determined by the director and the actor, Merlin recounts the following in rehearsal:

**(entertains)** Next day we sent Cullen the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word 'accident'. **(impresses)** We all did. **(teaches)** Because Ladbroke Grove wasn't an accident. **(focuses)** In the signal box, they admitted, there's an override button you can push and straight away you close down the whole Paddington throat. **(alerts)** But of course they don't. They never touch it. (Merlin, 2003, p.20)

This method of action and intentions has been integral to all Stafford-Clark's work as a director, becoming prominent for example during the development of *Fanshen* where he says he learnt it from Gaskill and then took it further. Stafford-Clark's method was honed to stop actors playing *past emotion* and to make them play *present intentions* instead:

the scene between the Bereaved Mother and Father [*The Permanent Way*] ... they're talking to the audience and describing seeing their son's body in the mortuary ... and how the mortician has combed his hair into a fringe though he'd never had a fringe in his life. Now that information was in fact told to us as a joke; they were laughing as they said it. But if you just read that in a script, you would say that the feeling the person had was, say, horror, and the intention they had

was perhaps 'to shock' the listener. So 'actioning' teaches us all observation.

(Stafford-Clark, 2003, in Merlin, 2003, pp.4-5)

Nigel Terry, who worked on Stafford-Clark's earlier productions, talks about how the director would have worked on the transient verbs by breaking the play into sections prior to rehearsing that day with the actors. He'd then give that framework/structure to the actors to refer back to as the practical rehearsals then developed. He wouldn't allow his actors on their feet until the section had been thoroughly read and all the actions had a transient verb agreed intellectually. These could be changed, by actor or director, it was Terry said 'flexible' (Stafford-Clark, 2007, in Roberts and Stafford-Clark, 2007, p.40) and it didn't replace or stop instinct, but as a methodology it offered/offers a clear reference point, especially useful when there were difficulties.

These actions intellectually and practically agreed upon were therefore not set in stone and inevitably adjust not only throughout rehearsals but also during the course of a production's lifetime. However, during a long touring production they also serve as a useful means of maintaining the inherent structure of a production.

Stafford-Clark qualified this approach in terms of the danger if an actor didn't action the script whereupon he feared 'the play could get emotionally indulgent, soppy, because actors would instinctively feel that what they had to do was *relive* the feeling' (Stafford-Clark, 2003, in Merlin, 2003, p.5). In actuality, there are small moments in *The Permanent Way* – the Cullen Inquiry, the meeting between the bereaved parents and John Prescott – that are re-enacted and do, as it were, flashback to 'time past'. But the vast majority of *The Permanent Way* is 'time present', talking about events which took place in the past.

And if you talk about a train crash that you were in four years ago, it's possible for the story to be quite detached and the speaker's objectives to become quite different: for example, to 'entertain' the listener. So the Squadron Leader's story of the crash at Potters Bar is quite jokey and underplayed. (Stafford-Clark, 2003, in Merlin, 2003, p.5)

When Hare brought back the script for rehearsals, there were some people who found themselves cast into the roles of those they hadn't interviewed. Later in the play's run this occurred too, and Flaminia Cinque who played the Bereaved Mother, said of the words that she was given:

From the first moment that I read the script, the way the character was written had an instinctive rhythm to it ... It flowed beautifully, it was very natural and I could hear the speed at which this person spoke – because of the way it was written and punctuated, and how she interrupted herself or repeated herself. So I really don't feel that I consciously did any work. I feel as though it was instantly there. (Cinque, 2003, in Merlin, 2003, pp. 12-13)

To enhance the portrayals, all actors, whether they had met their 'character' or otherwise, would watch videos that had sometimes been filmed during the interview processes, and then sometimes the actors would have lengthy phone conversations, which helped them complete the process of portraying the characters: 'It helped me once I'd seen her on the video obviously and then heard her voice on the phone, because the ease, the way she speaks, there's a natural flow of energy' (Cinque, 2003, in Merlin, 2003, p.13).

In October the roughly developed piece was performed to an invited audience for the first time, including Nicholas Hytner (Director of the National Theatre) and Graham Cowley (Producer with *Out of Joint*).

We do our first RT [run through] this morning in front of a small audience of colleagues from the National and from OJO. It runs for 1hr 57 mins ... and we need to cut 7m from that. The story is v. compelling. Hare is himself v moved as is Lucinda from NT who id (sic) in buckets of tears. ... of course, bits fell apart. The prologue is all over the place. (Stafford-Clark, 2003, October, in Stafford-Clark 2002 - 17 March 2004, n.p.)

### **Plot, synopsis and structure of *The Permanent Way***

Structurally, in many ways, *The Permanent Way* follows that of a mini classical tragedy; there are five 'Acts' (defined as 'parts'), within which each character is the focus centre-stage for a while, before then passing the narrative-thread on to another character or group of characters. In terms of how the action is played out, the scenery consisted of a backdrop of railway departure boards which in turn display the curtailed journeys that ended in crashes under privatisation.

The play opens quite realistically in style, with a Prologue set on a commuter train travelling into London where nine characters present various attitudes and opinions about Britain of the time; public transport, social apathy and essentially struggling to work out why the government has failed to find ways to privatise the railway network in ways that work. These are the opinions and voices of those interviewed by the cast at Waterloo station. The Prologue becomes ever-less 'realistic' in its presentation style, and

more 'agitprop' ending with the tearing up of newspapers whilst the outpourings of commuter indignation get ever stronger.

Act/Part One consists of four segments, not divided on the page, but divided in terms of foci. In the first the audience is introduced to the 'High Powered Treasury Thinker,' a 'Senior Civil Servant' and an 'Investment Banker' – the three powerful men who decided how the railways should be privatised and then floated in the City. Thereafter, in the undefined Act/Part Two, 'Senior Rail Executive' and 'Very Experienced Rail Engineer' give their perspectives on the privatisation as a concept and the problems faced in getting it done. The narrative then introduces a British Transport Policeman who outlines the events after the Southall crash which leads into survivors and the bereaved telling their stories in a section that also includes a brief dramatisation of Lord Cullen's Public Inquiry into the crash. In Act/Part Four, we are taken through the Hatfield crash of 17 October 2000 with, firstly, a very visceral reenactment of the crash and the narrative is passed from the Campaigning Solicitor to a Scottish Literary Editor (based on Ian Jack). This time, we are shown the impact of the crash on four figures who were at the periphery of the actual disaster, but who were heavily involved in the emotional aftermath. They are the Vicar of Hatfield, the Operating Executive of GNER (whose train was involved), the Technical Director Jarvis (who maintained the track) and the Managing Director of Railtrack. Having given us a range of technical, managerial and moral perspectives, the play moves into the emotional heart of the final crash in 'Act Five'. This section focuses on the Potters Bar disaster on 10 May 2002, through the story of a woman who was both a survivor and bereaved ('A Bereaved Widow') and the man who rescued her ('A Squadron Leader').

The play ends with an Epilogue, in which many of the characters return with final statements, illuminating where they are at now (2003–4) in their personal lives or professional careers. As Stafford-Clark recalls, the Epilogue took a great deal of work to get right:

we struggle with the prologue in the morning. In the end – successfully, Lloyd is a rock. In the arvo (sic) David is there and we assault the epilogue which, he is quick to point out, is rather wordy and over long. Some of the points have been made already in the body of the play. So we cut it. David leads the way and I follow with editing suggestions. It's much improved. We run bits and David gives royal assent ... he is very clear about the editing, a well behaved writer and lets me get on with directing. (Stafford-Clark, 2002, in Stafford-Clark Oct 2002 – 17 March 2004, March, n.p.)

But reflecting back when interviewed a year later, Stafford-Clark admitted:

I kind of knew that a crash would be appropriate, even though David hadn't written one in the script. At the beginning of rehearsals, we were trying to make the crash happen at the very end of the play. But when you look at the writing, you see that's a mistake. Although David knew a crash was important, he has ended the play far more equivocally with the Bereaved Widow's 'hysterical friendship' line. (Stafford-Clark, 2003, in Merlin, 2003, p.5)

Hare anonymised the characters, and so some of the interest is therefore in working out who the characters are. John Prescott is one of the few named in the script but interestingly (and to be returned to at length presently) he was never interviewed. This was justified by Hare when the play opened:

I didn't go to interview politicians because frankly they can't ascend to the level of truthfulness that is needed to be in this play. There wasn't any point in going to talk to John Prescott because I knew what John Prescott would tell me in advance.



People who tell me this play is very unfair to John Prescott drive me insane, because it doesn't matter whether the play is unfair to John Prescott, what matters is whether John Prescott is fair to the bereaved and the survivors. (Hare, 2004, in Preston, 2004, n.p.)

The rest of the characters are given more generic titles: 'Senior Civil Servant', 'Survivors' Group Founder', and so on. 'Managing Director of Railtrack' is credited as being Gerald Corbett. The basis of 'Another Senior Rail Executive' was GNER chief executive Christopher Garnett, who, was critical of the way he was presented claiming he had not been misquoted, but that his comments on the number of safety measures GNER had put into place after crashes had been omitted. There was one specific line that was the root of the complaint by Garnett. After the Hatfield crash, on hearing a police officer say it wasn't a problem with the operators, but a broken rail that had caused the crash, Garnett said 'Thank Christ it's not our crash. Not that I wasn't very upset about the crash. I was.' (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, pp.60-61) What the actors recalled though, Hare claimed, were just the words 'Thank god it's not our crash', which is what Hare then attributed to him. The moment Garnett complained Hare admitted 'I totally agreed I'd misrepresented him, I'll put it in the play' (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.61). The change did not stop Garnett going to *The Times* where he discussed these points in a full-page article in order to vindicate himself in, at least, part.

Hare, in recalling this 'misrepresentation' recalls:

[there I was] being held to account for one half-quotation based on a misunderstanding which I immediately corrected. Does anyone seriously imagine that journalists behave with anything like the same understanding or alacrity? (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.61)

In pulling together further the link between verbatim theatre and journalism, Hare argues that verbatim does what journalism fails to do, and that the impact of *The Permanent Way* came from people who were struggling to comprehend things that were happening in a rapidly changing world that journalism was not helping to adequately represent or interpret, and in some cases directly misrepresented or misreported. He believes that audiences, at times of unease, need a place where things can be put under sustained and serious scrutiny. This relates to the point made in Chapter Two about the rise of verbatim, especially since 9/11 which will also be looked at again, with examples in Chapter Four. Hare has also called journalism arrogant and lazy in not recognising that it has added to the sense of unease by not making it clear that there is a distinction between journalism and theatre, and therein verbatim:

Theatre is not journalism. The mistake is to imagine that simply because it can sometimes incorporate real-life material, so it can be judged by similar criteria. It is certainly true that the recent much-publicised flush of British drama on factual subjects is taken to be a response by many to the failures of the press. (Hare, 2005 p.28)

Hare, in discussing portrayals/performances said that overall the actors were wonderfully accurate. Though he would in many cases not meet the people whose words he was using until the run of the play, he said 'when I subsequently met the people that they had presented to me, I wasn't surprised. The actors had been very faithful messengers' (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.65).

'Campaigning Solicitor' is Louise Christian, who represented families bereaved by the Paddington train crash, and had a high profile as a result. Not only are the characters generic in title, and anonymised, they are also amalgamations, for example with Louise's character:

Mid-morning talk with David Hare who sounds apprehensive. I beam approval. Not difficult as I think the script and the story is enormously strong. I advocate combining Ian Jack with Louise Christian and he agrees. (Stafford-Clark, March 2002, in Stafford-Clark, Jan 2002 – 9 Nov. 2002, n.p.)

This is a direct example of verbatim's contentious issues in practice, in that if a work is verbatim and splices together the words of actual people, this rightly can generate accusations that the text has been manipulated and allegations of bias could legitimately then follow.

Interestingly, in the same diary entry Stafford-Clark mentions that 'Meeting Richard Branson tomorrow. David emphasises that we need to get lawyers to crawl over it word by word' (Stafford-Clark, March 2002, in Stafford-Clark, Jan 2002 – 9 Nov. 2002, n.p.). It appears, therefore, that where there is a risk of words being incorrectly attributed or transcribed when the person is of status and wealth, here, the writer (Hare) is more careful in the editing. This is both morally and ethically wrong and is something that the work could rightly be criticised for.

The threat of legal action does seem to have been more of an issue than any fear of someone arguing that the editing of their words wasn't 'fair' as Stafford-Clark, recalled later when the play was being re-written: 'To David's lovely studio this morning where we fiddle with the text and deal with the legal difficulties raised by the various lawyers employed by Fabers and by the RNT. We then allocate speeches in the prologue and epilogue' (Stafford-Clark, July 2002, in Stafford-Clark, Jan 2002 – 9 Nov. 2002, n.p.). Again, in early October the worries of being sued continue to interrupt the editing/writing process: 'David stays at home writing. He is sanguine about the problems presented to us by the lawyers from Fabers and from NT' (Stafford-Clark, October 2002, in Stafford-Clark, Jan 2002 – 9 Nov. 2002, n.p.).

Aside from legality, the other problem was not an unusual one for verbatim writers – what to cut out, what to leave in, which caused some tensions between Stafford-Clark and Hare:

Cuts have reduced it to 1 hr 53 it should be 1hr 45 or 1 hr 40. We should simplify more. (Stafford-Clark, April 2002, in Stafford-Clark, Jan 2002 – 9 Nov. 2002, n.p.)

We make deft cuts in the morning and David restores them in the avvo (sic). However, as it gets tighter a satisfying rhythm begins to emerge ... my main concern with PW is that it will overrun. By insisting on restoring cuts David has absolved me from responsibility. (Stafford-Clark, April 2002, in Stafford-Clark, Jan 2002 – 9 Nov.2002, n.p.)

Weighing heavily on the Hare's mind was the understanding of how precious testimony is to the speaker:

people do go berserk when their private territory is invaded. You tell yourself a version of events, and when that version is destroyed ... he cites example of current project PW he is currently seeking permission from victims to tell their story. All the time he's thinking 'I will kill my grandmother to tell this story'. (Stafford-Clark, February 2003, in Stafford-Clark, Oct 2002 – 17 March 2004, n.p.)

A key strategy in *The Permanent Way* is the way the characters occasionally refer to the audience as 'David', thus placing us in the writer's position and highlighting his role in interpreting the words – a deliberate device by Hare which the critics identified:

This reference keeps the notion of documentary-style reporting in the foreground, but also reminds the audience that despite its factual base and collaborative

creation, the work expresses the viewpoint of David Hare. (Howe- Kritzer, 2004, p.511)

Hare's use of direct address in *The Permanent Way* was not intended as a device to ensure audiences recognised the work had his opinion within it, but rather his intentions were to deliberately remind the audience of the context of the work. This technique which is common in participatory verbatim theatre was one that Hare also used in *Stuff Happens* (2004). Interestingly one of the actors within *The Permanent Way* speaking during the pre-show talk at The National Theatre said 'it's a work of art, I know we've said it's verbatim, but there are things in there that are pure David Hare' (Bailey, 2004, in Stafford-Clark, 2004, n.p.). This is not something that Hare says about the work, which again brings to the surface questions of truth in the work, and over the editing process and perhaps questions too on how self-aware Hare is of his style and the potential for bias.

### **The Permanent Way: Critical reception, criticism and wider ethical debates**

After being shown to an invited audience in October, *The Permanent Way* officially opened in York in November 2003 before then touring the UK in 2004. Critical reception of the production was, broadly speaking, highly positive and it went on to win the 'Best Touring Production' award from the Theatre Management Association. A version for radio with the original cast and production team, was made by Catherine Bailey Productions and broadcast on BBC Radio on 14 March 2004. This version was also nominated for awards.

Critics praised the play on many levels, including the use of individual testimonies merging into a collective narrative together with its episodic structure and the doubling of roles. Often reviews would praise the 'mechanics' of the play and then naturally reflect upon its power politically, and indeed morally:

One of the most visible playwrights of the left, Hare lays blame upon both major political parties and all corporate entities involved in the railroads ... [Hare] creates the vivid impression of a society in which responsibility has been atomised and dispersed to the point where blame is futile. (Howe Kritzer, 2004, p.511)

Stafford-Clark's aesthetics with the staging was also praised, including the use of the crash which Hare had originally omitted:

William Dudley has created a set consisting of an empty space flanked by overhead power lines with a large projection screen behind. The screen twice takes centre stage. It counts off the tragedies on a departure board and then, dramatically, it recreates the Potters Bar derailment using computer graphics. (Fisher, 2004, n.p.)

Several critics echoed Hare's initial reservations about how interesting a play on the railways could be 'When I first heard about this play, I thought it would be boring' (Sierz, 2004), but each then went on to recount that the richness of the testimonies and the people behind the words made the pieces at its heart successful, alongside the ability of the playwright to knit it all together:

... it proves riveting. I have rarely seen an audience watch and listen to a drama so intently, for this is a piece that gets to the heart of so much that is rotten in Britain today. Though the railway system is the play's subject, it also serves as a potent

paradigm of the morally shabby, physically run-down state of the nation. (Spencer, 2003, n.p.)

This review also usefully shows that an audience is not necessarily being voyeuristic in watching this play (or similar verbatim examples), rather they are often drawn in because of the moral and political debates that such pieces offer.

Not everything was of course so positive, with the devices that worked for some irritating others:

The preparatory shenanigans near the start – the passages, in other words, consisting of Hare’s own words – do no one any favours. Stafford-Clark’s direction of them is manic and clumsy; there’s lots of snapping of newspapers, as if this were some kind of journalism-themed “Laugh-In” sketch. And the same cast who double and triple so smoothly later on look pretty silly falling into bits of posturing that can be no substitute in this context for actual words, honest recollections. (Wolf, 2004, n.p.)

For aspects of the way the play was presented to be liked by some and not by others is very natural. However, Wolf alludes just briefly in the criticism to a more important point when mentioning that passages contain Hare’s own words. It is easy to miss this rather crucial criticism within the review, but once again it shows a tension in verbatim regarding ‘truth’ and how words have been edited for dramatic purposes.

Wolf was also critical and questioned the inclusion (in terms of ‘truth’) of John Prescott:

Hare gives (mostly) compassionate voice to a cross-section of experiences, encounters and views (the one outright buffoon of the piece being the recurring figure of John Prescott, Labour's deputy prime minister, here impersonated in full bluster by Lloyd Hutchinson) ... Does one wish for more 'balance', whatever that might mean? Perhaps, not least to the extent that the railways had their share of crashes back in the days when they were fully underwritten by the government. (One wonders if Hare approached Prescott for an actual interview). (Wolf, 2004, n.p.)

Aleks Sierz in the *Tribune*, whilst positively discussing the process of how testimonies were edited, revealed that he believed that Prescott was interviewed: 'he [Hare] edits and orchestrates the opinions of everyone, from the impossible John Prescott, through to top Treasury officials and accountants ... and all ... with such concision and verve' (Sierz, 2004, n.p.). Unlike Wolf, who questioned what he was hearing and its 'truthfulness' and 'authenticity', here we have a member of the audience (mis) believing that they were hearing actual words and receiving a truthful account from someone that (as was discussed previously) never actually spoke to/ was interviewed or approached by Hare or Stafford-Clark.

The use of a figure representing Prescott was a thorny issue that other reviewers also used as their way in to criticising the heart of the piece, and the form thereafter, which both Hare and Stafford-Clark, much as they may not have wanted to, had to return to defend endlessly:

Conversations with David who has just had robust exchanges with Billington ... he craves political drama but then runs when it arrives ... I tell Billington finally along comes a play stuffed with political purpose and he'd why didn't we interview John Prescott and isn't this type of theatre always biased when it claims to be objective



blah blah blah. (Stafford-Clark, April, 2004, in Stafford-Clark supplement 1. Vol.xxiii, 2004, n.p.)

Dear Lyn (Gardner – *Guardian*) I believe prejudice has led you to underestimate both David's importance and the emotional impact of TPW. After all what other playwrights are tackling public issues head on? Who else seeks to make the theatre part of public debate? (Stafford-Clark, April, in Stafford-Clark supplement 1. Vol.xxiii, 2004)

As will be discussed presently, in the years since the production first aired, this is one of the elements that remains problematic for scholars regarding the piece's claims of being 'truthful'.

### **Political debate and change actioned through performances**

The production was not only a general 'success' in performance-terms and with critics, but also in making the audience aware of issues and creating a sense of outrage. Hare and Stafford-Clark were proud of the work, and of the political debate that it then generated:

A lady asks if we have every expectation of effecting change. I said I travel in hope. TPW is articulating a wave of revulsion. Since we started touring rail maintenance has been taken back in house by network rail, Jarvis have given up maintenance contracts. Pam has arrived at a satisfactory financial settlement and, today, Thames train accepted responsibility for the Paddington crash. (Stafford-Clark, 2003, May, in Stafford-Clark, Oct 2002 – 17 March 2004, n.p.)

David rings to say David Willetts, shadow minister of transport has been in touch  
2 say he understands David knows a lot about the railways and would he like to  
meet. I hv (sic) also had an email from the wife of a lawyer who made a  
phenomenal amount of money out of privatisation saying she at least would like  
to say sorry and could she send a cheque – in the hope it cd (sic) be passed on to  
the victims. The lead story in the daily telegraph (sic) is the admission that rail  
privatisation was wrong. (Stafford-Clark, 2003, October, in Stafford-Clark, Oct  
2002 – 17 March 2004, n.p.)

Stafford-Clark also maintained that the production created debate, claiming that it led then to  
political change.

Though Stafford-Clark asserted otherwise, it is difficult to trace precisely the impact that *The  
Permanent Way* had. It certainly caused debate in the media and politically, but a definite policy change  
is not attributable. This is not a criticism of the work as the same point is made of much political theatre,  
and there are many reasons for continuing to celebrate it as positive case study within the verbatim form.  
However, for all of its strengths and plaudits, it continues also to be used as a case study for scholars to  
criticise the form and claims of 'truth' and 'authenticity'.

### **Truth & Authenticity in *The Permanent Way***

Stephen Bottoms, writing in *The Drama Review*, 2006, used Hare's work in *The Permanent Way*  
and, has been discussed previously, *Stuff Happens*, (2004), together with Out of Joint's next major  
production *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), to attack the form and what he saw as their self-righteous claims  
of truth and authenticity.

In an extensive discussion, he begins his assault on Out of Joint and Hare by clarifying astutely the difference between documentary and verbatim and pointing out that in his opinion this distinction matters because any production self-labeled as 'verbatim' immediately creates status in the eyes of audiences and critics:

'verbatim theatre' – the term currently favored in the U.K. over the more general term 'documentary theatre.' The distinction matters because, where the latter might be said to imply the foregrounding of documents, of texts, the term 'verbatim theatre' tends to fetishise the notion that we are getting things 'word for word,' straight from the mouths of those 'involved'. (Bottoms, 2006, p.59)

Though perhaps overly forceful in his tone of the writing, as mentioned before, I agree with Bottoms, and indeed it was this line of argument that drew me into the thesis originally. As has already been explored in Chapter Two, verbatim theatre implies 'more truth' than documentary theatre because the form claims to be taking its writing from actual words and in so doing implies its sources can be traced. It also implies a lack of bias in the methodology of putting the work together, which, as discussed, is not necessarily the case. As was also discussed, often the audience believes this, and they may well suspend critical enquiry thinking that skepticism or inquiry is unnecessary. The audience gives the production credit, and status, just because it is labelled 'verbatim' and those putting the work together know this, and could exploit this if they choose.

In Bottoms' continued attack on Hare, and *The Permanent Way*, he is also at odds with the device where Hare – and specifically 'David' – is included as a character:

the playwright's mysteriously omniscient role seems particularly pronounced. In *The Permanent Way*, Hare even has his speakers periodically address the audience

as 'David'. Though ostensibly a reminder of the original interview contexts, the result in the theatre is a sense that 'David' is some all-seeing, godlike figure, hovering invisibly somewhere in the auditorium. (Bottoms, 2006 pp.59-60)

I can again see his point of view here, and the allusion to Jacques Derrida's 1978 essay on Artaud, 'The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,' which Bottoms also connects to in order to bolster his argument. Derrida referred to traditional, text-based theatre as:

'theological' in that the 'godlike' author, 'absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assembles, regulates the time or the meaning of the representation,' even while perpetuating the illusion that he 'creates nothing' because he only transcribes and makes available for reading a text [that] maintains with what is called the 'real' ... an imitative and reproductive relationship. (Derrida, 1978, p.235)

Exploring this point, overall, stage realism purports to present a transparent representation of 'lifelike' behavior, whilst in fact it is providing a constructed authorial perspective on the real. With verbatim specifically, the status is then doubly illusory in presenting a 'realism' that comes from the speech of 'actual' people involved in 'real' events.

Bottoms also uses *The Permanent Way* to again question how materials have been gathered, edited and juxtaposed and what the writer's own bias has been in this:

Like the politicians he satirises, Hare insists he is shedding light on hidden truths, but then fabricates his own evidence. ... I would argue, that such performances need to foreground their own processes of representation in order to acknowledge the problem and encourage audiences to adopt an actively critical

perspective on the events depicted. (Bottoms, 2006, p.61)

In attacking the form in the hands of Hare (and by proxy therefore Stafford-Clark) Bottoms uses Kaufman and work such as the previously discussed *Laramie Project* as a positive beacon of practice and outcomes in the form. In extended discussion Bottoms asserts that *The Laramie Project* makes no pretense to unbiased 'objectivity' in the presentation of its concerns, and instead positively encourages spectators to think for themselves about the processes of representation involved (Bottoms, 2006, p.67). I agree with Bottoms that *The Laramie Project* is an example of a verbatim project that does to some extent acknowledge its bias in the collecting of material, and editing. I also agree with his points about encouraging spectators to think for themselves – always a healthy position to adopt – and indeed, I agree that perhaps some verbatim practitioners overall could/should foreground this more directly (as I will continue to discuss in case studies to follow). As mentioned before though, I do feel that Bottoms' is incorrect in going as far as to say that the form overall misleads and audiences are gullible, as I shall also continue to explore and prove in this thesis. Once more, I also feel Bottoms fails to see with *The Permanent Way*, and overall with verbatim theatre, that they are also serving 'art' and the complexities (and positives) that this presents.

Carol Martin, again in her article 'Bodies of Evidence' (2006), also discusses the problem of verbatim (though she does not distinguish it from documentary theatre) in not laying bare its sources, and in the editing. She too says that this means it is unclear what 'truths' the audience are then receiving, and that they might be being deceived (albeit not deliberately) by what is presented: 'The process is not always transparent. Documentary theatre creates its own aesthetic imaginaries while claiming a special factual legitimacy' (Martin, 2006, p.10).

Martin, like Bottoms, talks about the overall process within documentary theatre in its taking of the archived and turning it into repertory, following a sequence from behaviour to archived records of

behaviour to the restoration of behaviour as public performance. She then more generously than Bottoms', says that during each phase, a complex set of transformations, interpretations, and 'inevitable distortions occur' (Martin, 2006, p.10). Herein she uncovers a paradox for verbatim, and indeed all documentary theatre. She questions whether there is, from the moment of the project starting, any recoverable 'original event' available to the playwright because the archive is already an operation of power: someone has decided what is archived, and how. Martin has therefore cast doubt over verbatim, or documentary, ever delivering a 'truth' for its audience. Unlike Bottoms' examination, Martin does not criticise individuals for this, she just expounds it as an inevitable fact and paradox within the verbatim form and indeed with any act of trying to 'tell the truth' whether it be for Art or any sake. I agree with Martin and think her viewpoint and article offers a much more balanced assessment of the form and the complexities it negotiates in terms of 'truth' and 'authenticity' whilst also being a piece of 'art'.

Academic historians, such as Michel de Certeau, also outline how any documenting of history will come up against the issues Martin presents, as this inevitably involving refraction through the conventions of narrative, and is, in addition, affected by the perspective viewpoints of the historian (leading therefore to bias and representation) (de Certeau, tr. Conley, 1980). There is also the inevitable decline in memory to factor in:

What can 'the truth and nothing but the truth' mean in a world of theatre created from interviews and interpretations of documents? Especially when scientific research on memory finds that editing of the past happens without a person's conscious knowledge, and that the mind can be unpredictably prone to blur the distinction between reality and fantasy? (Martin, 2013, p.61)

Fallibilities (deliberate or otherwise) of memory aside, the work of the docudramatist and the academic historian are intertwined: in endeavoring to represent the truth the documentarian simulates

the historian's methodology and protocol: collecting data, citing primary source materials and so forth. Favorini (1994) in looking at representation and reality in his article of the same title, agrees with de Certeau in discussing the link between the historian and artist. He contends that the typical historical text narrates more than it reasons (in order to shut off debate), that the wealth of proper names and descriptions merely create the semblance of true knowledge of another time, and that the suppression of the authors subjectivity in adopting the third-person is nothing more than a dissimulation designed to convey the illusion of authority. 'We can therefore observe with some irony that when the historian wants to create the impression of truth s/he draws on the techniques of theatre; and when the documentary playwright has the same objective, s/he copies the ceremonial forms of the historian' (Favorini, 1994 p.39).

Favorini, like Martin, is not critical of Hare, Stafford-Clark, *The Permanent Way* or indeed any verbatim/documentary theatre writer/maker directly. As with many others writing within the field, he accepts that 'truth' is impossible to achieve in performance work, instead advocating that it is all merely opinion and a perspective.

Brecht observed the same many decades ago, and asserted that all art is in some way political, as well as biased, and interestingly he warned that our suspicions should in fact be greater if there is a proclamation to the contrary within the work presented. For Williams (and linking here to Bottoms' argument about transparency of sources and bias within editing) documentary theatre/verbatim can only achieve a level of objectivity if it admits levels of distortion that lie within; to believe in objectivity as anything other than limited is to 'rely on a fiction of reality itself' (Williams, 1974, cited in Paget, 1990a, p.20). In defence of the form, and of documentary theatre in particular, Janelle Reinelt argues here that audience members are given agency in documentary theatre by holding the power to validate or contest the truth-value of the document in question (Reinelt, 2009, in Forsyth & Megson, 2009, pp.7-11).

Documentary theatre upholds the Brechtian values of theatre as 'social experience of documentary inquiry and critique' and in the potential for public events to be 'examined and reconsidered communally' (Reinelt, 2009 in Forsyth & Megson, 2009, pp.11-12).

Dennis Kelly's 'verbatim' play *Taking Care of Baby* (2007) tackles many of these debates, identifying that the processes of construction and the potentially manipulative strategies that verbatim plays sometimes use are often not directly acknowledged to audiences. Kelly's play debates the notions of reality and 'truth' and how they are framed and mediated within the form. The narrative follows a young woman, Donna McAuliffe, who is imprisoned for killing her infant son Jake and is also suspected of being responsible for the suffocation of her daughter two years earlier. Seemingly critical in the trial was the evidence of Dr Millard, an eminent psychologist who diagnosed Donna as suffering from Leeman-Keatley Syndrome (LKS), a 'rare psychiatric disorder' in which the sufferer experiences increased sensitivity to distressing local and international events. Donna's conviction is eventually successfully appealed, with the judge condemning Millard and his theories. The storyline echoes the cases of Donna Anthony, Angela Cannings, Trupti Patel, and Sally Clark, who were all convicted and imprisoned for murdering their children and then subsequently exonerated because the expert evidence of Professor Sir Roy Meadow, crucial in convicting them and in which he blamed Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, was found to be flawed.

In constructing his drama, Kelly alludes to specific elements in British documentary and specifically verbatim plays. Most of the text comprises interwoven testimony narrated in the first person. The language – often fragmentary, stumbling and repetitious – simulates authentic casual speech. The testimony is apparently addressed to an unseen interviewer, whom we actually hear questioning and debating with Donna and Millard in particular, thus drawing upon devices that Hare uses in his own verbatim work where he is a named character asking questions or is directly referred to by the speaker.



*Taking Care of Baby* brandishes its verbatim credentials, beginning with:

The following has been taken word for word from interviews and correspondence.

Nothing has been added and everything is in the subjects' own words, though some editing has taken place. Names have not been changed. (Kelly, 2007, p.15)

Kelly then re-uses the framing statement to underline the deconstructionist strategies he is playing with, thus indicating that this is not the verbatim drama it purports to be. At the beginning of each of the subsequent three parts of the play, the statement reappears, but on each occasion the words are increasingly scrambled:

The following has been word from taken word for interviews and correspondence

...

The taken word for following word has been correspondence from and interviews

Te foling has beelown takhen wormed for wspoord frondrm and intews and cughorreviceence.

(Kelly, 2007, p.41, 71, 97)

To further arouse audience suspicions that the play may not be the verbatim form that it pretends, structural anomalies begin to appear, together with the interweaving of different types of scenes and narrative lines. For example, inserted between some of the monologues are multi-character scenes, that make the action unnecessarily more complex. This features the emergence of a storyline about Lynn, Donna's mother, who is a Labour candidate. Not at all connected to the storyline, these scenes feature her knocking on doors and speaking to imaginary voters about her decision to seek re-election as an

independent candidate. Similarly, scenes start to appear featuring 'The Reporter' and 'The Waitress' in a café, seemingly from an interview which took place between them, but again of no direct relevance to the storyline. To then compound the audience's beliefs that the structure, and indeed collation of material, may not be strict in its verbatim practices; whereas at times the interviewer/writer talks directly to Donna, Martin, and Millard, he never does so with the ever-complex additional characters and never engages with the narrative thread that comes from their inclusion.

Not only is the audience given testimony to enable them to register and question the process of editing involved in creating verbatim theatre, and therefore the effect this has on notions of 'truth', but through the role of Donna's husband Martin we, the audience, also confront the ethical issues of exploitation and voyeurism. In what purport to be a series of letters to Kelly, Martin explains his refusal to be interviewed and condemns the exercise saying it is making entertainment out of a tragedy in his life. The opportunistic and insensitive exploitation which Martin accuses the writer of is demonstrated then through the inclusion of embarrassing moments or disclosures that five other characters request not be quoted. As Young acknowledges in his assessment of this and other verbatim-subverting plays 'These incidents highlight the way in which verbatim theatre often panders to but may potentially confront audiences with our voyeuristic enjoyment when witnessing intimate or embarrassingly candid moments' (Young, 2009, p.85).

Ironically, some reviewers disliked the play because they felt it lied to them, however, some 'got it'; in the case of Young, he felt it cleverly points to the way in which documentary theatre all too readily strategically deploys the appearance of truth, while inventing its own particular truth through elaborate aesthetic devices, which Martin has acknowledged the form does as previously discussed. Young concludes his assessment:

This [play] demonstrates how easily documentary plays may slant the ‘truth’ and manipulate audiences ... if they fail to distinguish between representation and reality, such plays may implicate themselves in and even collude with the mechanisms of injustice which they seek to expose. (Young, 2009, p.86)

Thus far, *The Permanent Way* can be accused of not being clear about who was interviewed and whose words were ‘created’ or indeed amalgamated, for as was discussed, some characters were composites of two or more people with words edited together. It does not, as an example of theatre, need to apologise for making a political point; but if it acknowledged a bias (and therein a limit in its intended objectivity) it would answer some of the criticisms laid at its feet.

There is then still a further contentious element to be re-examined. Having read Stafford-Clark’s own acknowledgement that he and Hare were very careful about any editing of Branson’s words, this sits as an uncomfortable admission that the words of the rich and powerful are more carefully represented than the words of say, a victim’s parent. This admission allows for potential criticism of *The Permanent Way* in terms of its portrayal of real people.

### **Portrayal and misrepresentation in verbatim theatre**

As was discussed earlier, Senior Rail Executive’ GNER chief executive Christopher Garnett was critical of the way he was quoted and Hare did indeed admit that he had misrepresented him in the play by the way he had edited a sentence and changed the play accordingly. Hare did not like the fact that

Garnett then went to *The Times* about the misrepresentation. Hare complained in interviews afterwards that he doubted journalists would have gone back and admitted they had got the representation wrong.

It is not though only what is spoken that causes controversy, but also 'how'.

We have heard extensively in this chapter from the actors, and Martin offers an interesting take on their place within verbatim, both as 'positive' and 'negative' forces. She notes that it is the director's and the actor's 'job' to add to 'the archive'; glances, gestures, body language, the felt experience of space and the proximity of bodies are created by actors and directors according to their own rules of admissibility. This raises questions about the continuum between documentation and simulation, or in the case of Lloyd Hutchinson as Prescott – into impersonation that becomes parody. Martin argues this brings 'life' and believability to the theatrical work, making it viable as a form and engaging as performance for an audience.

Acting though can mislead. It can also misrepresent, and with this it can offend or upset those who were close to what is being depicted, or are indeed that which is being depicted. Bella Merlin has talked extensively about the integrity of the process she used to realise the character of the Second Bereaved Mother which she played in *The Permanent Way*. In interviews about the process of putting the work together and performing, she recalls the time the survivors, the bereaved and their legal representatives were invited to the Cottesloe Theatre in 2004 to see the performance for themselves. After the performance she met the woman she had portrayed, where she describes the 'second bereaved mother' and her husband as 'muted and cautious' (Merlin, 2007, in Boon 2007, p.132). Merlin said she could in part ascribe this to the fact they had just seen a reenactment of the death of their own child. Eventually the bereaved mother admitted 'that she felt I had been rather 'hard' in my portrayal of her' (Merlin, 2007, in Boon, 2007, p.132). Merlin conceded that she had begun herself to have doubts about the way in which

she was portraying the mother, feeling she was making her 'shrill' and angry in tone, and:

my quandary as an actor was whether or not I was right to 'forsake' the real person to some degree in order that the theatricality of the subject matter and the play's overall visceral quality was maintained, in order that Hare's 'anger' super-objective was honoured. (Merlin, 2007, in Boon 2007, p.132)

The internal debate for Merlin was to either compromise 'the mother's truth' to deliver Hare's, or whether she should be more faithful to the bereaved mother and thus compromise Hare's 'truth'/super objective as she saw it, or be faithful to neither and look for a middle ground. The bereaved mother had read the script when it was being put together and had not disagreed with any of the editing prior to performance, it was simply Merlin's performance of the words that 'offended' her. Merlin went to Hare who talked to her of his own ethical dilemmas and he revealed 'what you inevitably come up with is a version of events, a story, a narrative, with which you can be at peace' (Hare, 2004, cited in Boon, 2007, p.133). Merlin becomes 'at peace' with her performance and indeed the whole play itself by seeing it as political, not journalistic and she reconciled her dilemma by her own understanding that 'Hare's characters were artistic creations – they weren't impersonations' (Merlin, 2007, in Boon, 2007, p.132). I think it is interesting that she sees the work as political, therefore this admits there is a bias to the work, and also that she does not say that she sought to serve 'art' with the portrayal.

Hare and Stafford-Clark talk of the issue of representation, and both have said that usually when there is 'an issue' the controversy arises from those who are portrayed once they see themselves on stage and others' reactions to them. In 1998 Hare had encountered this with his monologue piece *Via Dolorosa*. For it, Hare travelled to Israel and Palestine in order to better understand the conflict and also to reflect on theatre as a means of communication and to consider its potential to reconcile. For the work, Hare interviewed over 30 people and their conversations were delivered by Hare himself who premiered the

work in September 1998 in his solo acting debut. After seeing the performance, one of those represented said “yes those are the things we said ... but they sound different when they’re said on stage” ... they knew that when it was said on stage it didn’t look good for them ... ’ (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.73). Hare argues though:

I’ve heard very few examples where people have gone to plays and felt misrepresented. I think it is to do with the act of standing up and pretending to be somebody, which I believe is a revelatory process, while just putting lines of writing down on a page is less revelatory ... I believe print is much more manipulative than performance. I think the truth of what goes on is revealed in performance, whereas the truth of what goes on is not so clearly revealed by being written down on the page. (Hare, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.71)

Though Hare has said it ‘rarely’ happens, being misrepresented either in word or in acting were ‘accusations’ levelled by at least two known critics of *The Permanent Way*, and as has been discussed, in regards to Prescott’s inclusion. Richard Branson did not complain about the way he was represented/presented, which must have been some relief given the fear Stafford-Clark and Hare had over some form of resulting legal wrangling and the extra care they took over the way they dealt with his portrayal ... This issue of being misrepresented - in word or portrayal - is returned to in future chapters, together with further consideration of the moral implications.

### **Verbatim theatre as a form of propaganda?**

Overall, academic writer Carol Martin sees verbatim theatre as often simply another form of propaganda, with its own system of constructed half-truths for the sake of specific arguments aligned to

the writer's beliefs (Martin, 2006, p.10).

This is not how verbatim theatre is presented/explained to the audience; as we know, typically, verbatim texts and performances are presented not just as *a version* of what happened, but instead: what actually happened. The potentially underlying intention to persuade spectators to understand specific events in ways with a particular political affiliation is seldom acknowledged.

If we look back at the case study, it is clear that all involved in *The Permanent Way* thought privatisation was a bad idea per se, and that the crashes that happened in its aftermath were used as a way to demonstrate this in the narrative. As was noted by more than one reviewer, Hare was/is known for a particular political bias and academic Stephen Bottoms has made this point too (Bottoms, 2006, p.56); Merlin also testifies that she felt there was a clear political bias to the work, and certainly the script is not balanced in respect to the safety record of the railways before privatisation. All of this appears, therefore, to subscribe to Martin's belief that the spectators to documentary theatre/verbatim, specifically here *The Permanent Way*, were being persuaded to believe in the bias of the writer and all involved, which could be seen as propaganda. In this instance this means that the audience/spectators were being persuaded to believe that privatisation was a bad idea. Stafford-Clark, Hare *et al* might counter this claim saying if it sent the audience home to study the facts and decide for themselves, then that is ethically enough and makes the piece 'worthy' – but if the audience does not know the facts presented and the editing is biased, some might miss the understanding that they need to research further and come to their own informed conclusions.

In 2019 *The Permanent Way* was staged, for the first time since its premiere, in London at the highly appropriate Vaults Theatre located within the arches of Waterloo Station. The reason for re-staging the work, according to the programme notes, was because the piece had lost none of its relevance in spite of the time that had passed since it was written. The review in the *Guardian* agreed: 'Plays about politics

are often said to date quickly. This one endures because it is sharply informative and profoundly moving' (Billington, 2019, n.p.). Due to the impending General Election, where speculation over the potential privatisation by the Conservatives of the NHS was used as a warning in Labour's rhetoric and manifestos, a verbatim performance on the consequences of privatisation was even more appropriate. Michael Billington for instance commented, 'In 2003, I questioned the play's use of the railways as a metaphor for national chaos. If anything, it now seems to have erred on the side of restraint' (Billington, 2019, n.p.); 'As the country itself careers headlong into yet another train wreck, the revival of this work could not have come at a better time' (Eaves, 2019, n.p.). The reception to the production was again very positive: 'It is a pleasant surprise that this production is able to make something watchable out of an historical event that is on the surface rather dull. Surely there can never have been such a disparity between how boring an event's Wikipedia page is and how engaging the dramatised story is' (Ainley, 2019, n.p.). Many commented on the Waterloo trains trundling overhead and how it added extra poignancy and atmosphere:

this venue selection is more than a gimmick ... the rumble of locomotives overhead adds a kind of organic immediacy to the production that would be impossible to achieve through sound design alone. Certain words and lines simply seem that much more vital and potent for having to fight to be heard with the tons of metal screeching over London's surface on a Thursday evening. (Ainley, 2019, n.p.)

The rest of the staging relied on nothing more than four wooden benches that the cast would occasionally re-position, each person then using costume changes to multi-role with design stripped back to simple symbolic items such as a high vis jacket or a suit and tie to determine role and status. No single performer gets all the attention, but in one review there is a mention of Paul Dodd's performance as John Prescott 'who comes off as the villain of the piece, swaggering on to offer glib soundbites, a stand-in for



every politician who's ever prioritised profits and public perception over safety' (Fagnoli, 2019, n.p.). This review seems to infer that the critic knew that the audience were not hearing anything that Hare gathered directly from Prescott, and instead recognised that all we hear from him are words others ascribed to him or things he was quoted in the press as saying, such as the repeated 'this must never happen again' which drew ironic, hollow laughter the second time it was said.

Personally, I too felt when watching it now it retained its potency and relevance. I also think it a politically biased piece, though unlike Bottoms I have no issue with this – probably because this piece's politics are ones I agree with, and therefore the information presented feeds into my desirability bias – a concept discussed earlier in Chapter Two. As I outlined at the end of the previous chapter, I do agree that verbatim practitioners need to acknowledge the bias within themselves and for the audience more and I agree that this celebrated example of verbatim theatre did not do this to any great degree. In terms of 'truth', after watching I thought of Martin's words:

what is real and what is true are not necessarily the same. A text can be fictional yet true. A text can be nonfictional yet untrue. Documentary theatre is an imperfect answer that needs our obsessive analytical attention. (Martin, 2006, p.15)

The next Chapter will seek to 'obsessively analyse' examples of verbatim theatre made by, for or with younger people to see if the same issues arise in terms of the ways in which the work is created, and presented, or whether the verbatim practitioners navigate the issues more carefully/differently because of the perceived greater vulnerability to exploitation of the younger participants/audiences..

#### **Chapter Four Verbatim within Theatre in Education**

As mentioned in the opening to this thesis, one of the reasons I started work in this research area was because of the extensive amount of verbatim work I had done with my own students. I have been teaching for 20 years, and in my experience as a teacher of Drama, Head of Drama, Head of Faculty and examiner of Drama, a clear trend towards verbatim in schools has emerged. In part this is due to the fact that the form is so adaptable, and also due to a greater requirement by examination boards for work to be actually devised by students, rather than them just performing already written texts. This devised work is also increasingly required (in order to fulfil marking schemes) to have social, political, historical and cultural relevance/opportunities – verbatim form allows all this.

This chapter will look at how verbatim has emerged from Theatre in Education (TIE) and how it has been used with and for young people in Britain. This will involve discussion of some examples of works that have been professionally put together in schools, such as the work of Fin Kennedy and Tamasha Theatre Company, together with professional productions beyond schools, such as the work by Mark Wheeller, each of which creates a TIE-verbatim hybrid. The aim in doing this is to investigate whether methodologies for script/production development and contentious issues for verbatim theatre, such as editing other people's words and representation, are the same here as those emerging and discussed elsewhere.

### **Roy Nevitt**

An excellent segue from the history of verbatim theatre discussed thus far, and this chapter on verbatim within TIE comes from the work of Roy Nevitt.

Nevitt's interest in documentary theatre began when he was himself studying Drama at Keele University. The nearest professional theatre to Keele was the Victoria Theatre, Stoke on Trent, where Nevitt first saw Peter Cheeseman's work, *The Staffordshire Rebels*, 1965:

it blew my mind. It was so exciting. It was telling the story of the English Civil War as it took place precisely in that area of North Staffordshire. It had humour, colour, energy, history; and it was a documentary play ... And I was thinking ... 'bloody hell! I could do this!' But being an educator I would want students in it, I'd want to have them involved in every stage of it. But I'd also want to have my colleagues on the teaching staff involved in it; and I'd want to have their parents involved in it. I'd want it to be a community play. (Nevitt, 2017, n.p.)

The next inspiration point was when Nevitt read a book by Bertram Edwards called 'The Burston School Strike', which was about the historical event of a school strike that happened in the Norfolk village of Burston in 1913. The strike was triggered because of conflict between farmers, church people and landowners who constituted the governing board of the school, and the teachers. The teachers fought to get their students 'boots for them to wear rather than walking through snow barefoot, coal to put on the fire so they didn't have to freeze to death during their lessons; and for farmers not to be allowed to take them out of school to pick up stones from the fields or frighten crows away as part of the agricultural season' (Nevitt, 2017, n.p.). Two teachers were sacked and then the rest went on strike, along with students and their parents and an alternative school was formed on the village green from 1917 until 1939. Nevitt befriended the author, Edwards, and asked to make a play about the event, and was duly given access to the people still living (then in their seventies) and the play of the same name was put together using a combination of interviews, minutes from parish meetings, letters and the source material of Edward's book. The play was then performed in the village using several of the locations mentioned in the narrative, such as the church and village green.

Nevitt, in reflecting on the work gives us his perspective on truth and authenticity, and what he seeks to do in his documentary work:

... these kinds of plays if they've remained true to their source material. If the characters as performed by the actors are true to the people they are representing ... the real people in the audience will tell you 'that's exactly what happened'. We know it wasn't exactly what happened ... you know it can't have been precisely like that. But they feel it was like that so there's a ring of authenticity running through this kind of stuff; and the proof is that the people whose stories are being told tell you that you've got it right. (Nevitt, 2017, n.p.)

Nevitt continued to work as a teacher of drama, in lecturing roles, in community theatre, throughout his working life. He straddled TIE and documentary worlds, and influenced many in the forms, for example Mark Wheeler, who will feature prominently in the rest of this chapter. Nevitt's name is not though one that necessarily is to be found in every overview of documentary/verbatim discussions; giving the last word to him on why this might be:

I mean you'd think David Hare had invented the form when he did that railway play *The Permanent Way*; you'd think he'd invented it. Peter Cheeseman did *The Knotty*, way back in the sixties, which is his Stoke Potteries railway play. We did 'All Change!', which was our railway play. And then along comes David Hare with *The Permanent Way* and suddenly its big news, and it was no better than *The Knotty* and I would dare say no better than our play. And yet because it's David

Hare, because it's the National Theatre, it gets adulation; and it gets attributed as a new invention. (Nevitt, 2017, n.p.)

### **Different styles and methodologies within the TIE form – Fin Kennedy and Tamasha Theatre Company**

TIE's aims of empowerment, growth, personal development, social and political awareness and self-identity are achieved through different methodologies, including direct participation during the performance by the young people within the audience. Sometimes to achieve these aims consultation at the development stage has been a methodology where particular choices in the themes, characters and language of the play are given directly to young people and the performance thereafter designed to speak directly to a particular community in which the consultation took place as exemplified by Nevitt's work discussed previously. Work within TIE includes verbatim – in terms of whole plays or parts of plays, with hybrid forms and methodologies recognisable as those which have been discussed in other chapters.

An example of a recent/current practitioner who has straddled many working practices in developing work for/with young people would be Fin Kennedy. Kennedy is an award-winning British playwright whose credits include writing for Soho Theatre, Sheffield Crucible, Southwark Playhouse, Half Moon Theatre, The Red Room and BBC Radio. For many years, Kennedy has been teaching playwriting in schools, youth clubs and at universities. He is a visiting lecturer for the master's degree in Writing for Performance at Goldsmiths College, and from 2007 he was writer-in-residence at Mulberry School in East London, with whom he co-founded a theatre company and wrote five plays, which premiered at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and in London. He was also co and then sole artistic director of Tamasha Theatre Company from 2013 until his resignation in 2021.

Kennedy's 2006 work *Locked In* (2006) was about a 16-year-old Bengali DJ and Black British MC who broadcast their own show on a pirate radio station. It was developed over two years of direct contact with a mixture of Half Moon Theatre company's youth theatre group and students from local schools, many of whom gave advice and guidance about the script's political content during its first drafts. This, though, was the extent of their involvement/consultation.

Kennedy's work as Mulberry's artist-in-residence had a very different methodology. His initial audience were the students of the school, who knew from the outset of each project that they would be to some degree simultaneously the performers of the work, co-collaborators, subjects of the drama and members of a specific community. Their collective imagination was crucial to the development of Kennedy's scripts, as Fisher observes of this type of method of TIE:

The playwright in residence is required to step out of their own subjective sphere and use their craft as a storyteller to draw out and express the lived experiences of the host community through the facilitation of collective story-making ... the playwright is not a *member* of the community but rather a *visitor*, a conjuror who is invited to play a temporary shamanistic role in order to transform the community's lived experience into a story that is meaningful and owned by those who create it. (Fisher, 2004, cited in Lane 2010, p.144)

Fisher delineates the role further, into three potential interactions for the writer in residence, which overlap rather than remain distinct in the projects: as facilitator, who assists the community in writing their own play in their own words; the interpreter, who takes the stories of the community and then writes a play themselves; and/or the mediator, who shapes verbatim dialogue or written contributions into a coherent whole.

Whilst moving through different methodologies to create work, Kennedy is very clear about acknowledging this, and, wherever relevant, what has been collectively penned. Indeed, the creative team (students) are aware of this too as demonstrated when they were asked by a journalist who wrote the first play that came out of the artist-in-residency, *Mehndi Night* (2007), the cast turned around in unison to declare 'we did' (Kennedy, 2008, cited in Lane 2010, p.144). The play was developed with ten 15-year-olds over several months who expressed to Kennedy a desire to create a play for a mainstream adult audience about the women of their community, and the effect of the modern world on their relationships with one another. In the early stages of developing *Mehndi Night*, the students had been given improvisation exercises through which they created characters and situations taken from family experience (this being the facilitator role in Fisher's model); Kennedy had then shaped these into a dramatic narrative that used these stories (interpreter role in Fisher's model); then lines of dialogue found their way into the play through further improvisation with the cast and discussion with former students (finally the mediator role, completing Fisher's delineated model) who worked as a focus group to 'to give it a sounding at every stage so it's convincing and watertight' (Lane, 2010, p.145). The title of the play refers to the traditional pre-wedding Hindu celebrations. Akin to a 'hen' night, it is a time for the female members of a community to gather together to sing, dance and bless the bride-to-be. However, in the play an estranged daughter returns during the celebrations of her sister's marriage bringing with her painful memories of the past. The event and location were only identified after several attempts by Kennedy to suggest a premise that the female-only cast found agreeable (he wryly adds 'I should have just asked them straight away'). According to a writer's note in the published edition, the play claims to be the first time in British theatre history that a play had been written entirely for and about British Bangladeshi women. It was first performed by students from the school on 2 August 2007 at Venue 45, Edinburgh, as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

The second play through the artist-in-residency, *Stolen Secrets* (2008) employed another distinct methodology for its development. It was a series of five dramatic poems for performance each developed from voluntary suggestions placed within specially-designed 'secret boxes' situated around the school. Kennedy, director Julia Voce and the cast would empty the boxes in rehearsal and identify potential starting points for stories that had come from within the school's community. Students were also sent out 'on location' to research characters and come back with suggestions. This extended relationship with the community's populace, geography and culture was vital in creating not only an environment of trust between the host community and the visiting artist, but also an opportunity for the writer to gain an intimate understanding of that community's internal dynamics (Lane, 2010, p.145).

Lane (2010) also recognises a tension in this type of methodology:

Covert censorship, however, is often a problem when plays are being produced in schools and subject matter conflicts with prevailing ideologies over what should and should not be discussed. If writers are working with extreme situations and language, or politics sensitive with particular communities, the handling of relationships is crucial. (Lane, 2010, p.145)

This is the same tension that cost many TIE companies their futures in the 1980s when TIE went through its period of struggle to exist and be welcomed in schools, specifically following the Tory Educational Reforms Act (ERA) in 1988. The ERA granted Local Management of Schools (LMS) which transferred a large element of budgetary control to schools from Local Authorities. This 'freedom' in reality meant there was great pressure on schools in deciding where to spend money, including whether to spend their budget allocations on more tangible resources like books and teachers rather than inviting in TIE companies. There was no process for schools to work with or 'commission' work from TIE



companies, which saw many TIE companies close as a result. The ERA also led to the introduction of the first National Curriculum where drama was not given 'core' status and instead it found itself tied within English instead. The link saw TIE companies slowly pressurised to fit the need for educational drama pieces rather than TIE programmes, with the key focus on matching some of the Learning Objectives in the literacy part of the National Curriculum.

All of Kennedy's plays for Mulberry are characterised by the predominance of a poetic, direct address storytelling style that often frames the action, allowing students to play multiple roles and transform themselves swiftly from narrator to character. Though Kennedy's methodologies do incorporate students directly into the work, they are not explicitly verbatim (nor are they packaged to be). When contacted about this thesis, Kennedy replied with suggestions on who else might be of use to be interviewed, but was very clear to state: 'unfortunately I'm not sure how much use to you I will be – I have never done verbatim theatre. Although developed and co-created with young people, all my plays are entirely fictional' (Kennedy, 2019).

### **20 Stories High & Tales from the MP3**

One example of a production that is most definitely verbatim, with a starting point similar in some ways to the 'accidental' beginnings of verbatim work by Max Stafford-Clark and Joint Stock, would be 20 Stories High – an award-winning theatre company based in Liverpool, whose work is aimed at audiences aged 13–30 and which intends to connect with culturally diverse and socially excluded young audiences. Their catalogue of performance work, includes their highly successful example *Tales from the MP3*, (2012 and then re-worked for touring 2014).

The director of the work, Julia Samuels, had been inspired by another verbatim production, *Mad Blud* (2011) which was created by writer Phillip Osment and developed from interviews by the young cast with a cross-section of their community in East London – teenagers, families, neighbours, teachers, police, victims and perpetrators – about youth violence and the effects of knife crime. Osment recorded many interviews and then edited these testimonies. The performance style used was that which was pioneered and discussed previously by Anna Deavere Smith – headset verbatim; its use in *Mad Blud* was made clear in the play’s opening with all five of the actors arranged on a traverse stage, counting to three and pressing ‘play’ on their MP3 players connected to visible headphones. Sound designer Matthew Xia let the audience hear a snippet of what the actors were listening to, in order to make it clear to the audience what the recording was and that it was (verbatim) families recounting their experiences. Osment wanted to use this style to preserve the spontaneity of live speech and to give an authenticity to the real experiences with actors listening and instantly acting at the same time. Just as with Deavere Smith’s first use of this technique, the actors included all the characteristics of natural speech such as repetition, stuttering and colloquialisms. They also multi-rolled, for example after the opening sequence the cast, with the help of a shawl and a couple of scarves, become three older ladies – first generation immigrants from the Caribbean bemoaning what has happened to modern youth. They then become teenagers, or younger, talking about gangs and black-on-black crime: a policeman who gives crime details; a mother whose daughter has been stabbed; a young woman who has known so many victims that she now refuses to go to funerals; a girl who explains that her frustrated peers either tend towards violence or become obsessed with ‘guys’; youths who say you cannot be friends with both sides and how gangs do not like people being on your own and doing their own things. The play was well-received: for its methodology in how the work came together; for the respectful reaching out to young people by researching their culture; in its themes that resonated with the audience; in how the performance retained the verbatim language and style of the speakers:

What we get here is not self-conscious interviews but people talking from the heart, their words given live immediacy by these actors, with an added poignancy from their being so close in age and background and coming from the same communities as recent murder victims. (Loxton, 2008, n.p.)

*Tales from the MP3's* director Samuels acknowledged the impact of the work, having also some years previously seen Richard Norton Taylor's *The Colour of Justice*: 'I think I was really overwhelmed at that point about how actually just hearing what words people really say in real life, when you put them on stage and the lights are shining on them, you hear them differently and the ordinary feels more extraordinary' (Samuels, 2014, in Welsh, Jones and Hall, 2014).

Osment had shown 20 Stories High's youth theatre company the head-set technique and Samuels recalled 'we were all really excited to make our own show' using the same style (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). The idea for the show specifically came as a result of them being creatively stuck:

We didn't really know what the next piece was going to be about. The nature of the group is that you've got a lot of very opinionated people in the group, so people would say, 'Let's do it about this and somebody else would be like 'let's not do it about that'. (Samuels, 2014, in Welsh, Jones and Hall, 2014)

Samuels recalled that the group had been experimenting with the recording technique, interviewing people on the streets, sometimes going in with questions that linked to a theme, to see what was generated. Things were proving interesting, but nothing was coming into focus in terms of what the piece should be about and the clear direction it should take 'nothing felt like it quite connected properly' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). There was even a reluctance to share some of the material with the young people saying they were uncertain of its quality, and they only wanted to share things that were felt to be of a

good quality (whatever that actually, meant which at this stage they could not determine). With frustrations building at the end of a particular over-running session, Samuels told the group they would have to put in more rehearsal time to find the 'good'. At this, one young person within the theatre group suddenly said, of the thought of spending more time with others, 'I'm not being funny or nothing Julia but ... we don't even like each other' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). This explosive and divisive comment Samuels says had 'a bit of truth ... because it was a bit cliquey – some people got on with some people and some didn't' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.), and the honesty meant 'the penny dropped':

I was like 'oh my God I know what it [the production] needs to be' so I went away and then the next week I just collected some of the best bits and brought it into them on MP3 players and said 'right I'm going to show you something and you're playing you, and you're playing you, and you're playing him' and so on and then basically they performed this sort of collection of their voices. I was saying 'I think that's what the show is'. I think it was about this group of people who genuinely are getting to know each other who might not massively get on at the beginning and let's find out more about each other and see what's happened by the end.  
(Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

From this the process developed; there was writing, but mainly just speaking – recording thoughts, feelings, about each person and their identity, their 'life stories', talking to each other to try and find some common ground, or to celebrate the non-common ground. The group gradually took control and interviewed each other; they worked sometimes in pairs, sometimes Samuels was the interviewer who would introduce a very wide topic. For example, Samuels recalled:

At one point we thought there are quite a lot of solo voices, and there'd been a recording [of] a big argument about religion, so I said to those I knew had really strong views, why don't we do [more] recording about religion. That became one of the tracks [we used] and actually one of them got really frustrated and walked out [when recording] so it was quite dramatic. That was really good because that was a nice contrast to a few of the stories where it was just someone being sort of very reflective. So, I suppose I was looking for all that kind of a real variety of texture. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

Students would go away and do the recordings, and then come back to the group, swap over who performed it (working then in the expository verbatim form) and share the material with the group. In this way, it is very similar to the methodology used when the actors and wider theatre company brought the work together for *The Permanent Way*, as discussed at length in Chapter Three.

Ultimately, Samuels was the one making the decisions on the editing, giving responsibility for small decisions and moments with the cast. This shows that even in the very collective way that many verbatim projects are put together and the ways material is gathered, there is still within the production model usually someone with ultimate control over what is included. This fits with traditional models of theatre-making; complete agreement over editorial choices and shaping of the work may not always be possible as a collective, and someone has to be the final stop for the decisions. Making links and knowing what to edit Samuels acknowledged was very difficult:

We sort of themed things together. We had a whole load of stuff about relationships, so we put all that together. We had a whole lot of different conversations that had happened about people's journeys to Liverpool from

Africa, so we put them all together as a track. (Samuels, 2014, in Welsh, Jones and Hall, 2014, n.p.)

This therefore again follows the *Mad Blud* production that didn't have a narrative structure:

We were finding conversations and bits of stories that we found interesting and then grouping them thematically and then I remember spending a good chunk of time with loads of post it notes over a big table looking at how they might flow into each other. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

How much of a theatrical production they would actually have was unknown:

We didn't really know if it would work and we were just all being really brave and trying it out. They kept going 'Is this going to work?' and I'd say 'I don't know'. And I didn't know if it was going to be like the world's least interesting piece of theatre or a really touching, interesting, beautiful piece of theatre. (Samuels, 2014, in Welsh, Jones and Hall, 2014, n.p.)

I asked Samuels about what the criteria was in the editing – how did she know, for example, what was 'good': 'I suppose in that first instance it was a combination of things that people had said that were ... some sort of really personal or revealing story or people said something in a particularly interesting or unusual way' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). Samuels was also conscious of the audience in the editing process:

I was definitely looking at light and shade so making sure that we had serious things but also light things. I knew that it needed to be multi textured in order to hold an audience over a period of time. [I wanted to] get this sort of 360 image of what it is to be a young person in Liverpool today. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

In the process of editing I asked whether there were tensions or conflicts, which led Samuels to recall a story by one young male in which he discusses having learning difficulties and the bullying that he'd experienced at school from this. He had agreed to this being in the final piece, but then suddenly one night before it was due to be performed 'he just said to me a few hours before the show "oh I don't want that story in it tonight" and I was like "oh right why?" And he was like "well my mum's coming"' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). It turned out that his mum had encouraged him growing up to never talk about the fact that he had learning difficulties because she felt that would leave him in danger of more bullying; the young man 'suddenly had this realisation "oh god I've got to perform this now in front of my mum and she's told me not to say that"' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). To resolve this, Samuels and the young man and his mother all spoke and discussed the concerns in what must have been a tense conversation only a short time ahead of the performance start time; fortunately, all came away happy and it remained in the piece. In another section two girls have a conversation about fancying black lads versus white lads 'and we really liked it; it was kind of funny and interesting, but one young woman said "oh well I don't feel like that anymore. That was true for me then but I don't feel like that now. And so I don't want it in anymore"' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). There was more time for changes to be made on this occasion, and so Samuels and the group negotiated that actually after that scene the young woman would stop the action and say:

Right this was how I felt then but now I've moved on and actually I feel really differently. And that became a technique we used in the piece and actually the lad that had the bullying he stopped after the bullying track and stopped the action and said 'I didn't originally want this in the play but actually this is why it's in there'. So, we started using that sense of them reflecting on what was in it and we integrated that into the performance. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

In a workshop I attended, Robin Soans recalled an occasion when, in spite of the best intentions, one of the interviewees was negatively affected in a piece he had put together. Soans was unspecific about which play, but from what he did reveal it would appear to be *A State Affair* (2000) which was developed as a 'follow-up' to Andrea Dunbar's highly successful non-verbatim play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, (1982), which Stafford-Clark commissioned and directed twice. *A State Affair* provided a documentary account of what life is like 'today' on the estate which inspired Dunbar's original play. The piece consists largely of a series of fragmented monologues with strong themes such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, heroin addiction and unemployment. Soans recalled of an interview: 'there was a girl ... we did a page-turn [following the edited interview] and asked "is there anything you object to?" She said "no". But when it was on stage she said she felt exploited. She paid us not to tour it' (Soans, 2017, n.p.). In terms of legality, someone completing a verbatim piece would be bound by similar rules to a journalist, for example, the interviewee should have complete faith in the fact that the interviewer will not thwart what s/he is saying by leaving essential parts out, or by putting words in her/his mouth. The interviewee then has the right to know in what context s/he is being interviewed. According to good journalistic practice, the interviewee is entitled to read the quotations that are attributed to them before publication and possibly to suggest corrections to them. There is this, plus the ethical perspectives Summerskill has offered which have been discussed previously, and all of this it would appear was carried out by Soans within the *A State Affair* example, but still sometimes people have difficulties once they actually see themselves being portrayed and an audience responding to what they have said.

Samuels was clearly able to achieve such positive resolutions in both instances when she encountered tensions over portrayal because, as she said herself – she knew the group she was interviewing and working with really well. It was interesting that when I pushed Samuels to explain how



she edited for this project she reflected that she felt a responsibility to represent them accurately, and that, knowing them as a group:

I felt quite confident I knew what they meant. So, in terms of editing and making sure I felt true to what they'd intended I think I felt quite confident with that. I felt a very big duty to make sure that if I knew what they meant when we had the original whole recording that I was able to preserve that intent in an edited version. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

As has been noted previously by such practitioners and writers in the form as Robin Soans, building trust and a positive rapport with someone being interviewed is useful in helping to get them to talk, and then in representing them authentically. However, what this cannot do is take away all bias that may unconsciously be present, in the questions and in the editing that follows – as has already been discussed and proved. Furthermore, one could argue that knowing the subject really well might increase the bias. Samuels used the phrase 'I felt confident I knew what they meant' – which implies she was interpreting what was being said, acting as some form of filter rather than always working literally with what was being said. Intentionally or not, this is an editor exercising their power of interpretation over the material they have been given. Samuels did not say whether any other bias had occurred due to her knowledge of the students she was working with, but again intentionally or otherwise, this can be an issue, especially perhaps if, when asking questions, one feels positively about the interviewee or one edits in such a way as to present them positively, or steers them away from pursuing something that might prove negative for them if included in the drama.

Pushing this, I asked Samuels: 'if a person said I don't want what I've said going in there but to take it out would really change the whole piece, what do you think you would do in that situation?', to which Samuels reflected:

I think that is living on the knife edge of verbatim. I do feel incredibly uncomfortable about the idea of a person's material being used after a point where they don't feel comfortable. But I also recognise there's a pragmatism to the process of creating theatre, the industry of creating theatre. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

Here Samuels used her direct personal experience in being 'incredibly uncomfortable' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.) as an audience member watching the verbatim production *Fatherland*, (2017). The piece (which will be a case study examined further in Chapter Five) was a collaboration between playwright Simon Stephens, Frantic Assembly's Scott Graham and Underworld musician Karl Hyde which sought to explore where we come from, how we are fathered and how both contribute to a person's identity, through interviews with twelve men from Stockport, Corby and Kidderminster – the producers' home towns respectively. Within the play one of the 'characters' – Luke – reveals in his testimony that he was sceptical about the whole premise of the project and how much it is being motivated by money, and then makes it clear in his testimony that he does not want his words included anymore, and 'then they turn that into the play [and] you know you're watching [events] through that person [who] doesn't want their story in it' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). Having recalled this experience, it led Samuels to reflect upon another 'uncomfortable' example and aspect in verbatim: not just the editing of the words, but also the placing of the segments:

I remember Philip Osment saying with *Mad Blud* to us that someone [was] talking about advocating hitting your children and [that] if you don't hit your children then you don't discipline them properly then there's going to be more crime in the world. Philip had put it next to someone who was the victim of violence or something (I've forgotten exactly), and I remember him [Osment] saying about how conscious he was about his own personal politics on that conversation by the fact he'd put one next to the other. And as a verbatim practitioner I suppose I'm really aware of all of that and I'm aware where I place something and how I place something mediates its truth in some way. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

Samuels was then able to give her own related example:

There are things in *Tales from the MP3*, boys saying quite sexist stuff and how they view women and even though I might not have put it right next to it, I was making sure there was stuff from women [close by as a contrast in the editing]. There was one character who talked about how her family wanted to [have her in an] arranged marriage; I knew that I wouldn't necessarily have put this sexist thing in unless I knew I had something else [like the arranged marriage section] that was offering a different dynamic and a different perspective on how we view women in society or how women feel to be used in society. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

Samuels has created further verbatim projects with strangers as the interviewees and she says it affords a different dynamic; here she ensures she goes back to the person to let them check the work:

I will do as much as I possibly can to make sure the people feel included and empowered and that you're showing them in various stages along the way and they are able to raise any concerns and so you're able to explore that together. If they didn't feel comfortable with it I wouldn't want it to be part of it. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

In support of this, Samuels was able to reflect upon another piece where there was some potential for controversy in editing and sequencing, which again she was able to resolve through open dialogue with people interviewed: *I told my mum I was going on an R.E. trip* (2017). The production was put together as a collaboration between 20 Stories High and Contact and toured throughout theatre and community venues in 2017; it was subsequently commissioned as a film by the BBC/Arts Council immediately after when theatre professionals Julia Samuels and Roxanne Moores joined forces with film director Lindy Heymann. The film was first broadcast on BBC Two in January 2018.

*I told my mum I was going on an R.E. trip* explored the way in which society treats the subject area of abortion and how this impacts women today. It sought to question why we do not talk more openly as a society about the themes and issues surrounding abortion, why it remains such a taboo subject and what the consequences might be if we did. The stage and film versions used the same theatre technique of recorded delivery, and featured interviewees from Great Britain and Northern Ireland and beyond, health professionals, young people of both sexes on all sides of the debate. Although for this example Samuels did not know the people she was interviewing, once again she was able to positively reflect on the issues she had to resolve within the complexities of the production and the debates it was raising:

An advisor who was working with us had put us in touch with a gynecologist who is really pro-life, a conscious objector, and that doctor was very very, quite

understandably, wary about how I was going to use it [the material]. She wanted me to send her what edit I was using and see how it fitted into the bigger scene, and how it sat with the other pro-choice doctor that I was contrasting her against; and I really understood why she'd want to do that and I was totally fine to do that.

(Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

Clearly here there is a level of respect and care that Samuels has employed, which the interviewee has been aware of and responded to trustingly – aligning Samuels with the practices Summerskill has advocated, discussed previously. When the piece then went forward into the BBC commission, 'they [those interviewed] had to sign away that you could do whatever you want with it [the material] and you can edit it however you want' (Samuels, 2019, n.p.). Samuels thought here about the person she had interviewed and said to the BBC that although she had checked with her before, she again wanted to have the conversation to ensure that she was fully aware of where the material was going to be used and how it would fall in the editing. This, overall, fits into her wider ethos:

I wouldn't want to do anything that closes down discussion and makes people feel defensive, or someone's point of view even if I disagree with it isn't being respected within the piece. I'm genuinely going there for the conversation.

(Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

Seeking to test this, I asked Samuels, hypothetically again, a question about editing, if she were to, for example, dislike the person, or their views, and the effect this might have. Samuels responded:

I haven't tried doing any verbatim pieces where I'm interviewing you know hard core racists or people whose views I would find really abhorrent ... quite a few of

the [recordings for projects] I had quite a different perspective from, but I can't imagine if it goes further from that and if you had someone and you really hate what they are saying and then how you would treat that in a way they'd feel happy with you to treat. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

This reminded me of the situation outlined in Chapter Three with Max Stafford-Clark recalling interviews for *Yesterday's News*, in 1976, and the racist opinions which they listened to and included in the final work, claiming that they had not edited anything out. However ethical this may initially seem, by leaving the text in perhaps they felt secure in their belief that the audience would then be able to judge the opinions for themselves, and where they placed it may have helped direct the audience to have a particular reaction, just as Osment did in the example Samuels recalled for *Mad Blud*.

Reflecting on the *Tales from the MP3* production and its method of coming together Samuels went on: 'I've normally have got quite a set process that I like which is sort of Stanislavski based so it's all about objectives and all about what the characters want.... But with verbatim you've got someone's words and their intonations and what you're trying to do as an actor is just say what their saying as truthfully as you can by copying them' (Samuels, 2014, in Welsh, Jones and Hall, 2014, n.p.).

In performing the expository hybrid gathered material, the company also used the recorded delivery performance style. Just as with Deavere Smith, and *Mad Blud*, (and indeed celebrated verbatim work by Alecky Blythe who will be discussed in Chapter Five), the group listened to the original MP3 recordings live on stage, repeating the words they heard played through their headphones. 'This gives the performances a raw authenticity – and an incredibly spontaneous energy' (Samuels, 2014, in Welsh, Jones and Hall, 2014, n.p.). This is not to say it was without problems:

We did so much practising because we were just trying to get hold of the technique because it's quite tricky, well, some people find it really easy and some people don't, but also there was loads of having to put files on MP3 players and trying to get them in sync during a scene with somebody else and not being able to get them in sync and headphones being knotted up. We found [headset verbatim technique] quite a slow way of working but we still really liked it. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.).

In concluding our interview, I asked Samuels to reflect on verbatim theatre more widely, and its popularity in schools and beyond. Her opinions reflect my own and indeed my experience as a teacher when she said:

I don't think I realised how much verbatim was happening in schools. I was in school quite recently and they had lot of verbatim scripts and things, it has caught the imagination in terms of what's a quite nice thing to teach and share with young people. It felt in schools for a long long time that you couldn't or it was seen as limiting and reductive to do improvisations on real life and that was a bit 'soapy' and [young people] should be doing something more imaginative using more experimental conventions. What's quite nice about verbatim is that you can do stuff that is real and relatable to young people but that there are conventions so that they are not just feeling like it's better [done] on the telly. (Samuels, 2019, n.p.)

### **Risking it all by Zengage**

Another successful example of a verbatim TIE performance with further adaptations in the methodology for its compilation is *Risking It All* (2013), which was commissioned to tour 18 secondary schools across West Cheshire.

The work was put together by Zengage Performing Arts Company which is a not-for-profit organisation specialising in the delivery of interactive workshops, theatre performances and presentations in schools, colleges, universities and businesses across the Northwest of England. In 2012 Zengage received funding from the National Lottery to explore risk-taking behaviour with a group of young people living in sheltered accommodation. To begin the project, over a 14-week period, trained and experienced workshop leaders, performers and practitioners from Zengage held various participative consultations and drama workshops across the Northwest. Engaging young people in practical workshop sessions allowed the company to build rapport (as discussed previously, a key requirement for any successful interview situations), listen to stories shared, explore the issue of risk-taking behaviour and document the sessions. The findings highlighted a need to address safeguarding issues such as alcohol and substance misuse, social networking, sexting, child sexual exploitation, rape and inappropriate relationships. Zengage and a small team of associate writers used the real case studies and young people's stories to write the piece to address these issues. As the project was lottery funded, the company and multi-agencies involved in the project also put together feedback questionnaires to determine its reception and any positive outcomes for the audiences that might encourage similar projects and further funding. These feedback questionnaires were handed to schools to distribute to every pupil post-show after watching the performance. These also served a purpose in offering another way for pupils to make a disclosure or reach out to someone. After its pilot performance in 2013 at Neston High School feedback



was extremely positive; 91.4 per cent of the whole year group believed that the *Risking It All* was the most effective way to address the issues.

Within the performance, after 35 minutes, the action was stopped and pupils were engaged in mid-show discussion using Augusto Boal's forum theatre technique whereby an audience can propose alternative ways that the action could have gone which the actors then replay to test the suggestions through an improvisation, returning in many ways also to the original forms of TIE.

In total, nine young people utilised the questionnaires after seeing the performance as a method of reaching out for support, opting for someone to contact them privately outside of school. This shows the power and potential of the TIE-verbatim form. This example also highlights the versatility in methodology in putting the work together, and indeed in its performance style; in *Risking It All* those performing the work were older than those they were portraying/than the 13–16-year range it was aimed at which is very different to the examples of 20 Stories High, for example. The more traditional model in TIE is that people within the action are the same or a very similar age to the majority of the audience, due to beliefs that this will mean the work engages the audience more and will have greater relevance to them both in and beyond the moment of watching.

### **Mark Wheeler**

The biggest 'voice' of verbatim in schools and youth groups, with methodology that crosses into all those mentioned so far in this chapter, in my experience again as a teacher within the Arts, belongs to Mark Wheeler.

Many, myself included, did not use his plays initially to inspire our own verbatim projects. Instead scripts, such as *Hard to Swallow* (1991), and *Too Much Punch for Judy* (1986), have been used in schools as performance scripts for students to rehearse and often perform for their exams, and also for TIE companies seeking to tour plays that have strong messages to teach to the younger audiences.

In 2017 I was asked by my editor to interview Wheeler for the *Teaching Drama* publication in regards to his verbatim play *I Love You Mum I Promise I Won't Die* (ILYMIPIWD, 2017). I was also asked to interview the mother of the teenage boy whose tragic story the play told, Fiona Spargo-Mabbs, in order that an article about the play and The Daniel Spargo-Mabbs (DSM) foundation, (set up by Dan's parents Tim and Fiona) could be written to publicise their work and the touring production by Oasis Youth Theatre. Through this connection not only was I able to discuss the verbatim piece with Wheeler in relation to the article, but also to address questions that were forming ahead of my thesis writing. At the same time, I told Fiona Spargo-Mabbs of my dual purpose in contacting her and she too was very accommodating in answering questions which gave me content relevant for both the article and thesis.

ILYMIPIWD tells the story of Daniel Spargo-Mabbs who was a bright, popular and talented teenager with a promising future ahead of him. On the evening of Friday 17 January 2014, Dan persuaded his mum to let him go to a party, with a group of friends. As Dan was usually responsible, Fiona agreed that he could go; however, Dan and his friends went to an illegal rave in Hillingdon instead of the party. At the rave Dan took MDMA, along with four of his friends. He had no way of knowing that there was a lethal amount of MDMA in the bag he had. The other four were fine, but immediately Dan experienced ill-effects – his body temperature began to soar, eventually peaking at 42 degrees centigrade. At this temperature, the body's organs cannot cope and they shut down. For a couple of hours his friends could not find him, and when they did he was propped up outside the building in the rain with paramedics. Dan was rushed to A&E at 04.30 on Saturday 18 January; two days later, aged just 16, Dan died as a result of

taking the drug. This was such an uncharacteristic act by Dan, that his parents felt that if this could happen to their son, it could happen to anyone. Shortly after Dan's death, Fiona and Tim set up the DSM Foundation with its aim to deliver drug education programmes to young people, parents/carers and teachers in order to improve young people's understanding of the risks of drugs and to enable them to make safer choices.

To help in this objective they commissioned Mark Wheeler to write a play to tell the story of Dan's life and death.

The play was the idea of Dan's drama teacher Izzy Forrester. Dan loved drama and was good at it. Izzy suggested early on that drama could be a really effective way of communicating the play's important messages about the risks of drugs to young people. She loved Mark [Wheeler]'s work, as indeed did Dan, and Izzy knew Mark was a playwright who wrote powerfully for young people about issues that affect them. (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.)

On what would have been Dan's seventeenth birthday, four months after his death, Izzy contacted Wheeler, and immediately he agreed to be involved in putting together some form of TIE project/play using Dan's story.

Neither Fiona nor her husband had themselves heard of Wheeler, nor of verbatim theatre: 'this was all a whole new world to us, as have so many things been since Dan died' (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.). Fiona described that she and her husband were very much 'led' through this process, which they were completely happy about because 'to be honest at that stage we were still very much in the early stages of numb shock and trauma' (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.). In the background, following Dan's death and the subsequent coming together of the play, was the trial looming of the two young men arrested for supplying the drugs that killed Dan, adding to their trauma. For the play Wheeler decided to go with his

familiar verbatim style:

Mark said this would be how he'd like to approach this play, and when he explained the form, it seemed infinitely preferable to someone trying to recreate our words and those of the others involved in this story, which is not only incredibly precious to us, but also feels very vulnerable and fragile, and it was – and is – so very important to get it as right as possible. (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.)

In using real people's words rather than creating them, Wheeler reflected upon his experience of putting together an earlier play *Graham: World's Fastest Blind Runner* (1984) which tells the story of World Champion blind runner Graham Salmon MBE. Wheeler recalled the moment the parents told him about when their son's operation failed and he was left blind:

how much better it was to have the parent's real response: 'we have to take your son's second eye away and he's going to be blind' ... what the hell do you say as the parent? The line that they actually said was 'couldn't we give him one of ours' and if I'd written that it would seem a bit twee maybe and a bit made up, but the fact that I know that wasn't made up gives it an authenticity and a reality. (Wheeller, 2017, n.p.)

Wheeller also mentioned this aspect again when reflecting on the title of ILYMIPIWD:

As soon as I heard those words [that Dan had said before he left] I said that's the title. The young people said no, ... it needs to be something less harsh and short and snappy. I remember ... I thought the long title ... if it suggests the story and

hooks you in, it can work. I think titles are really important and I really stood out for that and said no it needs to be that. (Wheeller, 2017, n.p.)

Whilst some things occasionally leap out fortuitously, the majority of what the audience sees and hears from Wheeler has undergone a great deal of editing. This, as we have come to learn throughout the thesis so far, is common in verbatim, which again brings into question what the process is for selecting and editing, and how much this is then affecting the authenticity of people's testimony. Furthermore, as Soans remarked in the workshop I attended, the same material will be edited differently by different writers because of what he acknowledged the writer brings to the project – the bias we have referred to throughout this thesis – either consciously or unconsciously. Soans himself also said that it is important not go in with an agenda – to let the people you meet inform the agenda and remain open to wherever they take you. This said, Soans asserted that, as interviewer, one goes in prepared, with some form of 'plan' – what questions to ask based on research and wider understanding. This, however, means there is unintentional bias and assumptions already being made in the choice of questions. Though there remains a continual tension, I assert again that one does not have to go in without a bias to the process of making verbatim theatre per se, so long as it is acknowledged by those putting the work together and subsequently made clear to the audience, such as with *The Laramie Project* and the points raised in Chapter Two by Stephen Bottoms.

In terms of the process for ILYMIPIWD, Wheeler spent time in Croydon in July/August 2014 and taped hours of interviews with firstly the family, then Dan's girlfriend Jenna and her family, and finally with Dan's friends, which he then transcribed. There was then a further recorded interview between him and Dan's parents in December, to clarify aspects. Fiona said that for all the reassurance and commitment to get the story right and 'honour' the victim there were challenges:

It was also a terrifying process at times for me – it felt like handing my son over for public consumption, and because of the nature of the story, he and what happened could come across in ways we really wouldn't want them to, and he could be open to being judged in a way that would be heart-breaking but which I wouldn't of course be able to control. (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.)

All of this meant that the parents had to build very strong relationships with Wheeler and then the group of actors from Southampton company Oasis Youth Theatre (a company formed at Wheeler's school who often premiered his work), who were performing Dan's story. Of this process, and of giving the project over to a writer, Fiona said 'I had to put huge amounts of trust in Mark throughout'. Robin Soans, during the 2017 workshop, said 'never forget it's someone's life' when talking about his approach and experiences (Soans, 2017, n.p.).

Once Wheeler had completed the interviews he then had to edit, because:

I got so much material I said I just don't think I can do this justice in one play so I [decided to] do a 'buy-one-get-one-free' [creating two play versions]. One is very ensemble youth theatre [in its] feel and the other is very intimate and [with a] small cast and [has a] talking heads feel. (Wheeler, 2017, n.p.)

This is interesting because although Wheeler did not say that either version had anything other than words taken directly from testimony, the fact that he was able to get two very different plays/outcomes shows once again that the editing of the material is highly significant in verbatim.

Wheeller went on to then discuss the power of editing in changing a context, reflecting on another of his successful verbatim plays *Missing Dan Nolan* (2003). Dan Nolan was a 14-year-old boy who went fishing in Hamble (between Southampton and Portsmouth) on the night of 1st January 2002. Unbeknown to his parents he and his three friends had taken a litre bottle of vodka. Late that evening the boys became separated and, although the other three arrived home safely, Dan never returned. Twenty-one months later human remains were discovered at a remote pool area in Swanage, 33 miles away in a straight line, 60 miles by road. These remains were positively identified as Dan's. In creating the play, Wheeler had gone back to verbatim after a break from using the style, or in some cases mixing it with fictional interludes: 'I thought I'm not a proper playwright unless I add something to it myself and in the early days there was no such thing as verbatim, that's something that's come along much later; but with Dan Nolan I thought I've got nothing to add to this it needs to be the people who tell the story' (Wheeller, 2017, n.p.).

Of the methodology and those he interviewed, Wheeler revealed something controversial:

The police at one point wanted to pull out [of being involved in the project] and I said 'oh why?' And they said, 'well it looks like 'Nolan's family are complaining directly to the police' [in the way it is written] and I said well that's in the editing I can change that, so I changed it and it was alright. (Wheeller, 2017, n.p.)

This shows the awareness he has as a verbatim writer that changing words through editing can completely transform the way things come across; being aware is positive, however, his example is inadvertently a negative one in terms of the 'truth' of this (and indeed verbatim) work. In the example Wheeler gives, the police were ultimately happy following his changes. However, whilst this example seems very 'ethical' in giving those that appear a chance to reflect on what they have said, and to have editorial control, by then changing what is said through re-editing, this means the audience are not getting

an accurate appraisal of the event. In this instance Wheeler has given the authority figures a chance to censor the work potentially reducing their perceived culpability in the way the narrative unfolds for the audience. One of the aims of verbatim theatre is the very opposite of this: rather than to obscure injustice, verbatim sets out to show culpability and, where applicable, failures of process and individuals and the consequences. In revealing this example to me, I believe Wheeler was aiming to show reassuringly how verbatim works effectively to deliver the truth, or at least a version of it, because of the close relationship between the person who has given the testimony and the writer, and because his methodology involved going back to check the material with those persons whose testimony is being used (just like Samuels in her work, for example). It has the reverse effect, unfortunately, revealing a 'truth' flaw in the process for *Missing Dan Nolan* that then invites questions as to whether other projects have had the same treatment in some aspect. It is not, though, a flaw in his process, and simply reminds us again of the clear flaw in the whole act of editing. To edit is to change. To change is to move something further from that which it was (maybe for the intended 'better'). If what it was originally was someone's truth, editing moves it further from the truth and verbatim is far from therefore offering truth.

The contentiousness of this was evident in ILYMIPiWD, Fiona recalled:

He [Wheeller] was very open throughout the whole process and kept sending bits of script for us to see as he went along, and also invited us down to Southampton to see scenes as the play developed with his youth theatre company, Oasis Youth Theatre. He wanted to know what he was writing, and what they were producing, was something we would be happy with. (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.)



Fiona said that this was very reassuring but also, naturally incredibly hard for her and her husband, because 'it meant re-inhabiting the worst possible moments of our lives. I was (and am) also totally unable to step outside the story and see how it might come across to others' (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.).

I questioned Wheeler as to whether he feels a burden of responsibility when editing other people's words: 'No not at all because I always work with the people I am writing about. They always have editorial control over what I've done' (Wheeller, 2017, n.p.). This is slightly at odds, though, with something that Fiona revealed to me:

Through the interview process we found out some very important things about what had happened, which was very painful for us. Then when we learned about the role his friend, called Alice in the play, played in him ending up where he did, it was like starting grieving all over again from scratch. It turned out this wasn't something he'd gone running after, but something that had been brought his way, albeit by someone who very much cared about him and would have had no intention of him coming to harm, and yet he did. (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.)

Fiona went on to discuss how Wheeler chose to very much downplay Alice's role, 'which I'm sure was the right decision, because it would have been wrong to risk her being set up as the villain of the piece, which she wasn't, and Dan an innocent victim, which is too simplistic' (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.). However, in the timeline and indeed the real narrative, Alice played a much more active role in Dan making the choices which he did regarding the illegal rave and the taking of drugs 'much more than I think comes across in the play' (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.). In terms of the process here, Wheeler was given access to the texts on Dan's phone and the subsequent transcripts once they were returned from the police after the sentencing of the supplier. Wheeler then 'picked bits out then to include in the script.

Alice read and signed her approval for which we're very grateful' (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.). His ideas for using the texts as he did was because he had seen a verbatim play at the NT about the grooming and radicalisation of teenagers, and he felt that what had been going on with Alice was exactly the same as this grooming process. Following this he suggested to Fiona and (husband) they could maybe change their words in the play about peer pressure to grooming:

He wasn't the first person to see the texts and use this word, but what's been so hard every time I've seen the play (and I never want to again!) is that it seems to me as if that role has been very much minimised. I trust Mark that this was the right decision, and I know I'm the worst possible critic, but it's very hard for me every time to see and hear these exchanges knowing there was so much more on Alice's side. What was, and is, very hard for us is that if you were to write this person out of Dan's story we're absolutely sure he'd still be here. This must be very hard for her too of course. (Spargo-Mabbs, 2017, n.p.)

Of the changes, Wheeler when interviewed was unaware of perhaps how Fiona truly felt about this decision. Reflecting on the words as they are in the script he said: 'most of the words I included are from the young people because they will relate to it more closely than the mum and dad describing such horrific detail his death and so on. And I took the girlfriend out of that play and made her one of the young people. Effectively that's what's happened' (Wheeler, 2017, n.p.). The reasons may well have been very appropriate and well-judged, however, Wheeler's editorial changes have ultimately been chosen for creative purposes and also in consideration of how the audience might respond, and in acknowledgement of a wider picture for what was going on with Alice. The decisions made were not made due to some notion of achieving a 'truth'. Though Wheeler feels his openness in the process was enough, he had

control of the material, and to some extent of the grieving parents, and they questioned his choices with respect to Alice, Dan's girlfriend. Through the positive relationships that were established and the openness of the process, the parents trusted, and still trust, Wheeler, and whilst in disagreement, they were not so 'angered or aggrieved' by Wheeler's editorial choice to make him then change it. Once again, the tensions of this form of theatre are evident – between the creator/editor and the interviewees.

Wheeler described it initially as 'his best play' (though he has revised this having completed his recent project which is the subject of the next case study) adding 'there's a fortuity and a fortuitousness about verbatim, because you have by chance such eloquent people speaking to you' (Wheeler, 2017, n.p.). He also reflected finally in this case study: 'When I watch films and it says "based on truth but some scenes have been changed for dramatic purposes" I always think well why? It's just really bizarre and unnecessary so I genuinely don't change what people have said to me. Although I do edit' (Wheeler, 2017, n.p.).

### ***Kindness: A Legacy of the Holocaust - Voices of the Holocaust, Cate Hollis and Mark Wheeler***

This verbatim piece – a hybrid as will be outlined presently – first became known to me as a play text I was asked to review by my editor. The piece was put together by Voices of the Holocaust theatre company – which was founded with the objective 'to ensure that the voices of survivors and victims of the Holocaust would not be lost in the post survivor era' believing that 'theatre can be the surrogate human voice to continue telling stories that need to be told' (Voices of the Holocaust, 2022, n.p.). The intention when the project started was that this would be a touring production going into schools and arts centres, but the COVID pandemic hit and so the text came out before the premiere of the play had taken place, amid uncertainty about when the project would tour. The piece is described as 'largely a

verbatim play based on the testimony of Hungarian survivor Susan Pollack MBE, aged only 13 when she was sent to the notorious Auschwitz-Birkenau [concentration camps] in the summer of 1944. Interwoven are a number of complementary narratives ...' (Voices of the Holocaust, 2022, n.p).

In February of 2022 I was contacted by the co-writer, and artistic director of Voices, Cate Hollis, to ask if my school would be interested in having the company perform the play and complete a workshop with our students as the pandemic restrictions had been lifted and the play was able to tour as first hoped. Naturally I jumped at the opportunity.

In the play, four actors play 20 characters as well as undertaking all the stylised physical theatre/dance elements, with the influence of Frantic Assembly's movements evident (Frantic's own verbatim piece *Fatherland* will be addressed in Chapter Five). One actress – Hannah Mendel – plays just the central role of Susan. The other three actors multirole the remaining roles. The set has numerous props which serve functionary as well as symbolic purposes, for example one of the many ladders is used as a way to symbolise a character's rising panic over their children being taken away, and then as a pulpit for a Rabbi later on. Centrally in the set, a 3D tree – a tree of life – with stone setting beneath, a key symbol in Jewish culture, with stone setting moments memorialising those lost to the Holocaust enacted beneath as the narratives unwind, and end for some in the play. The effect of the set served 'art', and there was none of the aesthetics previously referred to that made it seem as if it was 'documentary theatre'. In this respect, there was nothing that seemed to be trying to push 'truth' in the aesthetics.

I sent Hollis a number of questions as well as speaking to her directly after she had been at our school, building upon the material available through their website, Facebook and education pack resources. I started by drilling down once more into the specifics of how the piece came about. Hollis revealed that the driving force for the project:

was an awareness that the single most espoused approach amongst Holocaust educators to stimulate engagement in young people was to bring a survivor to school to testify – the in person human connection – and that that approach will soon not be an option as our survivor numbers dwindle and living memory moves increasingly towards a more distant history. (Hollis, 2022, n.p.)

Susan Pollack had visited a couple of schools with the company within their opening season, answering questions after the performances of the non-verbatim works on the Holocaust and in so doing fulfilling the ‘human connection’ element to give the work they were performing more impact. It then became a very natural process to consider moving from this to then using Susan’s story, and indeed her words directly. It was at this stage Hollis contacted Mark Wheeler, having met him through Drama conference circles initially.

I then approached Mark ... he had the depth of experience in the process of working with testimony in emotional complex experiences ... and we had the experience, knowledge and understanding of the complexities of the Holocaust history and related challenges within the arts so it felt that our collective experiences and strengths would ensure that we did justice to Susan’s story and create an educational play that could be uniquely powerful and engaging. (Hollis, 2022, n.p.)

The interviews themselves took place in Susan’s own home, over the course of a day with Voices’ technician completing both vocal and video recordings to ensure there was as much to work with and refer back to later as possible. Though Susan has been testifying for over 30 years, the company were

acutely aware that they would be asking Susan to go into a lot more depth and detail than she usually would, so they ensured there were breaks during this intense day. Each of these practices relate again to Summerskill's ideas that for the verbatim practitioner it should not be external rules or laws but rather individual moral compasses that drive the way material is gathered and edited (Summerskill, 2021, p.46). In her book she reminds us that 'interviewers need to understand the weight of the favour they ask, and the gift that is given by the narrator' (Summerskill, 2021, p.95), which it appears Hollis and Wheeler most certainly did appreciate judging by their sensitive methodology.

Wheeler led much of the interview, whilst Hollis ensured that core questions were not missed given her prior knowledge of Susan's story and her broader Holocaust history knowledge, which Wheeler admits he lacked: 'I was somewhat overawed by the subject matter of the proposed commission ...' (Wheeler, in Wheeler and Hollis, 2021, p.10). Of this Wheeler reflects that it was highly successful: 'Cate was able to add to the process considerably by asking the questions to highlight something I wouldn't know needed to be included' (Wheeler, in Hollis and Wheeler, 2021, p.10). Interestingly, Wheeler – who chose a single book to awaken his understanding of the history of the Holocaust – realised from this project and methodology going into the interviews that he 'had never pre-researched the stories I told ... I went in knowing nothing but needing to know everything ... so I can ask the naïve questions ... I often cite this play when people talk to me about my 'research 'methods.' (Wheeler, in Hollis & Wheeler, 2021, pp.10-11). This approach differs to Summerskill's who recommends that when asking questions of a person who has gone through trauma, research is done to ensure the questions do not inadvertently offend or add to the trauma. It is instead like the methodology that Garson referred to in that the maker has no prior knowledge and is seeking to find answers or fill a gap in the archive or develop their own awareness.

The recorded testimonies were then transcribed by postgraduate student volunteers working with Voices theatre company, and from this Wheeler began an initial editing process.

In the performance, Susan's words are spoken by not only the actress playing her, but by those actors playing other characters. The actors here speak Susan's words as if they were actually the words of other characters, for instance when speaking as members of her family; what they say here is first-person, but is in fact actually Susan's words in their mouths. This took refinement, with the writers and cast having to reflect on whether Susan's mother would have spoken in the same way as her daughter about an experience – would Susan's choice of words fit her mother's guise, for example? This meant that, 'in rehearsal some of those lines we found needed to be reassigned and have since been revised in the published script' (Hollis, 2022, n.p.) sometimes giving them back to the actress playing Susan for example, or changing the words to fit better with other character. This is an example therefore, not of absolute 'truth', but of artistic aesthetics guiding the choices. However, it is also an example of due diligence by those putting the work together, in that they are making choices for the sake of 'art' whilst also considering the source material and its intentions by the speaker (in this case, Susan Pollack).

Whilst Wheeler was working on the material gathered from Susan, Hollis worked on the counter narratives 'the scale and complexity of the Holocaust meant other stories would have to be told and Susan's individual perspective would need to be contrasted' (Hollis, 2022, n.p.). Hollis explained to me, for example, that the Hungarian experience of the Holocaust was very different to the Polish and that there were differing ordeals in Eastern Europe where some were victims of the 'Holocaust by bullets'/the Einsatzgruppen; 'I needed to open out the broader experiences and complexities of such places' (Hollis, 2022, n.p.). This meant that Hollis included within the play's structure other survivor testimonies about arriving at Auschwitz, in so doing creating the balance and contrast between three other narratives: Zigi, Arek and Kitty's stories. This material was not gathered through interviews conducted by Hollis; however, the words are from testimony that Zigi, Arek and Kitty have given over time to different people. The character of the Rabbi was influenced by Rabbi Mer Lau – himself a survivor. There is also research into

other stories, not therefore testimony at all, but real people if not their real words. This can be found in Mala and Edek's resistance story (Hollis & Wheeler, 2021, pp.47-48):

I had known of Mala and Edek for a long time and theirs had been a story I had long since wanted to tell. Their deaths were tragic but their resistance and the power of their characters and love for one another I knew would be the right story to tell. So, whilst Mark worked away at finding form for Susan's story and words, I went into deep academic research to find the right way of telling their story.

(Hollis, 2022, n.p.)

Each of these layers make this piece into a historical/expository/participatory/literary verbatim hybrid.

The most complex part for Hollis, were the sections in 'Body and Soul' (Hollis & Wheeler, 2021, pp.44-46). This was formed from years of previous research, study and understandings 'they are amalgamations of listening to and reading survivor testimonies including Susan's' (Hollis, 2022, n.p.), as such – they are the least 'verbatim' of the play's text, and would be the hardest to source to one person, one document. In terms of the play, these parts are though vital in serving to establish a core foundation of the characters' humanity and pre-war lives, and to provide the moments of kindness – the sharing of advice, of food – helping to counterbalance the inhumanity and the horrors of the Holocaust, 'allowing the audience time to breathe, reflect and remain connected to the human narratives' (Hollis, 2022, n.p.).

Following the initial day with Susan, there were some follow-up clarification questions with her, and Susan was involved at every stage in the process offering amendments/revisions along the way, and she was given the authority to say what she did or did not feel happy with.

All of this is in a process Hollis terms 'weaving' and it sought to balance education and aesthetics, theatricality/engagement – like any writing of fiction or non-fiction requires, 'we [Mark and I] bounced



things backwards and forwards quite a bit ... the challenge was to keep everything in balance and in a one hour play you can't cover it all ...' (Hollis, 2022, n.p.).

Some of the students in the audience from my school had been studying verbatim with me as part of their Year 9 drama curriculum, and they were very interested in the fact that it was real people's real words. For them, they said this added impact, depth and also made their emotional response greater. When we discussed whether having a mix of actual people's words and some coming from research was an issue, as audience members they said it did not; the content coming from someone's real experience was enough.

I then asked Hollis: how do you feel working with real people's stories and their words? Does it bring challenges in representing the person more carefully?

Absolutely. It's an enormous responsibility. That said, we had Susan to work with all the way through so in a way that was easier than the other characters. We also have an enormous responsibility to her family who did not get to speak for themselves. We only had Susan's memories to work with so I'm constantly mindful that we have to give them their greatest truth, not just in the writing but in the direction and the actors' portrayals. (Hollis, 2022, n.p.)

I asked what she meant by this in terms of how the actors prepared and how the direction was for their portrayals:

we are mindful of working hard at building them in as three dimensional a way as possible. Once we had cast the play and had begun initial rehearsals and the actors had begun their Holocaust learning programme we spent a day again at Susan's

house. We talked in depth about her family, Mrs Schwartz and the other characters from her life. We looked again at photographs, they asked every conceivable question about their relationships, everyday life and so on. (Hollis, 2022, n.p.)

With the other characters, if there were videos or documentaries featuring them that Hollis had used, the actors watched these too, following therefore methodology that we have seen throughout this thesis when an actor is seeking to present a real person, and not just in verbatim theatre. 'Their vocal patterns and accents were worked on with our voice and accent coach to hold their truth' (Hollis, 2022, n.p.). This presented challenges for the parts where the testimonies were retrospective, which in some cases they decided as a company to act as lived in the moment. Once more, this is a choice in terms of aesthetics, of the art of play, it is not a choice controlled by 'truth' but it is nevertheless still about trying to present the experience in an ethical and 'authentic' way that connects with the audience in the aesthetically best way. As has been argued previously, and shall be presently by Alecky Blythe (for example), a playwright should be free to do this, and verbatim should not mean that a playwright cannot consider aesthetics because ultimately it is still a play. As Hollis said herself, whilst the impact of having real people's words and stories in the play undoubtedly adds to its impact:

It is the theatrical tools that we use around the words that extends that impact and makes our work so powerful. We use artistic means to shape / convey those truths rather than make up narratives for dramatic effect ... we use a range of techniques to help the audience to stay connected to the words and ideas ... we move away from dramatising and instead simplify, or use abstract forms or

choreography to support and encourage audiences to focus on the words, the feelings and experiences. (Hollis, 2022, n.p.)

Susan, in seeing the work at the premiere was full of praise for it: 'The actors were just fabulous and your direction is just remarkable. You made it so real and so convincing and so full of hope and full of everything I can think of. It's wonderful' (Pollack, in Hollis, 2022, n.p.).

Before leaving this case study, I asked Hollis if she and Voices were able to provide any of the feedback from audiences as the company have a detailed post-show questionnaire that they give out afterwards. It is partly to do with their continued funding that they use the responses to show that they are having impact. Teachers have commented on the play's educational value for example in terms of its impact on curriculum. More importantly, students have reflected very positively, and on how it affected them personally, noting for themselves the importance of it being 'real' and 'truth':

... it feels real and makes you think without being boring like a normal school lesson ...

... it helps people understand what it is and how it affected people and gives people a higher understanding if they already have this information because they show a real person's perspective ...

... it brings the stories of real people to life, rather than them being left as stone faces with silent words.

Having a real-life experience being displayed to you really strikes you, because you know that it happened ... (from Hollis, 2022, n.p.)

This doesn't provide a clear indication of how the work then generates impact in terms of subsequent positive personal, or political action, and therefore just as with other pieces examined so far, quantifying and qualifying the effect of verbatim theatre as with all political theatre remains to a certain degree 'unproven'. However, what the responses do show is the power of real people's testimonies, and the power of TIE upon students, and the challenge therefore again that lies with those who are working to make real people's testimonies 'theatrical' as well as ethically offering 'truth' and 'authenticity'.

### **Verbatim theatre projects for young people – a positive combination**

As has been outlined, done well TIE can have a positive impact upon students and such theatre projects are well-suited for communicating prevention messages to young people in audiences (Starkel, 2009, p.11). Hearing words from peers is often a way that a student/young person will engage and take in information, and this is also true when the young person performing is the same age as the audience members. In TIE, the world is presented as experienced from a young person's point of view; it is the same material world we inhabit as adults, but articulated differently. It honours experience above power of expression. As Michael Dalton of Pop-Up Theatre discussed on the subject of understanding, teenagers' level of comprehension is at an adult level, although their level of expression is not (Dalton, cited in Lane, 2010, p.151). Lane goes on to remind us that young people exist in the same globalised world as adults, so it is crucial that theatre can recognise and represent these experiences, for example through verbatim theatre where using their own words can help with understanding and in recognising their expression as

valid. Many TIE projects also link to the schools/communities where they are being presented, which adds to the positive receptivity.

Where TIE meets verbatim theatre and forms a hybrid – whereby the words are from a young person and potentially performed by a young person – the power to educate and reach the younger audience is even greater. This means verbatim theatre for young people is powerful, and once again, it has therefore a responsibility not to mislead. This is even true when it is verbatim for young people that is not linked under the umbrella of ‘TIE’ and is marketed as ‘entertainment’ only. Arguably the audience could be more easily misled due to their younger age and vulnerability. As has been shown in the example from Wheeler, unwittingly editing can ‘mislead’ even with the best of intentions by the creative team. Young people could also be exploited if appearing in TIE-verbatim or having their words used. All of this could also lead to the same contentious issues that have been present throughout this thesis resurfacing – of truth and authenticity in verbatim theatre. That said, the positives of the form outweigh the contentions and certainly make verbatim theatre something positive for young people to see and be part of.

## **Chapter Five**

As was mentioned in Chapter Two, verbatim theatre is especially popular as a form since the noughties and into the twenty-first century. In the UK, Alecky Blythe, Rufus Norris, Lung Theatre Company, Paper Birds Theatre Company and Hive North theatre are just some of the practitioners and theatre

groups whose work is part of this trend, some of whom will be looked at in this chapter. The rise of this form and the issues tackled are, as discussed, inevitably linked to dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of truth and authenticity in the world generally, especially with regards to politics and the political (at community and national level). As Cyrielle Garson comments in the abstract to her 2018 article 'Does Verbatim Still Talk the Nations Talk?' (2018) in regard to this positive trend for verbatim in the UK: 'In a post-Brexit (and perhaps even post-truth) context, the entire nation is going through an intense period of self-scrutiny, attempting to find a way forward for British culture despite a growing climate of divisive and destructive trends. As ever, verbatim theatre has sought to provide some answers in its relentless examination of the state of Britain' (Garson, 2018, p.206). As has been discussed throughout, due to the contentious issues, it might be a misguided trust that audiences are placing in the verbatim form to provide truth and answers, and this chapter will again highlight this as well as the many challenging performance projects that have successfully brought 'truth' to light.

When talking to practitioners for the purposes of this thesis, or reading interviews with producers within the verbatim form, many in the twenty-first century were inspired in part by one piece: Alecky Blythe's *London Road* (2011). This chapter will look at the production and the methodology for production, referring back to issues of truth and authenticity. The chapter will also look at why *London Road* in particular seems to have had such a profound affect upon many critics and practitioners. Thereafter, the chapter will look at some further seminal/celebrated examples from across the last two decades, discussing their methodology and strengths/weaknesses in terms of 'truth'. In this, my final chapter, I will also be looking to address some concerns for the future of verbatim, including issues of quality where projects are perhaps produced too quickly after the events they are examining while seeking to bring 'truth to light'. As will be discussed, a great deal of current verbatim is not tribunal or historical – it is instead more often about someone or something very current or recent; in some of these cases, there has been criticism of whether there has then been enough exploration, investigation and

specifically reflection – such as with the post-Brexit piece *My Country; a work in progress*, (2017), which will form a key case study.

### **Alecky Blythe and Recorded Delivery**

As mentioned, the ascendancy of verbatim theatre-making in the UK specifically, and indeed globally, over the past decade-and-a-half is due in part to Alecky Blythe's overall innovation and influence, especially with regard to her 2011 piece *London Road*. Blythe today is a multi-award-winning performer, playwright, screenwriter, director, researcher and editor. Her company, Recorded Delivery, was established in 2003, and as the name suggests, the headset verbatim style that was first pioneered by Anna Deavere Smith is the chosen methodology for verbatim performances. Blythe established the company initially 'solely to create work for myself' (Blythe, 2018, in Megson, 2018, p.220). Blythe was inspired to follow this style by British director Mark Wing-Davey. Wing-Davey had worked with Anna Deavere Smith directing her piece *House Arrest*, in 1997 in which Smith examines the relationships between a succession of American presidents and those around them whilst they were in office. Stretching across two centuries the piece included historical documents from the nineteenth century as well as press archives and verbatim material from 425 people gathered by herself or by her team across five years. Wing-Davey then went on to create the Non-Fiction Theatre Company with Louise Wallinger and extended Smith's technique to explore its potential in performance: 'What Mark noticed was that in rehearsals, while the earphones were still on, the delivery was all the more extraordinary. He decided to keep them on during the performance' (Blythe, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.80). His workshop *Drama without Paper*, held at the London Actor's Centre in 2001, was so central to the path that Blythe took that eventually she named her company Recorded Delivery to reflect the performance style, though at the time she was actually unaware that she was going to have any links to verbatim drama.

Recorded Delivery's first show, *Come Out Eli*, was staged at the Arcola Theatre in 2003 and explored the community response to a siege in Hackney that took place the previous year. It used the headset performance style for the actors and ensured that the audience were aware of this by playing the live feed across the public address (PA) system to start so that the audience heard it and the actors overlapped their words with it until the PA was faded out to just leave the actors live vocals; this was often the way Blythe 'showed' the audience the technique was being used in her early performances:

The audience quickly forgets that the actors are working from an audio feed ... the play should be strong enough on its own, but it becomes all the more poignant when the audience knows that it's created from real life recordings (more importantly, if the audience did not know that the words were real I would feel like I was conning them). The audience has a right to know where the material is coming from. (Blythe, 2008, in Hammond and Stewart, 2008, p.100)

Here Blythe, like many of the verbatim practitioners examined in this thesis, is keen to give as much transparency as possible to process and methodology, believing it gives greater authenticity to the work as a result. It is interesting then that she went on from such a 'pure' style of verbatim to her next 'ground-breaking' production, *London Road*, where aesthetics and artistic considerations pulled at (and, as will be argued, distorted) 'authenticity' just as has been seen in previous examples by other practitioners.

Work on *London Road* - a verbatim musical created by Blythe, with the composer Adam Cork - began in 2007. It is about the response of the local community to the serial murders of prostitutes in Ipswich in 2006. *London Road* opened to wide acclaim at the Cottesloe Theatre in 2011, transferred to the Olivier Theatre in 2012, and was adapted into a film released in 2015.



*Come Out Eli & London Road* share a commonality in that they deal with crisis situations, unexpected and terrible events within communities. This was also true of her verbatim piece in response to the London riots, *Little Revolution*, (2014), in which a significant focus for Blythe was two disparate groups within Hackney, East London. One was a middle-class group of residents who live around Clapton Square and who started a fund to come to the aid of a looted local shopkeeper and held a street party to bring people together. Meanwhile, female activists from the adjacent, much poorer, Pembury estate started a campaign against the scapegoating (both in the riots and more widely) of young people, stop-and-search police tactics and the social inequalities that were at the heart of the unrest and riots.

The way that Blythe and Recorded Delivery look at these is via peripheral events and communities. Blythe said this was by happy accident and an effective strategy 'I didn't have a press pass, I didn't have any sort of form as a writer and the people on the outside were the ones I had access to [but] people on the outside, even though they are not right at the nucleus, are affected in the ripples and reveal something about their lives' (Blythe, 2018, in Megson, 2018, p.221). In conducting interviews her approach, taught by Wing-Davey (fed down by Anna Deavere Smith), was to choose an interesting subject within the crisis, rather than looking to create pieces that explore a narrative of the crisis. For *Come out Eli* Blythe went in to conduct the interviews at the siege in Hackney, looking initially to create a performance on fear, thinking the siege would be a perfect situation in which to find out about people's fears specifically around gun crime on the streets. As the siege went on past sixteen days – far longer than Blythe had expected to be involved in the interviews within the area – the project did become more about the event, but it was people removed rather than central events or its victims that Blythe spoke to and interviewed. Using the same methodology and rationale, in *London Road*, meant Blythe chose not to approach the families of the murdered women in Ipswich, choosing instead to find meaning with those further removed from events. 'What I've learned over the years is that, by going a few degrees away from the centre of the

volcano, it allows for a little bit of space and some humour whereas if you go bang-on for the tragedy, I don't know whether that's a good fit for me' (Blythe, 2018, in Megson, 2018, p.221).

This methodology, as with a lot of verbatim, means that potentially many of the interviews take place before the central event or main characters are known to Blythe. As she works her way through this early stage of the process, Blythe gets verbal permission and explains from the very start of the interview that she's recording and ultimately an actor may speak their words on stage – aligning clearly therefore with expository/participatory verbatim methodology in the formation of the work. If she feels they may become a main character, Blythe will take their details and at a later stage get them to complete the usual release form allowing their words to be used together with their name. Due to her approach and in not knowing exactly who or what will be used in the final edits, Blythe believes that it is important to be honest with the person that she is interviewing:

If you set that up in the first instance, it allows you to then go 'Oh gosh, I'm going to have to cut that completely' if it doesn't keep moving the drama forward. That's what I'm looking for – to keep moving the story forward with compelling and interesting and maybe extraordinary characters. What makes it difficult is if, from the outset, you've said, 'I'm going to tell your story' and then it comes to the show and they're not in it. I would be uncomfortable with that and I'm sure they'd be very upset about that. You try to keep things open with the understanding that you can't necessarily put everybody in the play because the play would go on forever. Generally, people understand that. (Blythe, 2018, in Megson, 2018, p.233)

Having given this clarity to interviewees, Blythe stays away from formal one-on-one interview scenarios and settings which often characterise expository and participatory verbatim, because Blythe

maintains these can affect the ease and willingness of the speaker. What is challenging, and is something that is easy to forget until reading through Blythe's writings, is that when she is recording in this more 'natural' way, it adds complexities later on in editing. Her approach means there are sometimes lots of people speaking at once in the interview scenarios that are, in effect, more like conversations, from which she later has to find the key lines of dialogue. This can lead to rich overlapping dialogue in her work, not just separate monologues, which can sometimes be a criticism of the form from both audiences and critics. As an interviewer, another reason that Blythe feels she gets what she needs for her productions is because she tries as much as possible to let the interviewee steer the conversation; she goes in to listen, and has noticed that because people are just happy that someone is listening to them they will, as a consequence, reveal more. And to ensure people talk freely, Blythe ensures that she does not judge, and always tries to understand their point of view even when it contrasts with her own. This methodology is familiar to other practitioners and pieces discussed previously.

It is definitely a common protocol in documentary making that interviewees/subjects are not paid, so as a way of thanks, Blythe, as with most verbatim practitioners and the case studies in this thesis, invites them to come and see the show. Blythe is not someone who involves them in the rehearsal process to see the work as it is developing, which she asserts is because she wants them to see it at its best. It would be appropriate to wonder whether Blythe's reasons for not inviting interviewees/subjects to the rehearsals is actually because they may give a comment stating that they do not like how they are being presented or because they may demand changes, but Blythe has never alluded to this as a real reason. On a very positive note, Blythe has found that by having the people who are being played on stage in the audience helps her actors – it stops them from going towards mimicry that may give rise to accusations of ridicule – and as a director she always asks them to play their roles with this in mind even on nights when there are no known interviewees in the audience. This links to Blythe's wider beliefs regarding what

the actors are giving the audience and how the audience should receive the work; she views it as the people she interviewed are presented on stage as characters rather than as an attempt at creating exact replicas:

it is them but it's not them. It's been edited, it's been shaped, for *London Road* there's singing, it's been lit, it's put in a theatre, and, yes, I hope there is truth in it, it's taken from the real, but it hopefully becomes something else. It's not the picture of them – as in a photograph – it's a painting of them. It lives in a slightly different space. (Blythe, 2018, in Megson, 2018, p.233)

This differs from some practitioner's approaches that we have seen before, for example Stafford-Clark *et al*, whose methods strive to try to achieve not just the exact words, but the exact delivery. To achieve this the directors/practitioners have, as has been demonstrated, often referred to showing the actors the videos of the people and getting them to copy very much the precise gestures and mannerisms, as if to further enhance the authenticity. Here, where they are 'copying', each practitioner has always been keen to point out that the actors are not mimicking, acknowledging that this is potentially the weakness in such approach.

Each approach at characterisation by the actor in verbatim performances has its negatives in terms of 'truths' it then offers. Blythe, in accepting that she cannot achieve a perfect copy or greater 'truth' due to the 'different space' in which they are being presented – i.e. on stage and not where the interviews took place – offers the useful analogy by proposing what the audience gets is a likeness or 'painting'.

In terms of editing, Blythe considers herself a dramatist not a journalist and this affects her choices:

It's about keeping the audience excited and compelled by the story and, sometimes, if it's just too journalistic, just going with the facts, they might all fall asleep. For me, it's a balance. It's verbatim so therefore you're dealing with real people and you have to respect them, and you can't play around with it too much, but you've got to give it some energy and some life which might not otherwise have been there. (Blythe, 2018, in Megson, 2018, p.225)

As we have seen, this is a familiar stance by verbatim practitioners, which can lead to conflicts and the much-discussed issues of authenticity and truth. Of this, Blythe argues that she is ethical and understands her huge responsibility to the people that she interviews, but unapologetically champions that she will also be looking at the work artistically and she has to be responsible to the audience as well as the interviewee, and this will have a bearing on her decisions in terms of editing and how she presents the work. She, like practitioners thus far examined, acknowledges the continual tensions:

I'm always mindful of taking something so far out of context that it distorts the way in which the comment was originally intended, but it is not an easy task to cut fifty hours of material down to an hour, while maintaining one's integrity, and still to get a good story with it. While cutting and splicing material does give it more impact, there is a danger that a character is whittled down in order to fit the story, rather than generating the story themselves. I am always faced with the same struggle between remaining faithful to the interview and creating a dramatic narrative. (Blythe, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.94)

## London Road

During the winter of 2006, Blythe – by this point confident in her verbatim methodology – visited a brothel in Bournemouth, interviewing prostitutes for a new play she was creating (*The Girlfriend Experience*, 2008). By sheer coincidence, at the same time another story began to unfold following the discovery of the bodies of five sex workers in Ipswich on London Road, a residential street that had unintentionally become the town's red-light district when CCTV had driven them from other areas. Blythe switched focus and went to Ipswich to start her research, encouraged by the sex workers in Bournemouth who said it would be the place to go if she wanted to really write about their world and, indeed, the experiences in *London Road's* writing undoubtedly helped when she returned to *The Girlfriend Experience*. What she found was an unfolding story – all the murders had been committed, the bodies had been found, but no arrests had yet been made, and the truth about how the CCTV the police had put up in the town inadvertently pushed the sex-workers towards their killer was yet to be uncovered.

A few months later, in 2007, Blythe was invited to take part in a workshop at the National Theatre during its experimental *Writers and Composers* week of workshops. Here Blythe was paired with composer and sound designer Adam Cork – both of them sceptical about how they could work together, coming from different theatrical 'worlds'. They found themselves drawn to the series of interviews that Blythe had conducted the previous year in Ipswich, though Blythe was concerned that characters singing their words instead of speaking them represented not only something different for her way of working, but also initially an uncomfortable departure from the previous methodology she had employed. For his part, Cork remembers his very first thought was 'how on earth can I turn this into music?' (Cork, 2015 in Julien, 2015, p.261) and yet he was intrigued to work with the material and together with Blythe:

I was paired with Adam in a musical theatre workshop run by the National Theatre Studio and I took this material that I'd collected from Ipswich, just as clay for us to work with, to experiment with the form. What we found was that the music seemed to help create this mood of fear that I remembered from Ipswich at the time. I thought the subject and form seemed to work together, and then not long after the workshop it was announced that the trial was going to be in Ipswich rather than at the Old Bailey, which brought the story back to life in the town. As the real-life events happened I started to shape my piece around that. (Blythe, 2015, in Ward, 2015, n.p.)

Blythe returned to Ipswich many more times to gather further material, continuing to use her methodology of choosing to interview people beyond the epicentre of the events that had occurred; this meant that the direction of the work was led by these peripheral characters rather than the facts or the timeline. From this, it was the 'London Road in Bloom' competition – part of the community's attempt to rejuvenate the area and return to some sense of normality – that became the centre of the piece:

I went knocking on doors and I found that particular community really wanted to tell their story, about how they had come together, how they had set up a neighbourhood watch, how they were now holding quiz nights and Christmas parties and this gardening competition. By building a sense of community was the way that they got through it. (Blythe, 2015, in Clarke, 2015, n.p.)

Blythe and Cork present the text (and piece) as a *mise en scène* that examines two groups of people: the townspeople and the media covering the murders. This is shown through a succession of interviews that react to the escalating discoveries and traumas: the discovery of the five murdered women near the homes of those living in Ipswich; the arrest and later conviction of their neighbour, Steve Wright, who was responsible for the murders; the media inaccurately branding their community as a red-light district.

In the play, the greatest focus is on the voices of the residents, with the reporters' points of view gaining pre-eminence only in the second act after the arrest of the Steve Wright. Thematically, the focus is centred on the paranoia and dislocation suffered by the individuals who live in the immediate vicinity of the killings and their attempt as a community to then pull together. The mounting shock experienced by community members as the five naked victims were discovered by police over the course of 11 days, from 2 to 12 December 2006, sets the emotional tone for the piece which never becomes an expose on serial killers or prostitution – it remains as unsensational as possible and about people and community.

Through a series of short direct-address monologues (or vignettes), both spoken and sung, the performers introduce the audience to a variety of local characters whose expressions of disquiet are matched by a desire to reclaim the normality of their daily lives, which have been disrupted not only by the murders, but also by the subsequent invasion of the news media. Throughout, the motif is one of the pursuit of reclaiming societal normality: the community Neighbourhood Watch committee's 'London Road in Bloom' hanging flower basket competition on the street where the murderer lived and met his victims.

Even though verbatim interview material was always used as a primary source, the performance played with the tension between their semantic and abstract musical characteristics. The minimal narrative action was successfully opened up by Cork's character-driven score, and rigorous attention was



paid to each line and vocal characterisation. Every aspect of the chosen recorded interviews was meticulously notated; rhythm, pitch, tempo and timbre were matched to the uncertainties and at times ‘stumblings’ of the nervous interview subjects — the ‘ums’, ‘errs’, and ‘ahems’. A strong example of this is heard in ‘And That’s When It All Kicked Off’, a four-minute number that gives voice to townspeople as they observe the police closing in to make an arrest:

‘I got up and all I could see was police cars (*Beat.*) / goin’ up the road. Course —  
ya know — I — / we knew obviously in charge of — / ya know — somethin’ to do  
with these poor girls. / But, uhm — / And that’s when it all started, it all kicked  
off’. (Blythe & Cork, 2011, p.51)

The rhythms of natural speech inspired the music created, and for Blythe as she heard it coming together meant she felt reassured to relax some of her previously strict rules about editing and indeed performing. This led her to attribute some people’s words to another speaker and also to sometimes adding some invented words, though she is not specific about where these took place. However, according to interviews and critics, Blythe is meticulous in working ethically and asked all of the interviewees again if they minded the changes she made to ensure they never felt misrepresented.

Each cast tackling the script are tasked with avoiding the pressures of caricaturist portrayal or mimicking the original interviewee, challenging to achieve with 11 major and 52 minor characters to multirole between. This was potentially made more difficult because, unlike previous productions for the National Theatre, using the headsets was considered a distraction for the actors and audience, and therefore after rehearsing with them for six weeks and learning their lines, the actors performed each night without them. This was something that Blythe herself found hard to adjust to, and she kept her headset on during rehearsals only letting go when she felt confident that what was going on stage was indeed still faithful to what she alone could hear in her ear.

The end result was hugely popular with audiences and critics. Michael Billington gave it five stars, praising amongst other aspects that:

This miraculously innovative show finds a new way of representing reality ... A previous Blythe show about seaside sex workers, *The Girlfriend Experience*, smacked of condescension. But this one not only explores the way it takes a crisis to engender community spirit but opens up rich possibilities for musical theatre.

(Billington, 2012, n.p.)

In *The Independent* there was further praise from their reviewer: 'This production is one of the most exciting experimental pieces the National has ever presented' (Coveney, 2011, n.p.). There was also considerable praise for the music and the way the verbatim text had become lyrics:

[Cork's] score has echoes of Anglican chant and modern minimalism, fugue-like patterns and rhythmic repetitions, sometimes seeming just spoken but still with variation in pitch and rhythms that are matched or supported by the instrumental element which adds much of the emotional impact. I found it a delight and it gives what might seem ordinary and banal an added dimension. (Warner, 2011, n.p.)

Some commented that *London Road*, whilst about a specific event and place, was actually asking 'disturbing questions about the dark underside of bourgeois togetherness' (Billington, 2012, n.p.), (if not questions at least provoking debate) that could be applied to anywhere in the country.

*London Road* subsequently went on to win Best Musical at the Critics' Circle Awards and was revived in 2012 at the National Theatre in the Olivier after its sell-out in the Cottesloe in 2011, however, inevitably, there were some criticisms of the work.

Several have focused on the message and themes, arguing that the piece highlights that the Ipswich community was embarrassed and, in many ways, glad that the sex workers were gone. One character – Julie – comments: ‘Y’know, they, they’re better off 10 feet under ... That’s a horrible thing to say, isn’t it? But I’d love to shake his hand and say: “Thank you very much for getting rid of them”’. (Blythe & Cork, 2011, pp.109-110). This led some critics to argue that the play is not a celebration of community coming together so much as a community shunning and eradicating all memory of the parts of itself it did not like. Neither Blythe nor Cork were criticised for the overall negative messages within the piece about community and society, and indeed it is seen as a strength of the piece that Blythe left in things that did not necessarily reflect well on the people of Ipswich and remained impartial in laying out what happened for the audience to then make judgements.

As has been outlined, Blythe’s methodology is about going beyond the epicentre of an event; however, her choice to have so little about the victims or about those close to them could be argued as missing some elements that could have added more resonance.

In terms of criticisms about Blythe or Cork’s methodology in gathering material, there has also been negative mention in some reviews (particularly of the film version) that Blythe created dialogue which she then appropriated from one character to another. Acting ethically, Blythe did check this with the person whose words she was changing, but some critics (although not the people represented) felt it was uncomfortable to have the change in a piece that is ‘verbatim’:

director Rufus Norris, Adam and I went to Ipswich before we made the film with pictures of the shooting locations, new cast members, all that kind of thing, to try to explain what we were doing. I thought it was important to do that to the people we were representing. I'm in touch with them a lot. If the work is active they need to be kept abreast of what's happening. It's their lives, which are ongoing. They've been brilliant, but I have sleepless nights about whether they'll be happy. (Blythe, 2015, in Ward, 2015, n.p.)

Finally, and perhaps most negatively, *London Road* has suffered the same criticism as *The Girlfriend Experience* and *Little Revolution* in that it is biased and politically naïve. This is reflected, for example, in the 2015 article by Alice Saville for *Exeunt Magazine*. Saville was at the *London Road* film post-show Q&A at Peckhamplex Cinema where questions from the audience asked about the process of getting the interviews: 'Olivia Coleman and Rufus Norris seemed ill at ease' Saville noted (Saville, 2015, n.p.) and then Cari Mitchell, spokeswoman for the English Collective of Prostitutes began to ask uncomfortable questions. Mitchell pointed out that the production seemed to suggest that women become sex workers to feed drug habits, when in fact the majority do so to feed their families (Saville, 2015, n.p.). Mitchell also made much of the fact that the Ipswich police had embarked on arrests and crackdowns that forced the women into the London Road area, and close to murderer Steve Wright, which the play had not especially addressed, and yet this was a crucial element in what then happened. Saville, in recounting this post-show talk and the points made by Mitchell, then focuses on the Ipswich community who Blythe had placed at the centre of the project and discussed the fact that it was people who wanted the women gone who had been allowed to tell the women's story, which she felt Norris and Blythe didn't see the irony of.

In spite of such criticisms, *London Road* has had a profound effect upon verbatim theatre beyond its run at the National, and in its subsequent film version. This seems due to its inherent theatricality, in

contrast to the norm in verbatim, a form which is sometimes accused of being the opposite, as previously discussed with regard to the use of monologues and minimal sets. *London Road* by contrast was fresh and exciting – it had music and singing alongside acting, often with multiple speakers not just interviewer and interviewee. It had a set and lighting that brought to life the community of London Road and its transformation from something sombre to something bright to replicate the blooms from the hanging basket competition. The subject matter was dark and the play asked questions about community, police action prior to the murders and also the media’s intrusion upon residents and their responses to claiming back ‘normality’. It had all the hallmarks of traditional verbatim mixed with something new, something that brought about a whole new way for verbatim theatre-makers to view how they use language, and how the audience responds to the verbatim material:

The re-sequencing of the original speech patterns into songs allows the verbatim material to acquire a different energy and strength as well as a metaphorical meaning ... music possesses a communicative meaning that can potentially oppose the corollary of the verbatim language, having the capacity to add dramatic intensity, emphasise the state of mind of a character and/or facilitate empathy more broadly. (Garson, 20921, p.272)

All of which made it a highly distinctive new verbatim hybrid (or ‘aesthetic variable’ to use Garson’s descriptions, (Garson, 2021)) that was as entertaining as it was political, and this is why its effect has resonated directly or indirectly into subsequent verbatim plays.

## DV8 and Frantic Assembly – physical theatre/dance and verbatim

There have been many other notable twenty-first century examples that have shown how to keep the form from becoming simply dramatised interviews on stage. In 2008 DV8's *To Be Straight With You* was staged at the National after a year of touring. It was unusual in that The National is not a dance venue, and DV8 were not known as a specifically verbatim company. It is another example where the verbatim form chosen is expository or participatory. This is interesting as, recently, tribunal and historical verbatim have decreased as the hybrids used. This seems to be because, as mentioned previously, verbatim-makers are very much interested in engaging with current matters and socio-political concerns, and often on a 'personal'/'smaller' community level, such as in *To Be Straight With You*.

The text was based on 85 interviews and a series of vox pops, all conducted in the UK by the company, examining thematically tolerance/intolerance, religion and sexuality. There were three main events that founder and performer of DV8 Lloyd Newson used to make the piece. The first incident was back in the early 1990s when Newson and his then partner, who was Indian, were on a Gay Pride march that passed through the streets of Brixton. Both were struck by the large amount of homophobic abuse they faced by people who themselves are part of a minority. In making this work, Newson returned and conducted interviews and was saddened (but not surprised) to find that 16 years later many of these prejudices remained, often 'justified' by religious beliefs. The second incident was in 2006, when Newson saw a programme on Channel 4 called *Gay Muslims*. For the programme, two hundred gay Muslims living in the UK were interviewed, yet only one was prepared to publicly show their face. Lastly, Newson decided upon the piece because he was intrigued by what he considered was the Anglican Communion's continuing preoccupation with homosexuality, made stark by the proposed boycott of the 2008 Lambeth Conference by 38 Archbishops and Bishops who were outraged that invitations had been sent to more liberal bishops who condoned homosexuality.

Like Blythe when considering her use of verbatim material in a musical form, Newson was initially unsure about how to best combine dance and the verbatim text:

Finding movement for this piece was particularly difficult because of the subject matter and our commitment to use the interviewees' own words. How do you combine stylised movement with verbatim text? I didn't want to demean the interviewees' stories, which were often harrowing, with 'nice' movement phrases.

(Newson, 2008, n.p.)

One method of finding appropriate movement was to ask performers to listen to edited interviews on an iPod while simultaneously repeating the interviewee's words out loud and adding improvised, movements. In some ways, this was therefore like the recorded delivery methods used by actors approaching the verbatim text. Newson then gave the performers different physical instructions whilst doing this exercise. Gradually, through this process ideas emerged that could be developed as different characters began to appear. The end result in terms of movement was that it was in some ways 'literal' in that it was in-tune with the rhythm of the verbatim speech. However, there was also abstract interpretation and motifs, heightened by the use of multimedia. An example would be where, in the final image, a gay imam, after having given his testimony, seems to physically look for an escape, but to no avail. He is then surrounded by darkness and pounding sound and desperately moves his fists in the air until he becomes completely swallowed up by the lighting design. Here the text has been given physical expression and the design clarifies the internal feelings of the characters social isolation.

The end result of DV8's methodology for bringing verbatim material together and transposing it into dance was an 80-minute performance with a cast of eight – six men and two women – largely multi-ethnic, who continually changed character and accents, including Pakistani, Rastafarian and Cockney English. The performance included dance/physical theatre, the use of multimedia (including projections

that the actors would sometimes interact with) and music/sound and lighting design. Here, whilst the verbatim text was still crucial, it did not determine everything; it did not dictate the style and DV8 were able to make the work engaging and powerful through their trademark approach. This was also what critics noted – ‘*To Be Straight With You* is a hard-hitting and passionate 80 minutes that expresses what is often left unsaid’ wrote Lyn Gardner in the *Guardian* (Gardner, 2008, n.p.), whilst also acknowledging that for her the style sometimes meant the verbatim text was hard to hear or not foregrounded enough. The reviewer for *The British Theatre Guide* agreed with the positive power of the performance: ‘the result is a piece of commanding verbatim theatre which stands as a shocking indictment of the prejudice embedded within too many cultures across the globe, including our own, due in large part to extremist Christian and Islamic communities’ (Vale, 2008, n.p.), but disagreed that the visual style was a distraction to the verbatim text: ‘the use of visible text and graphics thrown across the set for emphasis is nothing new, but here, working in harmony with Uri Omi’s set, it is taken to a new level, lending the piece an immediacy and filmic quality which heightens both the production’s visual impact and accessibility’ (Vale, 2008, n.p.).

Another piece that showed how verbatim theatre need not be static and was a series of woven monologues and interviews was *Fatherland* (2017) – an experimental verbatim piece combining sound, songs and movement first staged at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester in July 2017. Developed by playwright Simon Stephens, Frantic Assembly’s Scott Graham and Karl Hyde from Underworld *Fatherland* looked at contemporary fatherhood, and also exposed what some see as a growing dissonance between London and the rest of the country.

The idea for the play came to Scott Graham when he became sole artistic director of Frantic Assembly. He had been talking to long-time collaborator Eddie Kay about making a show about people’s relationships with their fathers, but knew that to make it relevant and something an audience would



connect with aside from his own experience he would need a range of views into people's relationships with their fathers. He then met up with Simon Stephens and Karl Hyde:

We thought about the process we [would] put people through to get the truth and these histories to come out in this beautiful, eloquent way. One of us suggested looking at our school photos and interviewing those people, until we realised they'd just be exactly the same age as us. But that led us to focusing on our home towns, going back to them and interviewing the people we found there. (Graham, 2017, p.10)

Another reason for going back to their 'roots' was as a reaction to the feeling that the collaborators had that everything was too focused on London:

the discrepancy of wealth and cultural expectations between London and the rest of the country seemed more pronounced than they'd ever felt to me. The idea of going to places like Corby and Kidderminster and Stockport [respectively, the hometowns of Scott, Hyde and Stephens] felt intellectually fascinating as well as convenient. (Stephens, 2017, in Graham, 2017, p.10)

For me, it became an accidental stroke of genius going back home, because it's unfinished business with the town that created you. That town is your father, and you've mythologised that father, good or bad. All of that exists in the stories you tell of it, whether you choose to tell a story of it being a monster or a nurturer. (Graham, 2017, p.10)

Stephens already had developed a questionnaire in order to interview characters he had created in other pieces to add depth in improvisations. This had sprawling questions on a range of topics so more ‘father-centric’ questions were added and then tested out on each other, recording their testimonies initially with no intention of using them in the final work (dramaturg Nick Sidi would later persuade them otherwise suggesting their testimony was the heart of the piece). They headed off and completed the interviews in five days, accumulating 25 hours of material. They interviewed male and females, 80 per cent of whom were themselves parents, and aged between 19 to 80. They spoke to former friends in their former home towns and ran an ‘advert’ on Twitter asking for willing participants. In each case the interviewees knew it was for a verbatim project and that their words would potentially be used in the final performance, though how much was unknown as there was an editing process to go through. Some critics questioned the choices of people interviewed saying that they didn’t represent a cross-section of the population enough and each gave similar perspectives ‘They speak to only 12 men — a small sample that yields a lot of familiar observations’ (Hitchings, 2018, n.p.).

When it came to working with the material they gathered, they did not feel the need to subscribe to the ‘rules’ as they called them, but they did feel the familiar knot of ethics and dilemmas between ‘art’ and ‘truth’. In terms of the editing process, they understood:

You’ve got to be ferocious with your editing. It’s the only way that makes sense to me. Too many words deadens the drama ... you need to just carve away massive bodies of material. The printed transcripts of all the interviews must have been about 500 pages. To get a 50-page play out of that, your radar has to be really alert. (Stephens, 2017, p.14)

But collectively, they admitted, that they were caught in the memories of their interview experiences and could not always remove themselves sufficiently to find what was truly interesting for an audience within the mass of material. This is where they brought dramaturg Nick Sidi on board. At the first reading, Sidi thought the concept was brilliant and that a lot of the material they had discovered was fascinating, however, he could also see that the three producers were too close to edit and find the best within the gathered material. Furthermore, for Sidi it lacked a narrative drive, which he felt is often the way with verbatim. This meant Sidi and Stephens went for a further edit in which they really challenged the value of the interviews and looked for shared themes that seemed to be occurring. This also led them to do what Blythe did for *London Road* – they created a character – Luke – as a composite of other people’s words, plus added some that are entirely fictitious. Much of what Luke says is actually from Graham’s experiences and he acts as device to provoke the collaborators into revealing their stories. He is also crucial for making the narrative to the piece about hometowns and seeking forgiveness from the places we leave behind without acknowledging the part they have played in who we are. It is clear that Sidi did much to help with decisions for editing and shaping the material and it remains unusual to have a dramaturg involved in a verbatim project. His separation from the gathering meant he was able to make critical decisions without the ‘baggage’ of knowing the people whose words he was suggesting changes to; at the same time, however, this opened up the work to criticism regarding a possible lack of ethics in editing suggesting that ‘art’ was much more of a pull than ‘truth’ for the piece overall.

The material was then brought into rehearsals which employed the same techniques that Graham’s rehearsals always employed. There would be hour-long warm-ups, filled with music, to wake body and mind. Then the words were given to actors alongside props that might eventually become part of the set and Graham would ask them to improvise using the props with the words. There wasn’t a desire to faithfully represent the physicality of the person that had spoken the original words. There wasn’t a

recreation of the stale environments in which the interviews had sometimes taken place. Improvisations with the words created the physical theatre performance – a performance that is as much about the physical theatre style as it is the verbatim style. The words were also put to music at times, and while perhaps inspired to do this by *London Road*, here there was none of the copying of the disfluencies and the hesitations – it was more songs made to heavy techno beats to sound like highly produced slick songs not verbatim text simply set to music. There were everyday sounds from objects associated with their childhoods – car keys, a bouncing ball – that Hyde used to create the rhythms and then with these patterns he would find certain lines to sing alongside the rhythms.

The critical response to the play was mixed, with some finding it indulgent ‘Shame, then, that all *Fatherland* does is compound this old-fashioned view [of being emotionally devoid] with a series of often mundane and always morose anecdotes’ (Hewis, 2018, n.p.) and, as mentioned, perhaps not wide enough in terms of those it spoke to for it to represent a range of experiences and opinions ‘... a slightly irritating chaser of post-alcoholic middle class southern guilt’ (McGinn, 2018, n.p.). It was, though, appreciated as bringing something inventive to the verbatim table, and as a reinvention which, again, if not for the boldness of *London Road*, maybe would never have been attempted.

### **Home – Nadia Fall**

Another generally positively received example inspired by Alecky Blythe’s experimentation with form and content for *London Road* was Nadia Fall’s *Home* (2013), based on interviews with real people from an East London hostel and then set in the fictional hostel Target East.

*Home* evolved from the transcripts of interviews with young people, conducted over a short period of time by Nadia Fall, who went on to direct the piece when it was staged at the National Theatre Shed in

2013 and then during its revival in 2014. In the work, the characters respond to questions from an unseen and unheard interviewer. One character, Jade, responds in beatboxing only.

When starting the project, the challenging aspect for Fall was getting to speak to the right people (as is the case with many of the productions explored in this thesis and indeed inherent within verbatim theatre). In this case, the 'right people' Fall wanted to speak to were residents of a hostel for 16–24-year olds (the hostel was then re-named as Target East in the production to protect the real residents' identities). Fall gained access to the hostel through a friend who had connections. Some residents took persuading; some said yes but then were reluctant to open up and give the rich stories and 'truth' that made for engaging narratives and characters; and then some were represented in the end through the beatboxing character Jade as they did not want to appear as themselves. People who were reluctant to appear as themselves or needed persuading for their names to be used were initially concerned about not just how they might come across, but also whether there might be any repercussions to what they said that could put them in danger from others who were homeless, or from the local authorities who might then deny them the opportunity to stay in the hostel or to get further housing of their own.

Fall describes the work as 85 per cent pure verbatim, and admits artistic decisions in making up the other 15 per cent. Mainly the 'artistic licence' is because this production, like *London Road*, was put to music, but Fall has said in interviews there were other edits and changes due to her trying to find the truth of the situation and also because although using real life stories comes with responsibility, Fall felt, 'that doesn't mean that you can't use imagination, that you can't merge stories ... and use some imagined narratives as well ... as long as you keep your intention clear and the essence of what's being said true' (Fall, 2013, Jury, 2013, n.p.). She also says that some of what she heard was so unbelievable and extreme that she toned it down because she feared that no one would listen or believe it.

*Home* doesn't just offer testimony from the residents of the hostel, interviews were also carried out with key workers. One – Sharon for the purposes of the play – adds particular political tone, talking

for example about how deposits for renting and housing are unfeasible for most and that there is a lack of affordable housing overall. Fall's aims were not just to tell stories and 'entertain' but also to make political points and hopefully influence government policy. It is clear, therefore, that the editing and presentation of 'facts' is done with purpose and agenda (like Osment's *Mad Blud*, or Norton-Taylor's *The Colour of Justice* previously), for which Fall makes no apology, even if she is not specific about other changes and edits that she did to get the shape of the piece to where it eventually ended up: 'I hope the play puts the real challenge of housing — and the real bottleneck in the system — on the map. Politicians should come and have a look' (Fall, 2013, in Jury, 2013, n.p.). Another of the things that Fall wanted, apart from the political activism of the piece, was that the young people were represented in a way that made a re-evaluation of the stereotypes in our culture.

Overall, 48 hours of interview material formed the basis of the piece. In terms of process, this was initially transcribed and then, as is often the way with verbatim theatre, the next challenge was to begin to try and decide what to edit out and what to keep. Fall and assistant dramaturg Rob Drummer (who was part of the project from the start, unlike dramaturg Sidi in *Fatherland*) spent many hours reading and re-reading the interviews aloud to each other before making a shape out of those that felt the most central to the piece and its intentions. The play does not follow an arc of time passing, which added to the complexities of editing and creating an initial shape to edit work to fit within. As has been outlined before, when the material for the start of a verbatim piece has an absence of timeline (such as in Samuels' *Tales from the MP3*) what emerges instead are thematic connections and patterns in subjects that several people speak about. Workshops were then arranged before rehearsals began as a way to explore the themes and ideas that had been distilled thus far into 90 minutes of scripted material. There was a 'first draft', but nothing was set as an absolute to keep, and instead the first workshop focused on character and text, and looked at some of the ways music and staging could make connections across the material. Fall and

Drummer felt that scenes such as The Breakfast Club and The Tour could be central to the piece and indeed they remained and served as anchors for the narrative. In the Breakfast Club scene 'Young Mum' introduces the audience to Breakfast Club, which takes place every Tuesday and is a place for young mothers and other residents to have a free breakfast. The scene eventually went on to contain a song, 'Keys', which describes how the characters are looking forward to a home of their own – and which became a song repeated in the epilogue added for the second run of the play. The Tour is a repeating scene in which the audience are led on a tour of different parts of the home.

After the workshop week, Fall and Drummer returned to the text and continued to work on the characters and shape of the play, asking questions of the material in much the same way you might with a new play but with the added emphasis of trying to best represent the real people's lives. By this point, although there was no specific time-line, the work had become anchored by Daniel – a former resident who had been killed and whose anniversary was coming up. It was here they began to allow themselves to be more inventive and commit to a theatricality that allowed for the accentuation of images, attitudes and ideas coming out of the interviews. The music and the beatboxing gave the piece energy and also helped connect the monologues, which can often be the aspect that makes verbatim predictable in its form and structure.

The script passed through several further drafts and over time became a two-hour performance that would continue to develop yet further during rehearsals. During this early stage people who had been interviewed were invited to come and see how things were being shaped and how they were being represented; anybody who was unable to come in was met with and shown videos once rehearsals started so that, once again, they had the opportunity to give feedback if there was anything they were unhappy with. The actors were also given the original recordings of characters they were playing so that they could hear for themselves the speech rhythms and accents of the people they would be playing. During one

week they went to visit the homeless shelter for themselves, taking pizza and going for a tour to meet the interviewees and to get a sense of the location in which the interviews took place and what they were trying to represent. This continued throughout the process and indeed, as with many previous examples, the people interviewed were invited to be members of the audience during the early performances. 'We were very transparent and if they didn't like it we were prepared to stop or not include stories' (Fall, 2013, in Jury, 2013, n.p.). This, in turn, did something which Fall and Drummer considered really important: 'it grounded the story and enabled us to work together to find the language of the piece. Verbatim material should ask questions and encourage active engagement from its audience' (Drummer, Fall & McMurray, 2014, n.p.).

Where criticised, the end result received comments that could be put down to subjectivity and personal taste; some commented that they might have preferred more structure, some wanted to hear more about ex-residents. Not everyone liked the idea of the audience in the role of the interviewer. There was though no criticism of it being edited to deliver an ultimately political message, because critics and audiences agreed with the messages and the concerns the work raised about homelessness. Overall, it was much praised, with once again the music and style getting a great deal of appreciation for adding something alongside the edited powerful verbatim interview material:

one of the most innovative aspects sees UK Female Beatboxing Champion Grace Savage use beatboxing as a form of expression ... using just her vocal chords, she argues, agrees and chats to her friends on stage ... and brilliantly it works – she gets just as much emotion and meaning across with her chosen form of expression as anyone else does when using normalised English language. (Hutton, 2013, n.p.)



### *My Country; a work in progress*

Another property of verbatim is in the immediacy of its connection to events that it then highlights/represents/opens up for debate. This has worked to its benefit, and its detriment, depending on the quality of the work, and the way in which the project was put together. A notable example (for what it gets 'wrong' rather than what it gets 'right') is *My Country; a work in progress*, (2017) which came about as a direct response to the referendum and Britain voting to leave the EU. Within days, the National Theatre had dispatched a team to various regions of the UK to conduct interviews with members of the British public on the subject of the referendum. The verbatim material was compiled and arranged by the Artistic Director of the National, Rufus Norris, with additional text written by poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy, and uses the allegorical conceit of a meeting between personifications of some of the UK's regions (East Midlands, Northern Ireland, the North-East, the South-West, Caledonia, and Cymru) as a theatrical framework to present the verbatim voices of the play's interviewees. The play depicts the female personification of the UK, Britannia, as she chairs this meeting within a setting of a community centre operating as a polling station. The regional personifications, who use the verbatim material, are all wearing costumes that represent the semi-formal attire of civic councillors. The character of Britannia – as a conduit – also offers the words of the most prominent political figures during the EU referendum campaigns, namely David Cameron, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, Michael Gove and Theresa May. These political voices create a timeline, beginning with Cameron's formal announcement of the referendum in 2013 to his resignation after the referendum result, and Theresa May's replacement as leader of the Conservative Party and Brexit Prime Minister. In addition to this chronological framework, the play is then divided thematically into 12 sections, with subjects including the European Union and immigration, to which the verbatim voices (via their regional personifications) respond.

The play was commissioned by Norris, very soon after the result came through that Britain had voted to leave the EU. Part of the reason for this was that Norris and a number of highly respected arts and culture celebrities – including Dame Kristin Scott Thomas, Benedict Cumberbatch and Carol Ann Duffy herself – had written an open letter staunchly endorsing the Remain campaign; furthermore, only a month before the referendum took place, the Creative Industries Federation released a poll that had shown 96 per cent of its members were in support of remaining, calling it vital for the continued success of the UK's fastest growing sector (Stewart & Brown, 2016, n.p.). This, and the shock that was expressed by many in the industry following the result, meant that Norris felt that the arts community was out-of-touch with the way the country had been feeling, and that as Artistic Director to Britain's national theatre, he had to lead on listening more to the audience and national community which he was supposed to be providing/making work for. The verbatim technique seemed the obvious choice to Norris and to the National Theatre, offering the theatre direct access to voices it had not perhaps heard before and particularly those on the victorious Leave side who were not necessarily the demographic who visited such venues as The National. By using real testimony from a wide demographic, the aim was to offer a non-biased non-partisan forum utilising 'theatre as a place of debate' and encouraging audiences to 'drop [their] self-righteousness and certainty' regarding the motivations of people whose voting preference had deviated from their own (McCormay, 2017, n.p.). The personal testimony would also foster a degree of empathy between those on both sides in a way that Norris felt fictionalised drama would not. To make it clear to the audience that verbatim was the style and that the words were from real people, the character of Britannia welcomed the audience in at the start of each performance and told them 'this is verbatim'; then when each regional character speaks for the first time, a photograph of them is shown to the audience and their name announced.

The final piece was viewed as, at best, 'mixed' in terms of its success with audiences and critics alike. One criticism was that whilst there seems to have been great pains by Norris to not have a London-bias which was achieved geographically (across the UK's various regions) and demographically (in terms of rural and urban locations and across different age groups) as far as as possible, London's exclusion from the work only served to strengthen the very dichotomisation of metropolitan elites and regional constituents that the play sought to remedy (O'Brien, 2019, p.5; Tomlin, 2018). Furthermore, Norris admitted that after these interviews had been collected and transcribed, it was decided that approximately 5–10 per cent more Leave voices would be presented on stage in the final edit of the play than Remain voices, which exceeded the margin represented by the referendum vote itself. Norris' rationale for this was that it was 'a fairly safe assumption to say that [there would be] a balance leaning towards Remain in [the NT's] audiences' (alluding to the point made earlier about the venue's normal demographic) and that these additional Leave voices would, therefore, provide a counterbalance to this audience make-up. This means that before even Duffy had begun her edit, decisions had been made on what to include and exclude that did not stick to a balance but rather had created an unintentional bias undermining credibility. This was observed by Liz Tomlin:

although the published script doesn't signal so clearly where the politics of the production lies, the performance choices were explicit [in saying] that the result of 'Leave' ... was a catastrophe: the lights dimmed, the music was sorrowful, and Britannia was a physically broken figure ... speaking Farage's words, the tone of victory notably absent. (Tomlin, 2018, p.242)

Then there was the editing and ordering by Norris and Duffy together. Inevitably verbatim material is cut down as has been discussed while the ordering and intersplicing of material has the opportunity to create new meanings that were not present in the original edited interviews. As O'Brien identifies in her

in-depth article criticising the piece, Young offers us the good and bad of this form and structure technique in verbatim: 'interweave[ing] [of] various speakers and their testimony throughout a play' can be used productively by theatre-makers to emphasise 'differences as well as similarities ... between disparate characters' experiences and perspectives' however, this re-arrangement can misleadingly 'create the impression of an objective, polyvocal overview of a particular topic' that can foster 'dubious assumptions about "truth"' (Young, 2017, cited in O'Brien, 2019, p.6). Unlike other plays where this happens, nothing was made clear to the audience regarding how the material was gathered and that this style of the production was very different from the actual methods. Liz Tomlin's article criticises the production for this: 'the shaping ... remains invisible, so that what is presented, is presented as the voices of "real, ordinary people", rather than pre-conceived characters speaking from limited options offered within a highly-constructed and ideologically-loaded script' (Tomlin, 2018, p.243). Research into the interviewees and their methods also throw in further areas for debate about the final authenticity of the piece. Questions asked were not all the same for each interviewee and some interviewees, like Sarah Blowers, were very deliberately dispassionate and detached in their responses to the interviewees, whilst another interviewer, Rhiannon White, admitted that she used particular words to elicit responses, such as inflammatory words from the press (O'Brien, 2019, p.6). The actors did not have access to the recordings, and so their claims to be faithfully mimicking the gestures and stances of those interviewed cannot be substantiated (though, this is not always the case in verbatim work) however, the fact that the interviewees are played by the same performers doing multiple accents does mean that some were more successful than others; some undermined the testimony with their poor stereotyped vocal deliveries. This is ironic in a piece trying to undo simplistic notions of British identity and just serves to make the work seen as strengthening Londoncentricity. O'Brien in her article also criticises the authenticity of the piece due to the fact that it employs multi-roling. This is a reoccurring feature of verbatim performances where casts are often small, sometimes to keep costs down, and could be argued as achieving something of a

Brechtian alienation effect to the performance which O'Brien seems to miss in her criticism. By having actors playing more than one role it reminds the audience that they are watching a play and creates a *verfremdungseffekt* allowing for a more detached critical reflection to take place. This could therefore be seen as a positive feature.

A very interesting point that returns us to 'fake news' from Chapter Two is that Norris attempted to exclude everything except what he termed as the interviewees' own and actual 'lived experiences' (O'Brien, 2019) from the play. By this means he sought to not include testimony that seemed to have been directly influenced by political rhetoric. Whilst this may seem laudable in order to arrive at 'truths', it is difficult to make the claim that the online social and news media platforms that Norris sought to exclude from the play have not become a large part of many individuals' 'lived experience', whether they realise it or not. As Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan observe, that 'experience is now, to varying degrees, wholly mediated' by these platforms (Duggan & Wallis 2011, p.15). O'Brien *et al* conclude that in:

a play attempting to delineate voters' reasons for choosing to remain or leave the EU, the desire to exclude such platforms, which have the potential to exert as much (if not more) influence on voters' behaviours as more tangible 'real life' physical interactions, seems misguided. As has become clear in the aftermath of the EU Referendum, these online arenas have become some of the most important and contested spaces for campaign groups. (O'Brien, 2019, p.11)

For example, when the interviewee Donna argues that she no longer 'feel[s] safe in the city as [she] used to' because of the rise in her region's immigrant population (Duffy & Norris 2017, p.28), how is it possible to determine whether this opinion has been solely formed from her 'lived experience' or whether her fear of the immigrant population has been fuelled by the anti-immigration rhetoric of Leave campaigners?

Certainly, though it may have been an aim to remove that which was not 'lived experience' it is clear that this is still present, and indeed Billington found it found it a source of irritation:

There is one question I longed to hear asked: how did people get the information that informed their vote? I was struck by how often people's fears, on a variety of subjects from the EU dictating the shape of bananas to the notion that asylum seekers are sending money home to 'murderers and rapists', seem to reflect the prejudices of the anti-European press. (Billington, 2017, n.p.)

This was a missed opportunity to interrogate the vox pop culture behind the Brexit campaign (Tomlin, 2018, p.243) and in a post-show discussion (Thursday May 25 2017, Warwick Arts Centre) Rufus Norris did eventually concede that not asking the interviewees where they felt their information or opinions originated from had been an oversight (Tomlin, 2018, p.243).

O'Brien concludes her article by making a very broad but valid point that once again reminds us of the fallibilities of all verbatim projects in terms of 'truth' and moreover about the problems in using anything from a linguistic exchange. Alongside what she felt was radical decontextualisation of the interviewees' words due to the highly-edited (re) presentation in the form and structure, O'Brien argues that *My Country* created an absence of a determinate meaning that marked the 'limits of [their words] intentionality' (O'Brien, 2019, p.12) which then created a linguistic vulnerability, because the absence 'belongs to the structure of all writing' and 'all language in general' (Derrida 1988c, in O'Brien, 2019, p.12). All linguistic interactions operate within these structures, and Brien concludes her article by stating that *My Country's* failing highlights the mistrust that people have now with how their words, and any words they read or hear, can have been taken out of their context and exploited, and that any claim of veracity by verbatim theatre or otherwise is therefore impossible, and sometimes a deliberate lie.

Overall, *My Country* was, as mentioned, received with generally faint praise. Many of O'Brien's and Tomlin's points were not noted by reviewers as seriously undermining the work, however, ultimately damning the work was the feeling that 'however well-intentioned, the show offers little in the way of fresh information or insights. We already knew that the EU had become a scapegoat for popular discontent and that there are serious fissures between, and within, the UK's separate parts' (Billington, 2017). Furthermore, the fact that the ending served to make it clear how those putting the work together felt about the Brexit result, added to discontent about Londoncentric theatre/arts.

## **LUNG**

It is easy to think that in order for verbatim to still be 'relevant' and to 'entertain', it has to reinvent itself and go for more 'theatricality' and 'spectacle'. Whilst this is what has spiked interest in the form in recent years, it is of course not the only way for verbatim to continue. Nor does it have to be connected to something that has literally just happened, as was seen in the *My Country* example. The work of Manchester-based LUNG theatre company is an example of practitioners engaging with the verbatim form and keeping to its traditions. Their work rejects layering in/on 'spectacle' and instead creates progressive dialogical engagement with an audience and community in order to raise awareness of a political agenda and to make sure the voices of the voiceless are heard.

The company started in 2013 within the University of Sheffield whilst its founders and co-directors Helen Monks and Matt Woodhead were still completing their studies there. The immediate aim was to put voices on stage that were under-represented or who went unheard (as is often the way with verbatim practitioners). Their now producer Gemma Wilson was a fan of Bradford City and got them interested in telling the story of the 1985 Bradford City stadium fire in which 56 supporters died because they wanted

to open a dialogue about what had happened, in order to pass the legacy and memory of the club on to a younger generation (Monks, 2020, n.p.). As Woodhead and Monks admit, they were to some degree out of their depth in terms of being in their 20s speaking to people, many still feeling injustice and grief, in their 60s and 70s. They also didn't know a huge amount about verbatim, and learnt a great deal by experimenting and by reading about Peter Cheeseman's work, *The Tribunal* plays and indeed Alecky Blythe. In spite of the challenges, the idea found its audience and they built up trust which meant the testimonies they received created a piece that people wanted to see. It was performed in the stands at Bradford City on the last day of the season – a piece therefore very much of the traditions of verbatim playing right in amongst the community that it was representing. It then transferred to Edinburgh and was staged eventually on the thirtieth anniversary of the fire with people who survived and were present in 1985 taking to the stage in the finale. This site-specific approach to verbatim creates a greater engagement with the audience, as has been noted previously.

Their next project in 2015, *E15*, illustrated the way in which the company's work would be campaign-led; in this case, it was the Focus E15 campaign that they became interested in and wanted to put work on to raise awareness of. The campaign itself was born in September 2013 when a group of young mothers were served eviction notices by East Thames Housing Association after Newham Council cut its funding to the Focus E15 hostel for young homeless people. Many of their experiences and concerns were similar to those being expressed by those that Nadia Fall highlighted in *Home*. When they approached the Council for help, the mothers were advised that, due to cuts to housing benefit and the lack of affordable housing in London, they would have to accept private rented accommodation as far away as Manchester, Hastings and Birmingham if they wanted rehousing. The company originally met the mothers and campaigners at their street stall in Stratford and then joined their campaign for two years. During the campaign meetings some of the earliest interviews then took place, and then at housing occupations and on marches the interviews continued. Those interviewed would feedback on drafts of



the script as it began to take shape 'to make sure it felt right and truthful to their story and their voices' (Monks, 2020, n.p.). Into the interviews with the mothers there were 'bubble' sections in the play that were intercut, these consisted of more formalised interviews that Monks and Woodhead conducted with figures such as politicians and advice workers.

We shaped the words by mapping out the timeline of events, and then after over two years of interviewing the campaign, we colour coded the interviews in relation to that part of the timeline. We worked with the campaign to get this right. For example, their occupation of the Carpenters Estate was green, and any time anyone had spoken about that, we put it in the green section. Once we had everything divided up, we intersected the different voices and accounts to create a shared narrative of events. (Monks, 2020, n.p.)

*E15* continued to rally support for the group's cause over the next three years, gaining signatures and donations for the group from audience members post-performance, and offering a national platform of awareness for the Focus E15 campaign. The intention was to make the play itself feel like a protest, so when the show transferred to London's Battersea Arts Centre in 2017, the company opened the run by marching into the theatre from the local train station with the campaign group themselves, emphasising the reality of the situation, that real families' homes and lives were and still are at stake. Helen Monks described their struggle with the responsibility towards communities and audience's 'You can't just give someone a piece of theatre that's incredibly triggering for lots of issues they might have in their life and then just leave. There becomes a responsibility around that play and what that play is trying to do' (Monks, 2020, n.p.). True to their words, and those of the people they are representing on stage, LUNG continues to be part of the Focus E15 campaign even though the piece no longer tours.

In the piece itself, there is evidence of an inherent and integral critique of their own process that tries to make the work resonate for the audience further, and beyond the end of the performance. For example, in *E15* roughly three quarters of the way through there is an interruption by a member of the audience. A voice cuts in, disrupting the actors onstage who eventually ask for the house lights to be brought up. The audience member who caused the interruption continues to speak. He claims to be homeless and criticises the company's singular focus on the Focus E15 campaign, stating that audience members most likely would have passed homeless people on their way to the theatre without a second look. In performances sometimes the audience shift uncomfortably, some applaud, some tell him that the performance is not about him; the house lights then dim again, and the play continues. Many of the audience do not realise until the end, when he joins the cast on stage, that this person was in fact a planted actor recounting the lines spoken during a housing crisis conference when a homeless person stood up and heckled the speakers. Its insertion into the piece, and the intentionally disruptive staging, came from an understanding that the group's focus on the campaign ignored the wider issue of homelessness, and a desire to challenge an audience's complacency in watching the issue on stage whilst on their way to the venue they have ignored those directly involved in the plight of homelessness. This and other moments where there is direct address interruption to speak directly to the audience are acknowledgments that verbatim is still not something that activates change unless those watching are activated to change; it also shows that verbatim theatre, in constantly evolving, is also borrowing from other forms that help it to communicate messages and engage audiences.

In a departure from their emerging style in how work came together and 'representing the voiceless' mantra, in 2016 the company, and most specifically Woodhead as writer, worked with journalist Richard Norton-Taylor to develop *Chilcot*. The piece was based on the Chilcot enquiry and featured testimony from army veterans and Iraqi refugees.

LUNG's 2017 production *Who Cares* which aimed to identify young carers within schools and youth centres was then a return to their more recognised methodology and style. Starting from a suggestion by The Lowry theatre in Salford (whom LUNG work closely with in terms of collaborators due to them sharing the same ethics – of using performing arts to enrich people's lives and activate change) who had a partnership with Salford Young Carers, it took two years to come to fruition. It was developed from by building relationships with young carers from Salford and around the UK who were initially invited to complete a series of first-person verbatim exercises in just describing their daily routines. Young people who were caring for siblings, and parents, sometimes both, were invited to take part. From here, it then built into a holistic experience with the young carers feeding into casting the actors, designing the set, the props, the costumes, and the music tracks that went in the show. This engagement with the participants became central and integral to the aesthetics and theatrics of the performance itself. The show then toured schools, raising awareness with many instances of students watching the show only to find that they had not realised they were carers and were entitled to further support as a result. As before, when the work finished touring, Woodhead and Monks continued to support those that had featured in the work and to raise awareness of young carers, even finding permanent employment for one at The Lowry:

While many audiences already might have a theoretical understanding of what it means to be a young carer, the Verbatim form allows an insight into the very real, lived experiences. Alongside the play, we launched the Who Cares Campaign which continues to campaign for better services for young carers. Audiences were very responsive to signing up to join the campaign after seeing the show. (Monks, 2020, n.p.)

In 2018 LUNG put together *Trojan Horse* which was centred around the 2013 schooling scandal in Birmingham in which it was erroneously claimed in a letter leaked to the mainstream press, that there was a plot by Islamist teachers to take over schools and run them under strict Islamic doctrine. The letter

outlined a plan known to many as ‘Operation Trojan Horse’, and started a chain reaction that included insensitive headline articles, emergency OFSTED inspections of 21 schools in Birmingham and Michael Gove openly criticising the Home Office on its methods for tackling non-violent extremism. Tahir Alam, the former chairman of the Park View Educational Trust who ran three schools in Birmingham, and fourteen other teachers would receive lifetime bans that would later be dismissed. The scandal was damaging to the local community of Birmingham, and in a world whereby Islamophobia is on the rise, scandals such as this fuel a climate of hate.

Monks – a self-described Brummie – had seen for herself the long-term impact of ‘Operation Trojan Horse’ on her home city, but like most on the outside did not understand what had actually happened and where the truths lay. To find the ‘truth’ she and Woodhead went to the people directly affected, including the children in the schools, and to Tahir Alam, the chair of governors and educationalist accused of being at the centre of it all. Over the course of two years they met up with Tahir several times, as well as with 88 other governors, teachers, pupils, parents, councillors, MPs, civil servants and reporters to gather as much evidence and as many voices as possible. They ended up with over 200 hours’ worth of interviews. Furthermore, they got hold of the transcripts from the teacher’s trials, Ofsted reports, EFA reports, the Parliamentary select committee’s report and the Clarke and Kershaw reports (looking into Trojan Horse) which are public documents. As with all verbatim work, the problem by the end was distilling all of this down into an hour and 15 minutes. This included amalgamating characters together, which they did directly with the people affected by the decision ‘often it’s as much for anonymity as it is for artistic licence’ (Monks, 2020, n.p.). Specifically, in *Trojan Horse* the character of Rashid was created from several interviews with three individuals, who at the time did not want to be identified. By being told they would be amalgamated and not identified it allowed them to speak freely in interviews, without fear:

When we shared the script with them, there was a real joy in them recognising their own voice within the fabric of it. And we found that in this case, because the Trojan Horse Inquiry impacted so many teachers, by amalgamating stories the character becomes much more representative of audiences' experiences. (Monks, 2020, n.p.)

Monks and Woodhead were highly aware of the sensitivity of the piece and the potential effects on the people within and their reputations, so they decided to triangulate any factual information they were presenting. They made sure to only include things that had been corroborated by three reliable sources: 'With other stories there wouldn't be the same responsibility, but we were very cautious that we weren't adding more "hearsay" to a story built on rumours and whispers, but that we were evidence based in our storytelling' (Monks, 2020, n.p.).

Once they had done this, they showed it to people from the schools directly affected – including the teachers, governors and students within the predominantly Asian Alum Rock area in Birmingham – with them feeding back on drafts of the script, meeting with the cast and helping design the engagement around the show – to make sure the play felt like a truthful retelling of what really happened in Birmingham and made the audience consider radicalisation in schools and ways in which the government are adding to islamophobia by their counter terrorism methods. To help get the messages and conversation across, the play was translated into Urdu and the audience could listen to this during the performance if they needed/preferred to. In partnership with MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) the company's Engagement Manager Madiha Ansari hosted a post-show Q&A after every performance. Panels were made up of local campaigners/teachers/politicians who had a personal connection to the subject matter. Professor John Holmwood – who was an expert witness for the defence in the Trojan Horse Inquiries – also joined each post-show discussion. This then led to the launching of a

petition and to the showing of the work in the Houses of Parliament (linking to their 'site-specific' style from before) to further generate change and awareness:

There were many, many things in these documents that we just couldn't fit into an hour and 15 minutes. Which is why when we toured the show we made sure there was a post-show discussion after every performance ... we did not want Trojan Horse to be the definitive narrative of what happened, but a springboard for the beginning of a discussion. (Monks, 2020, n.p.)

There seems little in the way of controversy surrounding the way the performances are put together, because of the company's openness in their methodology. Monks recalled one though:

The journalist Andrew Gilligan didn't like the way he was represented in Trojan Horse. He wasn't a character – his voice was never directly in the play – he was just talked about. That always has been the biggest objection people have had: not the characters themselves, but the things characters have *said*. The question of truth comes up a lot in our writing process, because in verbatim you are not presenting the truth, but you are presenting perspective. And you are making a choice about who's perspective of events you are putting on the stage. Andrew Gilligan didn't like that we chose to put on stage a perspective that wasn't favourable of him. (Monks, 2020, n.p.)

This is another example of verbatim practitioners being self-aware and trying, as we have seen throughout this thesis, to put into their methodologies measures to ensure ethical outcomes. This led LUNG to have to make difficult choices in editing and working with the material gained – but the choices were positively informed:

There were some voices we would have liked to include in [the Councillor's] character, who said interesting things about the case and had an interesting perspective, but it felt very different from the other people whose voices we were amalgamating and so we chose to keep those interviews out. It sometimes feels a shame to lose interesting perspectives, particularly when during the interview you've felt certain that what they're saying is going to move the story forward. But we always make sure that we're character driven. Both in representing the real-life Councillors, and in terms of the audience experiences, you want to feel assured that a character is truthful and consistent. (Monks, 2020, n.p.)

LUNG's work has been well-received by critics and those whose communities are represented or whose stories have been told. They are an example of a company taking the verbatim form and returning to its political activist roots, adding very little for the purposes of purely 'entertainment' in their process. For the foreseeable future LUNG intend to continue with the form: 'Verbatim is also a fantastic form for campaigning. By presenting the human stories behind certain issues, it allows audiences to understand the reality of something that otherwise might be dry or theoretical' (Monks, 2020, n.p.). Their next show – *The Children's Inquiry* (in association with the Queens Theatre Hornchurch) – has been made over the course of a year-long programme with looked after children in Havering and Essex. These young people signed up for a weekly drama group which ran from September 2019 to November 2020. During the year, through workshops, discussion and interviews (all of which have been affected at various stages by the COVID-19 pandemic), their words will create a new verbatim musical about the care system which will be a mixing again of the purist activist verbatim form and the inspirations of Alecky Blythe's aesthetics.

## Conclusion – the future of verbatim theatre

Some critics have concerns about the endurance of verbatim theatre as a form. As long ago as 2007, theatre critic Lyn Gardner raised this point asking directly ‘is the shine on verbatim theatre starting to tarnish?’ (Gardner, 2007, n.p.). She went on:

However noble its intentions, it is unsatisfactory as theatre and ineffective as politics. It’s inadequately staged and will only ever confirm what most of us already largely think and know, allowing us to pat ourselves on the back for thinking and knowing it. (Gardner, 2007, n.p.)

Even the once ‘figurehead’ of verbatim drama, David Hare, speaking to Simon Stephens in a 2017 interview for the Royal Court stated:

[verbatim theatre] sick of it to death as a form and until Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork found something new to do with it in *London Road* which I loved to bits and which I thought was fantastic and an answer to all the horrendous problems of verbatim which was to set the bloody thing to music, but it’s not an answer that’s going to last and there’s something so po-faced and retractable about it ... I grew sick to death of it. (Hare, 2017, in Hare & Stephens, 2017, n.p.)

Again, damning, and a warning to those working with the form that they must continue to reinvent and adapt. But as was demonstrated in the last chapter, since Gardner and even Hare’s words, verbatim theatre has still been a prominent form in mainstream and alternative theatre.



## COVID and theatre

In 2020, the landscape of everything changed as the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, people were fighting for their lives – physically, and also financially. And businesses too – including theatre, which is ultimately, a business.

Where possible, theatres tried to adapt. Some postponed their work – as we saw with *Kindness: A Legacy of the Holocaust*. Some opened temporarily when allowed to at the end of the first lockdown in the summer of 2020 with restricted numbers for their audiences, only to then close when the next lockdown hit in December later the same year. Many felt that staying shut was more cost-effective than opening with restrictions when they were told they could only allow 50 per cent capacity. To break even, the biggest shows in the West End have to be at 70 per cent capacity each night which continued social distancing rules prevented theatres from achieving. Some could neither open with restricted numbers nor postpone their shows, and instead had to cancel.

Some companies and productions utilised what was still available – such as television – with some theatres putting their work onto live-streaming platforms, whether it was productions they were due to show but could not as with The Old Vic's *A Christmas Carol*, or re-runs of classic archived performances that had once shown in cinemas in the case of The National and its Live productions. Some, like the Donmar, even came up with a specific COVID-19 rule-compliant production when theatres were briefly allowed to open again in summer 2020 that could rotate an audience every two hours and maintain their social distancing. Simon Stephens' 2020 adaptation of José Saramago's novel *Blindness* was a clever way to offer live 'performance' again to the culture-hungry. A sound and light piece, it involved a limited audience either sitting alone or in household 'bubbles' of two, six-feet apart from others, with Juliet Stevenson narrating the action via headsets which each audience member had. It was a triumph of a show

that sold out and received rave reviews which saw it transfer to New York. Its plot – about an infectious and instantaneous blindness pandemic that spreads overnight globally bringing everything to a standstill – was perfect to be presented in the way that it was, and perfect for reflecting on the times everyone was living in. COVID-19 wasn't sending people blind, but it was infecting and restricting lives in ways that were eerily reflected in the fictitious work.

There was also another piece that was put on by The Royal Court that was also perfect for the times in which it was being created, though unlike *Blindness*, it wasn't actually original as a form ...

As has been noted in Chapter Two, verbatim theatre may well have seen an upsurge in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first century due to responding to an unstable political landscape, and also as a response to concerns over 'fakeness'. Indeed, the Royal Court's decision to use verbatim theatre's pre-cursor The Living Newspaper format for its creative work in 2020 was born out of this. The plan was to give the many out of work theatre professionals some much-needed employment. Each week, for six weeks, a different team would be behind that week's show. They would take the news of the week, but not the major stories, the ones left out of the main headlines, and present a promenade performance around many seen and not-usually-seen spaces at The Royal Court. The performances were put together for a socially distanced small audience (new audiences arrived at intervals with the action then re-playing several times per day). For those not able to get tickets to this exciting event, the theatre cleverly increased their audience by offering edited versions to 'buy' online. In this case, the camera would move, whilst in your own home you could remain static to take in the journey and its stop-offs. In Edition One, the first 'stop' was the auditorium space itself, with the audience on the stage and the actors in the stalls and circle seats, switching the usual theatre dynamic. The actors sang 'locked down' – an original song that declares a mistrust of the government and of all the 'facts' being offered in the pandemic. Then the audience are guided (or the camera moved) to spaces such as the foyer, the bar area or the basement

with its installation piece with screens and buzzing batteries making the point that everyone is being watched all the time. Beside the theatre's lifts, an actor then delivered a monologue about the spread of misinformation and an erosion of faith in truth and facts. The work was publicised as being a 'counter narrative' to everything being given out by the media, and again it was successful critically:

It demystifies the usually hallowed spaces in a theatre, presenting all of itself for us ... it seems to say that this is not for the privileged few. It belongs to us. (Akbar, 2020, n.p.)

Everything is political, especially in a pandemic, and Living Newspaper is also intensely, warmly theatrical [this] site-specific promenade fuses with filmed theatre to brilliant effect ... The Royal Court's experimental piece is political theatre at its finest and fiercest. (De Lisle, 2020, n.p.)

With the Lockdown at Christmas 2020, the theatre had to pause the event again, but continued to stream the first two editions that had been able to take place, and then finally concluded the run in June 2021. Though the pause was disappointing, it shows how adaptation ensured survival, but also – that when adapting, looking to the past can sometimes offer solutions that work for the present, and future. It also shows that in a time full of misinformation and disinformation, there is an appetite for 'truth'.

Now that theatre has fully returned with the ending of restrictions, what will this all mean for verbatim theatre overall and how will it go on into the future? After all, as Hare observes, one cannot just stick all future verbatim projects to music and think that will keep the audiences coming back.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, verbatim theatre often responds to current, ongoing events, sometimes in a timely way. For instance, Richard Norton-Taylor and Matt Woodhead's *Chilcot* (2016) was performed before the delivery of the inquiry's report was made to the Cabinet Office. Even more striking was Tom Harvey's *About Last Night* (2017) at the Arcola Theatre, a devised verbatim project – written between the 8 and 9 June 2017 – that responded to the UK's 2017 General Election, capturing the key moments of the previous 24 hours through the words and actions of its main players, journalists and the general public. Verbatim theatre has the potential to challenge dominant discourses by staging alternative voices, and amplifying marginalised voices. We have seen that plays such as Nadia Fall's *Home* (2013) or LUNG's *E15* (2015) that attempt to give voice to the homeless; the Young Vic's *Now We Are Here* (2016) presented us with the words of LGBT refugees living in the UK. In politically, socially, economically unstable times, political theatre thrives, and so it is likely that verbatim will be used as a form to reflect on the pandemic.

As was discussed right at the start of this thesis, according to Janelle Reinelt, in order for something in everyday public life to become theatricalised for aesthetic and social inquiry, a number of elements must be present (Reinelt, 2006, p.74). Verbatim theatre adheres to Reinelt's criteria in some ways, but not all. Verbatim theatre does take something that is felt to be related of worth and social enquiry and theatricalises it. This might indeed be an event of gravity, but with verbatim that gravity might be at a smaller community level (Peter Cheeseman's work for example) and in so doing verbatim may 'give a voice to the voiceless'; it might also though be a level of gravitas for the audience, such as with Hare's work, for example. Verbatim often, though not always, takes as its stimulus events or people that have yet to attract a critical mass of public attention, and by theatricalisation expands this deliberately to open up awareness, and, again, 'give a voice to the voiceless'. The verbatim stimulus varies as we have seen, from a person's diary, to legal transcripts, to reports and inquiries following tragedies or to local

campaigns to change an injustice growing in a community. Sometimes there is a very clear Aristolean plot and protagonists, sometimes, indeed often, there is not and the work is fragmentary. Emerging from the pandemic, there is much that will subscribe to Reinelt's theatricalisation theories, either from the epicentre of what was being reported, or beneath/on the periphery, and with other stories that were pushed aside whilst the focus burned just on the pandemic; there is also much of which would suit, in turn, the specifics of the verbatim theatre form.

However, just as a potential for verbatim theatre remains, so too will its challenges in negotiating the tension between creative engagement and faithfully representing those who have given their words to the piece in the first instance. Alecky Blythe outlined these issues many years ago when she said:

even though it serves political drama, it [verbatim theatre] should not be limited merely to this genre. I want to surprise audiences by using the verbatim technique in new ways and by experimenting with its use in different genres. An audience wants to be entertained, and this means being gripped by a story which facts and journalism – and 'pure' verbatim – may not be able to provide. (Blythe, 2008, in Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.102)

Blythe has herself evolved from the strictness that she adhered to when first producing work – as she alluded that she would in the quote from 2014. She does now include scenes that are fictitious in her work, as has been noted in Chapter Five, and she has gone into interviews looking more for specific things she has identified that she needs her subjects to say for the arc of what she is putting together. This is her self-reinvention, and it continues to leave her like all verbatim practitioners balancing between creativity and faithful representation as they re-invent and further hybridise the form.

However, these challenges, and questions over methodologies do not damn the whole form; they merely act as a 'code of practice' and warning to practitioners – and indeed to audiences. For as was discussed in Chapter Two, verbatim theatre is a form as much, but no more, flawed than documentary theatre from which it evolved; like documentary theatre, or the documentary form per se, or journalism, editing has to occur because one cannot include everything in and in the editing, subsequently bias can be present. I have experienced such tensions myself within constructing this thesis: I have gathered research, and testimony, but in the asking of the questions, and in the editing of the responses and research, I have been making decisions that serve a purpose – a bias – and I have tried to act reflectively and ethically in my practices, just as the majority of verbatim practitioners do too.

Verbatim theatre still offers much, and not necessarily to 'confirm what most of us already largely think and know' which was Lyn Gardner's sweeping and unfair assessment that we began this conclusion with (Gardner, 2007). As Blythe said herself, when asked whether she felt the popularity of the verbatim form would mean that the competitive nature of the market might make some cut ethical corners in an attempt to create ever more sensationalist work or different hybrids:

Individual people will work in different ways whether it's an overcrowded field or not. I would like to think that it would lead to people thinking about producing verbatim in different and exciting ways. We're going to have to, if there are more of us at it. We're going to have to keep rethinking. I very much hope losing sight of the ethics wouldn't happen. I doubt those without ethics would have very long-lasting career. (Blythe, 2018, in Megson, 2018, n.p.)

The pursuit of the verbatim play is to reveal 'truths' opening up an event or issue for closer examination and trying to go beyond intentional or unintentional un-truths – misinformation. To uphold

the future of the verbatim form, the verbatim practitioner needs to act with respect, honesty and integrity: the ethics that Summerskill talked of and which Blythe has outlined in her quote from 2017 – these should be the guiding principles. A verbatim play is not ‘the whole’ – it is a reduction of ‘the whole’, and whilst the original testimonies are real people’s words, the result has been achieved through a subjective editing process. A verbatim play is not, therefore, ever going to be ‘the whole truth’, nor is it real – it is a staging of the real, which as Martin states are two quite different things. People who have been interviewed have rights, which must be protected, but more than this – the words they have given the verbatim practitioner are precious gifts and must be treated valuably; within the reinventions of the form, within the need to entertain or educate (or both), or in the desire to tell a story, above all those practicing within the form must never forget this.

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix A – Emailed correspondence and questions to Fiona Spargo-Mabbs with replies for *I Love You***

***Mum I Promise I won't Die* theatre piece - Chapter Four**



On 6 March 2017 at 20:12, Rhianna Elsdon [REDACTED] wrote:

Hi Fiona

Thank you for forwarding the dates and times; I will check out what's going on in school on 27th and see if I could get to the performance in Croydon in time. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] what's next for the production? Is it likely to tour further afield? I could certainly raise it with our PSHE coordinator if it was.

I have found a great deal of really useful copy for the article, not least of course from your own press release and the foundation website.

If you do have time to answer any/ all of the questions below then I will knit them in with the copy I have and the words I get from Mark when I speak to him Wednesday. Your replies will also help me in thinking about my thesis - already your replies have done this. It's so interesting to hear what it feels like for someone who is in/ whose words are represented in verbatim theatre. It's easy for me to project what I assume it must be like, and then be wildly wrong. Your strength to have completed this piece is incredible; as you hoped when you started the play, something positive has indeed come out of Daniel's death and the reception and impact in schools of the current production is fantastic to read about.

Please don't feel you have to send back replies immediately - sometime next week if it's more convenient would be fine.

The questions I had were:

At what point did you decide that having a play written about Daniel was going to be the way forward for promoting awareness? I see articles by the Daily Mail et al around July time when you are discussing raising money to get Mark on board and the press release/ foundation page talks about it being very soon after Daniel's death that you started the foundation and the idea of the play.

How was it then that Mark came on board?

Did Mark suggest the play should include yours and Daniel's friends/teachers words or did you suggest it knowing Mark's style when you first approached him? How did you feel when this became the direction the play would go in?

What was the process once Mark was on board – I believe it took 18 months and lots of interviews? Did Mark show you the script as it was coming together or just when he had a full first draft?

You mentioned that there are particular aspects of Daniel's story that Mark's chosen an emphasis that you wouldn't but you've trusted him to know how to communicate it best – please don't feel you have to for the article if you don't want to, but I would be interested to know more about this – if not for now, then the thesis maybe?

Why did you opt to edit the original script into the 45 minute current touring performance? Was it to engage and fit into schools more easily?

How has it been to see and hear yourself and others close to Daniel within the performance?

Has there been a stand-out comment after someone has seen the work that has stuck in your mind the most?

What's next for the production?

You have also been involved in petitioning the Government about PSHE in schools - did you want to add anything else regarding this now?

Many thanks again,

Rhianna

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Hi Rhianna

I do hope you can make it to Croydon - let me know if you can and I'll look out for you. We have quite a lot of interest in getting a tour into specific London boroughs, in particular Hillingdon where the police are raising money for this for us, and in Merton where the commissioner has expressed an interest in the play and PSHE programme and is just setting up a meeting, and schools in Mole Valley are also looking to raise funds for their schools. Adrian New was planning to take it on a national tour of a city a day for a week to generate interest further afield, and we're also as a charity planning to budget for another spring term tour in 2018. So lots of plans but nothing concrete and as you know these things are really expensive!

Thanks for these questions - they're good ones and I'll try to get back to you early next week if not before. I'm attaching the programme from the OYT premiere at the BRIT school and our recent premiere of the touring version of the play which have some words from Mark and from us (slightly different) which might answer some of these questions as well.

Thanks  
Fiona

**Fiona Spargo-Mabbs**  
Director and Operations Manager  
Founder and Dan's mum



***Winners of 2015 Chris Donovan Trust Special Award for Education in Drug Awareness***

**The Daniel Spargo-Mabbs Foundation**

***'Supporting young people to make safe choices about drugs'***

**Website:** [www.dsmfoundation.org.uk](http://www.dsmfoundation.org.uk)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com@danielspargomabbsfoundation](http://www.facebook.com@danielspargomabbsfoundation)

**Twitter:** @foundationdsm

**Instagram:** @dsmfoundation

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Hi Rhianna

I've done my best to answer your questions here. Do let me know though if you have any more questions having read this, and do use the programme info etc.

Fiona

**Fiona Spargo-Mabbs**

Director and Operations Manager

Founder and Dan's mum



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**Twitter:** @foundationdsm

**Instagram:** @dsmfoundation

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1. At what point did you decide that having a play written about Daniel was going to be the way forward for promoting awareness? I see articles by the Daily Mail et al around July time when you are discussing raising money to get Mark on board and the press release/ foundation page talks about it being very soon

after Daniel's death that you started the foundation and the idea of the play. How was it then that Mark came on board?

The play was the idea of Dan's drama teacher Izzy Forrester. Dan loved drama and was good at it, and had been in the school show, *The Wiz*, just a couple of months before he died. Izzy was one of our first trustees, and suggested early on that drama could be a really effective way of communicating these important messages about the risks of drugs to young people. She loves Mark's work and teaches him regularly at school – in fact Dan had studied scenes from 'Legal Weapon' and loved it. Izzy knew Mark was a playwright who wrote powerfully for young people about issues that affect them. She asked if we'd mind her contacting him, and she did this on Dan's birthday, 27 May 2014, just over four months after he died. Amazingly Mark came straight back and was really keen to take this on, which was incredible. We had no idea at that stage though what, if anything, might come of it all.

2. Did Mark suggest the play should include yours and Daniel's friends/teachers words or did you suggest it knowing Mark's style when you first approached him? How did you feel when this became the direction the play would go in?

Tim and I had never heard of Mark Wheeler I have to confess, nor did we know that much about drama, and had never heard of verbatim theatre. This was all a whole new world to us, as have so many things been since Dan died. We were very much led through this process, and to be honest at that stage were still very much in the early stages of numb shock and trauma, and facing the stress of the trial and then sentencing of the two young men arrested for supplying the drugs that killed him. Generally not at our best! From memory Mark said this would be how he'd like to approach this play, and when he explained it, it seemed infinitely preferable to someone trying to recreate our words and those of the others involved in this story, which is not only incredibly precious to us, but also feels very vulnerable and fragile, and it was - and is - so very important to get it as right as possible

3. What was the process once Mark was on board – I believe it took 18 months and lots of interviews? Did Mark show you the script as it was coming together or just when he had a full first draft?

Mark spent two days in Croydon in late July/early August (just before and just after the sentencing of the supplier) and taped hours of interviews with us three, Dan's girlfriend Jenna and her family, and with Dan's friends, which he then transcribed. We then did a further recorded interview with him in December, about something we'd mentioned he wanted to ask more about. He was very open throughout the whole process and kept sending bits of script for us to see as he went along, and also invited us down to Southampton to see scenes as the play developed with his youth theatre company, Oasis Youth Theatre. He wanted to know what he was writing, and what they were producing, was something we would be happy with. This was all so good, but also incredibly hard for us both, me especially, because it meant re-inhabiting the worst possible moments of our lives. I was (and am) also totally unable to step outside the story and see how it might come across to others.

It was also a terrifying process at times for me – it felt like handing my son over for public consumption, and because of the nature of the story, he and what happened could come across in ways we really wouldn't want them to, and he could be open to being judged in a way that would be heart-breaking but which I wouldn't of course be able to control. We built very strong relationships from the start with both Mark and with the amazing young people in OYT though, and all of them were so committed to getting

Dan right and getting the story right and honouring him and us, and of course that helped hugely. I've had to put huge amounts of trust in Mark though throughout.

You'll know from the play that through the interview process we found out some very important things about what had happened, which was very painful for us. The story we had had been very partial, and hadn't really made sense, but it was all we'd had for six months, and we'd had to keep trying to reconfigure Dan in it all, which was so hard. Then when we learned about the role his friend, called Alice in the play, played in him ending up where he did, it was like starting grieving all over again from scratch. It turned out this wasn't something he'd gone running after, but something that had been brought his way, albeit by someone who very much cared about him and would have had no intention of him coming to harm, and yet he did.

4. You mentioned that there are particular aspects of Daniel's story that Mark's chosen an emphasis that you wouldn't but you've trusted him to know how to communicate it best – please don't feel you have to for the article if you don't want to, but I would be interested to know more about this – if not for now, then the thesis maybe?

This is all about the role of Alice – maybe not for the article? Mark chose to very much downplay her role, which I'm sure was the right decision, because it would have been wrong to risk her being set up as the villain of the piece, which she wasn't, and Dan an innocent victim, which is too simplistic. However, she played a much more active role in him making the choices he did than I think comes across in the play. Mark saw the texts on Dan's phone, once we knew they were there – his second interviews, with Dan's friends, came just days after we'd got his phone back from the police after the sentencing of the supplier. We gave him a transcript and he picked bits out then to include in the script. Alice read and signed her approval for which we're very grateful.

Mark more recently saw a verbatim play, I think at the NT, about the grooming and radicalisation of teenagers, and he phoned me from the train on the way home to say that he could see that what had been going on with Alice was exactly the same as this grooming process. He suggested we change our words in the play about peer pressure to grooming. He wasn't the first person to see the texts and use this word, but I've been reluctant to in case it seems as though I'm trying to make Dan into an innocent, and let him off the hook somehow. But what's been so hard every time I've seen the play (and I never want to again!) is that it seems to me as if that role has been very much minimised. I trust Mark that this was the right decision, and I know I'm the worst possible critic, but it's very hard for me every time to see and hear these exchanges knowing there was so much more on Alice's side. What was, and is, very hard for us is that if you were to write this person out of Dan's story we're absolutely sure he'd still be here. This must be very hard for her too of course.

5. Why did you opt to edit the original script into the 45-minute current touring performance? Was it to engage and fit into schools more easily?

We'd planned from the start that we'd try to fund a professional tour of the play. It ended up being about twice as long as Mark's plays usually are – two plays within a play, or two acts of a play - and very long for a school to make time for. I know from working in schools what pressure there is on the timetable. We commissioned Mark to adapt it for tour, and he amalgamated the two parts into a 45min play for four actors, which could then be performed and followed by a TIE workshop, which was also something we

wanted to offer, so that students had time and space to reflect on and learn more about the issues the play raises.

6. How has it been to see and hear yourself and others close to Daniel within the performance?

So strange for all sorts of reasons. Painful to hear things Jacob and Jenna say in particular, and feeling their loss so keenly for them all over again. Hardest of all though is seeing someone being me holding Dan – even if as in this production it's an animated but empty hoodie. Having him to hold in front of me and it not being real is the hardest thing. Hardest of all though is not to be able to get inside the story and change it.

7. Has there been a stand-out comment after someone has seen the work that has stuck in your mind the most?

Every time a young person says it's made them see the risks of drugs differently that means masses and makes it all worthwhile, but to be perfectly honest, the comments that have meant most to me and stuck with me have been when young people say they feel they know Dan having seen the play, and it's like he's one of their friends. This isn't at all why we got involved in this – it was all to do with communicating these important messages so other young people make choices that keep themselves safe - all about the higher purpose of it all. But before anything I'm Dan's mum and he's my funny kind clever chatty lovely precious amazing boy, and that people can still feel they're making friends with him means more to me than I can say.

8. What's next for the production?

There has been a lot of interest in various places to fund this StopWatch Theatre production in more schools in specific areas, which we're following up, and Adrian New was planning to take it on a one-week national tour to showcase it outside London and try to generate more interest that way. The feedback has been incredibly positive and it's clearly a very powerful and very clever production. As a charity we really hope to be able to raise funds to tour the play again with StopWatch at least one term a year.

With the play itself being published in February by Bloomsbury, and on the Methuen Plays for Young People and Schools list, it's already reaching young people in schools and colleges across the UK and further afield. This is what we'd hoped originally, but never really envisaged such a major publisher would take it on. Mark said early on that this was by far the best thing he'd ever written, and he's reiterated that on several occasions since then. This is incredible, given what great work he's done already. We feel so privileged that our story has ended up in such gifted hands.

9. You have also been involved in petitioning the Government about PSHE in schools - did you want to add anything else regarding this now?

With all the pressures on schools, and so much focus on results and achievement, this very important aspect of the curriculum is often beleaguered, and many schools have felt it necessary to minimise the time given to it. This means that the essential information and lifeskills young people need to lead healthy and happy lives are often sidelined – and this of course inevitably affects results and achievement. Our core programme, of which the play is only a part, is providing drug and alcohol education for schools and colleges to be delivered through PSHE – through assemblies, workshops, planning and resources for lessons and form time, staff training, parent/carer workshops.

Without intervention from central government by re-introducing PSHE as a statutory part of the curriculum, it will continue to be marginalised in many schools. There was a recent announcement about sex and relationships education from Justine Greening which was very encouraging, and could pave the way to this happening. Until then though the important work we're trying to do with young people faces the challenge of timetable constraints, in schools that of course understand how important it all is, but feel under too much pressure to be able to make space outside core curriculum subjects.

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On Fri, 23 Jul 2021 at 11:30, Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED] wrote:  
Dear Fiona

Four years ago you kindly sent some material through for my thesis, as well as for an article which I wrote for Drama & Theatre magazine.

The thesis is now complete, but if I may ask one final favour - can you email me back to say the following:

'I consent to my words being used in Rhianna Elsden's thesis' - it's a formality, but I then include this email in the appendices. It also means that if I ever published it beyond University I couldn't do so without again getting your permission. A protection for your words, in effect.

Kind regards  
Rhianna

---

**From:** Fiona Spargo-Mabbs <[fiona@dsmfoundation.org.uk](mailto:fiona@dsmfoundation.org.uk)>  
**Sent:** 23 July 2021 11:36  
**To:** Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Re: a request for thesis

Hi Rhianna  
That takes me back! I do hope it's all gone well. I'd be really interested to read it when it's shareable. I consent to my words being used in your thesis and happy to sign anything too if ever needed.  
Fiona  
I consent to my words being used in Rhianna Elsden's thesis



**DANIEL  
SPARGO  
-MABBS**  
foundation

The drug education charity

**Fiona Spargo-Mabbs**  
Director and Founder

---

**M** [07785 280116](tel:07785280116)

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**W** <http://www.dsmfoundation.org.uk/>

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**Appendix B – Emailed correspondence and questions to Mark Wheeler with replies for *I Love You Mum***

***I Promise I won't Die* theatre piece - Chapter Four**

Fri 28/08/2015 08:29

To:

Dear Mr Wheeler

I am [REDACTED] at a state school in [REDACTED]. Like yourself, I am also a playwright, though I cannot claim to have been anywhere as influential or as successful as yourself in this respect.

I am trying to gain a place on [REDACTED] distance PhD [REDACTED] and I plan to write a theatre script that will fuse verbatim testimonies with fiction.

For the piece I have to complete a critical studies essay/ thesis as well which will examine issues in the writing process that I undergo. I intend to look at the moral, ethical and philosophical debates that spin out of using real people in fictitious work. Naturally, this links to your own work.

The reason for this email is to ask if you would be willing, at some point across the next two years, to allow me to do a face-to-face interview or via email I send you some questions about the processes you go through and the decisions you make when putting your work together? I have some information from the forewords in your play scripts (plays which we often use in my department - thank you for writing



such brilliant material for young people!) but further questions will come from doing this project and your perspective could be invaluable for me both creatively and critically for the PhD.

I promise that it wouldn't take lots of time, and I wouldn't be asking you to read my work and offer input; it really would be all about hearing you and your opinions and reflections on what you do.

Do you think that in the future this might be possible?

It could be that specifically we talk about your current work 'I love you mum and promise I won't die', which I hope to see from March onwards, or it could be that you choose to give more general answers and draw upon a great many of your plays.

I wish you well with the current production and hope that you might be able to find time in the future to answer a few questions for my thesis.

Best wishes

Rhianna Elsdon



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On 4 Mar 2017, at 08:31, Rhianna Elsdon  wrote:

Dear Mark

Editor of Teaching Drama magazine Sarah Lambie has asked me to write a feature commission about "I love you mum, promise I won't die".

I've been writing for the magazine for some time, hence she asked, but she also asked because she knew that I was in the very early stages of doing a PhD on verbatim theatre.

I don't know if you remember the email I sent below some time ago? I asked then if you would agree to be part of my PhD, and you kindly agreed.

I wonder if, therefore, I could talk with you about this play for the intended article, and then follow up thereafter with further discussion for wider use in my thesis?

I also have Fiona's contact details and will be asking her if she'd be happy to speak to me for the article and then my PhD thereafter too.

I need to get the article with Sarah by the 27th of March, but the thesis of course has to gently develop and mature across a lot longer time span.

If you are happy to go ahead, would me popping over to see you be appropriate? Or a phone call initially for this article might be easier and then an extended visit in the future for the thesis?

I look forward to hearing from you.

kind regards  
Rhianna

---

**From:** Mark Wheeler <[wheellerplays@gmail.com](mailto:wheellerplays@gmail.com)>  
**Sent:** 04 March 2017 08:44  
**To:** Rhianna Elsdon  
**Subject:** Re: Article for Teaching Drama Magazine

More than happy to talk. Best by phone initially. Am around Monday or Wed if we prior arrange a time:

██████████  
Did you see the play? If so the OYT or Stopwatch version?

Mark

Sent from my iPhone

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On 5 March 2017 at 10:35, Rhianna Elsdon <██████████> wrote:

Hi Mark

thank you so much again for your help and support.

I've had a reply from Fiona and she's happy to help with article and thesis and she's sending me details of when the performance is on in the next couple of weeks and then I would love to see it, though I don't know if it will fit with work. Sarah was also keen so we'll see if either of us can get there.

Can I call you Wednesday with the questions and can I confirm by email tomorrow a time? Ofsted are looming, but I think I have more time Wednesday and I can get the initial framework of the article and questions together by then.

Best wishes  
Rhianna

Rhianna Elsdon  
Wed 24/05/2017 16:38

Transcript from interview with Mark Wheeler:

I was commissioned to write a 40-50 minute play and I ended up doing one that was nearly two hours.

**At what stage did you decide it was going to take the format that it has now taken, obviously it's ended up as two plays and now that it's gone to 45 minutes at what point did you decide it was going to take the format it did?**

It's really difficult to remember in detail where, pretty early on I got so much material I said I just don't think I can do this justice in one play so I'll do a buy one get one free thing for you and it kind of made my job easier because I was able to do more and what I think it's created for schools is a play which has three very distinct parts telling the same story with two very different moods so one is very ensemble youth theatre feel and the other is very intimate and small cast and talking heads feel. And so there's two feels to it and then the one that I've done for stopwatch had to be done in a very it had to be done for a 50 minute slot erm but by that time I was so familiar with the material and had a real sense of what would work to be able to cut it down to something that was erm so the majority of that play to be honest is the young people's play so the majority of the words in it are from the young people because they will relate to it more closely than the mum and dad describing such horrific detail his death and so on. And I took the girlfriend out of that play and made her one of the young people. Effectively that's what's happened.

**Are you still in there asking the questions?**

Very very occasionally I think it only happen once with Alice.

**It's quite unusual for your plays because you usually have some form of fiction or some kind of something else in there and this is a really pure kind of verbatim piece theatre.**

Now that's ... what that is, TMPFJ I suppose you could say the little bit of fiction is the Bob & Nob bit at the beginning the rest of that is pure verbatim. Erm ... yes ... I've never thought about it like that. Dan Nolan was very much pure verbatim. I can remember thinking when I did that. I don't know, there was something in me that said I'm not a proper playwright unless I add something to it myself and in the early days there was no such thing as verbatim that's something that's come along much later, so there was documentary theatre and I er it just seemed like I was cheating all the time rather than erm, so I wanted to prove myself, I think it was as much as that I can remember the first time I really thought about it was writing Dan Nolan and I thought I've got nothing to add to this it needs to be the people who tell the story.

**[this is really useful not just for the article but also for my thesis]**

I mean I can remember in HTS for example inventing some dialogue just so that I could er I could do it just to check that I could do it kind of thing so this scene with Anna and the scales is my invention based on a little bit of stuff in the book erm, so that was one of the first bits of dialogue I wrote.

### **Why do you think verbatim I so popular at the moment?**

*London Road*. Is the answer to that. It's just really changed everything. Erm and what a clever piece of work that is, just amazing, so I went to it and was absolutely thrilled to see it and I took the guy who writes our underscores and he said it's changed his perception of musical theatre it's the most, so wonderfully done I really liked it, not without its flaws but it is just amazing.

### **And why you do enjoy working in that way? Is it because the stories are just so much better than any you could ever invent, I mean that's what Alecky Blythe says about hers, why go looking to make up stories when there's such amazing stories involved in real people?**

Yeah definitely the example I can give you is some is the first one I came across it Stantonbury with Roy Nevit doing the dig where you stand thing with his Theatre of Fact erm and he came across it from Victoria Royal theatre on Trent (?) Stoke on Trent er where Peter Cheeseman had worked that's the kind of background to mine erm and I can remember doing *Race To Be Seen* [Graham: World's Fastest Blind Runner] which was a story about Graham Salmon and thinking how much better it was to have the parents real response to erm the er we have to take one of your son's second eye away and he's going to be blind now you know as a playwright you kind of imagine what the hell do you say as the parent and that's all you can do as a playwright the line that they actually said the mum told me they said was couldn't we give him one of ours and if I'd written that it would seem a bit twee maybe and a bit made up but the fact that I know that wasn't made up gives it an authenticity and a reality that you can never ever ever have with some, so it gives me the reassurance that I've done the right thing I guess the only time someone has ever argued with anything in a play was in that play where a lady said to me why didn't you get Graham, well I didn't get Mari to ask Graham out and I said well that's not how it happened and there was nothing that she could say to me and it was just a one of those erm it was like er, er a frustrating thing that someone would pick on something so small but there was an easy answer to it in that that's not how it happened, now I'm not going to change it so now when I watch films and it says based on truth but some scenes have been changed for dramatic purposes I always think well why it's just really bizarre so I genuinely don't. Although I do edit.

### **In the fact that you edit there is therefore, you become, it becomes you to some extent because you're making choices. Do you feel a burden of responsibility when you're doing that?**

No not at all because I always work with the people who I'm writing with, sorry who I am writing about, whose words I'm using so they always have editorial control over what I've done so again, for example, in *Dan Nolan* erm the police at one point wanted to pull out and I said oh why and they said well it looks like the Nolan's complaining directly to the Police and I said well that's in the editing I can change that so I changed it and their view was that's an official procedures for police complaints as that's what they should use and as soon as I changed it it was alright.

### **And you said you think this is the best play you've ever written why do you feel that it is, is it because of the richness of what they said?**

Yeah, there's a fortuity and a fortuitousness about that erm because you have by chance such eloquent young people so for example Jack in in the play is incredibly eloquent in his views, Alice is incredibly eloquent in her views erm so you've got a range of really eloquent young people plus almost poetic Tim,

who speaks in, I'm never very good at this, metaphors or you know he speaks with those big you know animals coming down on his I can't remember what they were coming down on his shoulder in the hospital and then he refers to Star Wars and you know going to the toilet within the journey of Star Wars it was that kind of so this lovely imagery and that's better than metaphor. This lovely imagery in what he says and erm Fiona is so heartfelt and eloquent erm so that er yes that the other other things is I think I've learnt a bit about structure by then which I started to learn erm in *Dan Nolan* because what you have to understand is I'm a CSE grade 2 English literature so I'm not a kind of you know oh he was really good at school type person erm I haven't got a degree I've just made it up as I go along erm and I've really become a playwright because I'm too lazy to read plays. I found myself reading plays that I hated and it was just taking forever so I thought it'll be quicker if I write one and literally its out of that that I've written plays for my youth theatre erm but I went to a workshop the Nuffield theatre in Southampton about 8 years ago erm and worked with an amazing guy who I'm gonna have to ..., maybe John something or other I can't think of his last name, who forced us to look at structure and as a result of that all the plays that I have done after that so the *Chequered Flags* erm this one and *Driven to Distraction* have interesting structures to them that make them more artistic I guess to be poncy about it (13.31).

**Do you know the future for this particular play? I think Fiona said they were trying to get funding for nationwide tour at some point next year.**

That would be amazing if that happens yes, I think it kind of deserves it because it's so theatrical so for Drama teachers, it's a gift and for health education people, so yeah one would hope so and the way they do the you haven't seen it have you the way they do the puppets of Dan is just incredible.

Again that idea came by accident because the guy playing Dan was a boxer and he suddenly had real success and he had to drop out about two months before and we just thought having worked on it for 18 months do we want to introduce someone new into the mix or shall we just find another way of doing it and I thought well Dan was the only person I haven't interviewed let's just have him voiced by other people erm so that is why Dan is voiced by other people that's a really iconic thing that's happened about the production we did with OYT how Dan was presented and then the theatre company with only four people didn't have enough people to play him so they've done it with puppetry and it's just incredible amazing.

**Some things just fall into place, like the title, if you'd have made that up some people would have said that's twee.**

That was really controversial when I I, can remember it being talked about and as soon as I heard those words I said that's the title and erm the young people said no, no its too harsh it needs to be something less harsh and short and snappy and I remember *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* the first album that I ever bought and it was the title and the image on the front cover that hooked me in erm as well as the lead single 'Starman'. I listened in the record shop to another of the songs and didn't like it but still bought it so you know I thought the long title thing if it suggests the story and hooks you in and you the rest of it it can work and I think titles are really important (17.20).

I really stood out for that and said no it needs to be that.

**What's next for you then?**

Er David Bowie next week doing er two tribute plays to David Bowie and Mick Ronson his guitarist. Next week. And then after that that's my last production with OYT after 29 and a half years erm I'm moving to open a new youth theatre in nearby Romsey they've got a very exciting drama department and we're calling it RSCYT so I'm really excited about that having not started a long long time and going in with someone who has a reputation with someone who doesn't so I don't know what we're doing I don't know how old the people will be who are in it and so its really back to basics and starting again and being very very exciting. The sad thing about that the reason I'm going I'm not sure whether you should mention it, it would be lovely to find a way to do so is that drama is just dying at the school that I lead and that's really really sad.

I would ask you not to write this I mean it'll come out at some point but the reason they've appointed an unqualified teacher from Greece with very little, well I've not met her and drama is a problem, but like the NHS they've put it in such a position that no one's gonna complain about it if it goes. And people say to me isn't it sad and my answer to that is well yes in a way but nothing can change what did happen erm and we did some great stuff and I did some great stuff and it was very much a two way street the kids have been grateful for me being there and I've been supremely grateful for them and also these talented adults I've had around me its been fantastic in a way that a professional theatre would never get. My son who is in a professional circus company and he looks on with great envy at the huge 16 month rehearsal period I get for things like *ILYM* all funded, all paid for erm whereas he has to put their circus shows on between two and four weeks. And yeah they're at it all day but nevertheless so yeah it's been a real benefit for me to work in the education sector where it has been throughout those 29 ½ years including the time when it has been with the academy really well supported by both money and talent and that's enabled what I've done to be done so I'm hugely grateful to them. I worked with Danny Sturrock whose multimedia Richard Longs creates the set designs and stuff and these people are just there because they're in a school and they're able so fantastic and the most enthusiastic kids as well, you know I will get the most able willing nice kids so my FB is filled with ex students and ex YT members who are life long friends as well.

---

On Fri, 23 Jul 2021 at 11:37, Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED] wrote:

Dear Mark

I don't know if you remember me, but 4 years ago we spoke and I wrote an article for [REDACTED] on 'I Love You Mum and I Promise I Won't Die'?

At the same time I said I was writing a thesis and that I would use the same material much more fully in the thesis.

I wonder if you could email me consent as I am about to send the final thesis for submission?

It's just a simple return email that I need, stating 'I give permission for Rhianna Elsden to use my words in her thesis'.

I do hope you can help.

Many thanks

Rhianna

---

Mark Wheeler <wheellerplays@gmail.com>

Fri 23/07/2021 11:49

I give permission for Rhianna Elsdon to use my words in her thesis.

Good luck.

I hope it goes well.

Mark

---

## **Appendix C – Emailed correspondence and questions to Julia Samuels with replies for 20 Stories High**

### **Theatre - Chapter Four**

On Wed, Jul 31, 2019 at 9:14 AM Rhianna Elsdon [REDACTED] wrote:

Dear Julia

I am completing a PhD looking at verbatim theatre; I believe my supervisor, Graham Saunders, has been in touch and you have kindly agreed to be interviewed so that I might include direct responses from yourself?

The PhD overall is looking at issues and notions of truth within verbatim theatre. The chapter I have just completed focusses on TIE and verbatim theatre. I have chartered how TIE emerged from DIE (for want of a better acronym) and then I have looked at some interesting TIE examples, leading into those that have some specific verbatim theatre form.

Within this I have discussed your work with 20 Stories High and specifically Tales from MP3.

I wondered if you might be able to answer some questions about the process? I have the education pack which has given me a great deal of material, but I have then some follow-on questions which would add depth to my work. I am also interested in whether you feel there is a push by funding bodies to go in a documentary drama/ verbatim route at present rather than 'fiction/imaginative', and why verbatim is so popular overall, and especially with young people? I also wonder if I might ask some questions on any difficulties you have faced with editing, such as the difference editing can make (deliberately or otherwise) on what has been said VS what the audience actually receives, and how much a verbatim editor must be aware of their unconscious bias that could 'interpret' rather than 'edit' the work for an audience?

If you would like I could send you full list of questions (there are a-only a few more than outlined generally above), or I could give you a call - whichever would be easiest, please do let me know.

Thank you again for your time and agreeing to help with my thesis.

Kind regards  
Rhianna Elsdon

---

Hi Rhianna

Happy to help.

A phone call would be brilliant, if that's OK.

Also, I wrote an essay in Scenes from the Revolution edited by Kim Wilshire and Billy Cowan, I don't know if you've come across it, but it might be useful.

I've got good availability next week, before I'm away for the following 2 weeks, so I don't know if any of these times suit you:

Mon 5th 10-2

Tues 6th 12.30-4pm

Wed 7th 12-5pm

Thurs 8th 11-5pm

Otherwise, I think it would need to be the afternoon of 27th Aug or the morning of 29th.

Let me know which and I'll pop it in the diary.

best wishes

Julia

---

Transcript Julia Samuels Interview Thursday 8 August 2019

JS: Hi.

**RE: Hi is that Julia?**

JS: Yes is that Rhianna?

**RE: it is. Is this still a good time to call?**

JS: Yeah, yeah that's fine.

**RE: I'm going to record you if that's ok. And then obviously I'll transcribe it later. So just to let you know I will be taking some notes but it's recorded.**

JS No problem.

**RE As I said when I sent the emails through I've written the chapter and it's a chapter about theatre in education and how some verbatim work has come out of there, so my focus is verbatim theatre rather than TIE and then your name and your work came up and then obviously Graham when he looked at my chapter said oh I know Julia and that's how it all sort of linked together.**

JS yey that's great had you seen *Tales from the MP3*?

**RE I haven't no I mean it was literally I put in the words verbatim theatre TIE and it all starts to link and find itself from there. And I just did a sort of sprawling look and then I picked some case examples to use within the chapter and the rest as I say is a pure coincidence and a very good one which is great.**

JS Yeh yeh great lovely.

**RE: I read the education pack so a couple of the questions are about the piece specifically and then more generally about verbatim theatre. So I believe it was *Mad Blud* and *Colour of Justice* were the**



**verbatim pieces that you'd seen that you'd found inspiring but that the actual work *Tales from the MP3* comes out from a point where everyone in the company were a bit stuck as to what to do. Is that right?**

JS: Yes that's absolutely right, cos we were...Philip Osment had introduced us to *Mad Blud* which he'd created and the recorded delivery technique of verbatim theatre so we were all excited to make our own show and we were trying to find what we'd do it about so people would go out and interview people they thought were interesting or discussing themes that we thought we could look at but nothing felt like it really quite connected properly and so we just had this moment where we had to share a work in progress at a festival at Contact Theatre and I was just saying, and one of the things we'd been doing along the way was just trying out the technique by asking each other questions and recording each other playing each other just as a way to learn how to do it and there was this moment where we were discussing the fact that we had to share some stuff and I was saying it's totally fine that we haven't found what we're doing it on yet, we'll just share some of the stuff we got and they were saying no no no we're going to share, cos this was our young actors company if we're going to share at *Contact* it's got to be really good so I just said well if you want it to be really good then we need to put in a bit of extra time so we need to put in some extra rehearsals really need to focus in on what we're doing and collecting the right material and one of the group just went oh I'm not being funny or anything Julia but we've put in quite enough time together already and we don't even like each other and so I just had this moment of going 'oh right' and the session had overrun a bit and I didn't just want to leave them on that note because there's a bit of truth in what she'd said because it was a bit cliquey some people got on with some people and some didn't and so and then this penny dropped and I was like oh my god I know what it needs to be so I went away and then the next week had edited some bits that we'd just been using as recordings in this skills learning thing and I just collected some of the best bits and brought it into them on MP3 players and said 'right I'm going to show you something and you're playing you and you're playing you and you're playing him' and so on and then basically they performed this sort of collection of their voices and I was saying I think that's what the show is. I think it was about this group of people who genuinely are getting to know each other who might not massively get on at the beginning and let's find out more about each other and see what's happened by the end.

**RE Yep and er, you say there wasn't any narrative structure it was sort of put together in a thematic way like *Mad Blud* is that right?**

JS Yes definitely definitely, we were finding the conversations and bits of story that we found interesting and then grouping them thematically and then I remember spending a good chunk of time with loads of post it notes over a big table looking at then how they might flow into each other. There was I suppose an overall arc which was about this group of people like at the beginning one of the first tracks [scenes] was called 'The Group' and so it was about and so it talks about how the group didn't really get on with each other some people like each other and some people do each other's heads in so there was a sort of arc that by the end we sort of saw this group getting on a bit better and the audience saw this growth as this group of people. And that was I suppose the overall arc and within it there were these thematic scenes or 'tracks' as we called them.

**RE One of the things I'm interested in, you said that you went back to the group having done some sort of best bits to show them how things could come together when you were going for that best bits, because what I am interested in as well is how people make decisions when they are doing verbatim editing. What was your decision making process for what were the best bits what was best?**

JS I suppose in that first instance it was a combination of things that people had said that were ... some sort of really personal or revealing story or people said something in a particularly interesting or unusual way and I was definitely looking at light and shade so making sure that we had serious things but also light things. I knew that it needed to be multi-textured in order to hold an audience over a period of time. Things that were surprising I was looking for a combination of people having unique experiences and I

was really on the look out for when people had experiences that were similar to each other and I suppose that was part of the my bigger picture of the meaning of the piece.

**RE And people finding commonalities?**

JS Yeah, yeah, I think at one point we thought 'oooh there are quite a lot of solo voices so should we have another theme' and there'd been another point where we'd had a big argument about religion so I said to those I knew had really sort of strong views 'why don't we come and do a recording about religion' and actually that become one of the tracks and actually one of them got really frustrated and walked out so it was quite sort of dramatic and that was really good cos that was a nice contrast to a few of the stories where it was just someone being sort of very reflective. So I suppose I was looking for all that kind of a real variety of texture so that we could get this sort of 360 image of what it is to be a young person in Liverpool today what the range of those experiences are.

**RE Were there any tensions? I know you said, one of things you said, was you have a real burden you understand the burden of editing other people's words. So was there any moment where you had a real difficulty with the editing or can you remember anything of that process and doing it and what was complicated within there or something or something you had to leave out or someone turning round and saying I didn't mean it like that or anything?**

JS I think I knew the group really well. So I think that, cos I subsequently did a verbatim piece where we're interviewing a lot more strangers which is quite a different dynamic but I think in that one because I knew the group well I felt quite confident I knew what they meant. So in terms of editing and making sure I felt true to what they'd intended I think I felt quite confident with that. I felt a very big duty to make sure that if I knew what they meant when we had the original whole recording that I was able to preserve that intent in an edited version. And because we were toing and froing so much editing them and then seeing them the next week I knew they would be straight on the incidence where they thought no no that's not right. So think that was ok. We had a couple of interesting moments just before the first time we ever performed it one of the group had told this story about having learning difficulties and the bullying that he'd experienced at school from that and then he just said to me a few hours before the show 'oh I don't want that story in it tonight' and I was like 'oh right why?', and he was like 'well my mum's coming' and it turned out there was this whole thing – his mum in response to the bullying he'd had had really sort of encouraged him to never really talk about the fact that he had learning difficulties because she felt that would leave him in danger of more bullying and he suddenly had this realisation 'oh god I've got to perform this now in front of my mum and she's told me not to say that' so then we had a really good chat with him and we said 'look can we talk with you and your mum and you know just really explain to her why you think it's really important to be in there and why we want it to be in there and make sure she feels ok about it and you feel ok about that' and actually we did and it was in it and she was fine with it I think that was really helpful. And then ... so we did it first in 2012 which was just part of our young actors company project and then in 2014 we re-did it and that's when we took it on tour and so for the 2014 one I said to them you know how are you feeling and things about it and Ade or I can't remember if it was Lateefah but it was these two girls who sort of had this conversation about fancying black lads or white lads and we really liked it, it was kind of funny and interesting as well what they said but Ade said 'oh well I don't feel like that anymore. That was true for me then but I don't feel like that now. And so I don't want it in anymore' and I was like 'well okay but you know how much we all love that scene, you love that scene we all like it' I said 'is there a way that we can keep it in?' and then we sort of negotiated that actually after that scene she'd stop the action and say 'right this was how I felt then but now I've moved on and actually I feel really differently'. And that became a technique we used in the piece and actually the lad that had the bullying he stopped after the bullying track and stopped the action and said 'I didn't originally want this in the play but actually this is why it's in there'. So we started using that sense of them reflecting on what was in it and we integrated that into the performance.

**RE if a person said I don't want that going in there but to take it out would really change the whole piece what do you think you would do in that situation?**

JS I think that is living on the knife-edge of verbatim. I don't know if you've come across *Fatherland* [a Frantic Assembly/Royal Exchange show] because that felt really uncomfortable with someone saying 'no I really don't want my story in this anymore' and then they turn that into the play but you know watching it through that person doesn't want their story in it and I felt really uncomfortable so I do feel incredibly uncomfortable about the idea of a person's material being used after a point where they don't feel comfortable. But I also recognise there's a pragmatism to the process of creating theatre, the industry of creating theatre so I think my stance is I will do as much as I possibly can to make sure the people feel included and empowered and that your showing them in various stages along the way and they are able to raise any concerns and so you're able to explore that together so I didn't ever do just one interview and that was all that person ever heard from me again, I like. have always stayed in touch with people. given them updates, invited them to sharings, asked them for feedback. I personally hate the thought of taking somebody's words and then doing whatever I want with them that doesn't sit comfortably with me at all ... I like to integrate them into a piece I'd like to know what they think about that and if they feel comfortable with it and like them to be part of it if they didn't feel comfortable with it I wouldn't want it to be part of it.

**RE verbatim says it is a more truth form what would you say about that? When you go and see verbatim are you in your head thinking I'm seeing something truthful or as a person whose creating this kind of work does it skew how you are watching this work?**

JS Hmmmm I do think its truthful but is I suppose anything that's based on ... I suppose I do think its truthful but I am aware it's been edited and I remember its been edited by somebody ... I remember Philip Osment saying with *Mad Blut* to us that he was really aware ... there was somebody, I think he was involved he might have been a perpetrator ... if I remember rightly he was someone who'd come out of prison or something like that and he was talking about how he'd felt like oh no I'll mis quote, it was something like someone talking about advocating hitting your children and if you don't hit your children then you don't discipline them properly then there's going to be more crime in the world kind of slant and then Philip had put it next to someone who was the victim of bullying or victim of violence or something I've forgotten exactly what and I remember him saying about how conscious he was about his own personal politics on that conversation by the fact he'd put one next to the other. And as a verbatim practitioner I suppose I'm really really aware of all of that stuff and I'm aware where I place something and how I place something mediates its truth in some way.

There are things in *Tales from the MP3* there are boys saying quite sexist stuff and how they view women and even though I might not have put it right next to it, I was making sure there was stuff from, about, women. there was one character who sort of or one person who talked about how her family wanted to sell her off to marry type thing, not sell her off but arranged marriage with a dowry and so I knew that I wouldn't necessarily have put the sexist thing in that the lads had said unless I knew I had something else that was offering a different dynamic and a different perspective on how we view women in society or how women feel to be used in society. When I did *I told my mum I was going on an RE trip* which was my subsequent verbatim piece which was about abortion it was interesting working with some doctors so an advisor who was working with us had put us in touch with a gynaecologist who is really pro-life, a conscious objector, also I'd done this interview and that doctor was very very, quite understandably wary about how I was going to use it and she wanted me to send her what edit I was using and see how it fitted into the bigger scene.

And how it sat with the other pro-choice doctor that I was contrasting her against and I really understood why she'd want to do that and I was totally fine to do that and we ended up doing an adaptation for the BBC and there was a whole sort of clearance that you had to get for your interviewees and they had to

sign away that you could do whatever you want with it and you can edit it however you want they give you over their rights to all of that because the BBC obviously need that level of permission but I was saying well I've got one interviewee who would absolutely want to ok her bits and I want to be able to give her that right to be able to do that so again that had to be a conversation with them and persuade them that was ok. She was the interviewee I'd come across ... with this sense of the most 'I want to know how it falls in an edit because I know that can affect the meaning'.

**RE And you've always managed to arrive at a point where it still preserves them and you as an artist so you haven't had a moment ... positive relations always managed to be mediated?**

JS Yeah yeah that's right and I think I'm genuinely interested in a range of different perspective and if the range is reflected by the audience ... young audiences ... and I wouldn't want to do anything that closes down discussion and make people feel defensive, or someone's point of view even if I disagree with it isn't being respected within the piece. I would be surprised if that happened because I'm genuinely going there for the conversation.

I haven't tried doing any verbatim pieces where I'm interviewing you know hard core racists or people whose views I would find really abhorrent ... quite a few of the *RE* project I had quite a different perspective from but I can't imagine if it goes further from that and if you had someone and you really hate what they are saying and then how you would treat that in a way they'd feel happy with you to treat.

**RE Do you think funding bodies push verbatim with YP have you had that as an experience where it seems to be the case?**

JS No no I have encountered that at all?

**RE So you think that whether it be fiction/non fiction there's no push either way?**

JS No I think things have moments don't they of being popular and in the ether.

**RE and why do you think verbatim is so popular at present within the world at large and with YP?**

JS I don't know, I keep thinking of the crazy world we're living in at the moment but that's much more recent and we did *MP3* in 2012 ... I think some exciting work was made and some things started getting high profile with something like *London Road* [a National Theatre verbatim show/film] and like at the moment, I went to Edinburgh festival last year and everything was gig theatre and a couple of years before I went it there was loads of autobiographical ... I don't know why but there's something probably in this moment that we're all ... truth feels like it's become much more ... what's the word I'm looking for ... subjective ...

I know it's not the same thing but there's lots of real life things on Netflix and it feels like people are wanting to get to something that's as unmediated as possible.

I don't think I realised how much verbatim was happening in schools. I was in school quite recently and they had lot of verbatim scripts and things it has caught the imagination in terms of what's a quite nice thing to teach and share with YP.

It felt in schools for a long long time that you couldn't or it was seen as limiting and reductive to do improvisations on real life and that was a bit soapy and should be doing something more imaginative and physical theatre and you know using more experimental conventions that's how I felt and what's quite nice about verbatim is that you can do stuff that is real and relatable to YP but that there are conventions so that they are not just feeling like it's better on telly.

**RE Just with the headsets, what was the students, I mean YP's reactions I mean was there lots of hilarity to get used to it?**

JS Yeah that's why we did so much practising because we were just trying to get hold of the technique because it's quite tricky, well, some people find it really easy and some people don't but also there was loads of like having to put files on MP3 players and trying to get them in sync during a scene with

somebody and not being able to get them in sync and headphones being knotted up and we found them quite a slow way of working but we still really liked it.

**RE So they multirole, or did they play themselves?**

JS No they were always playing other people in the group except for those brief moments when they stepped out of role as themselves to comment on the edit ... the material ... their changed perspective.

**RE I think that's all the questions I've got.**

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On Fri, Jul 23, 2021 at 4:38 PM Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED] wrote:  
Dear Julia

many thanks again for your time two years' ago now when you kindly spoke to me and gave me lots of material for my PhD.

It is now complete and off to the proof-readers very soon.

I just need a final consent confirmation from you in a return email to say you are happy for your words to be used in my thesis.

Could you send me a return email with words to confirm this?

Many thanks and best wishes  
Rhianna

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**From:** Julia Samuels <julia@20storieshigh.org.uk>  
**Sent:** 26 July 2021 09:52  
**To:** Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED] >  
**Subject:** Re: PhD verbatim theatre consent enquiry

Hi Rhianna

Happy to give consent, but would it be usual for me to check the words I'm quoted saying for accuracy?

Cheers (and congratulations on completion!)  
Julia

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On Mon, Jul 26, 2021 at 10:19 AM Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED] wrote:  
Dear Julia

Thank you for your reply.

Some people do check the words, some don't and just send back a consent, but I'm of course more than happy to send the transcript through.

Please see the transcript below (before proof readers have taken their look so there might be a misspelling but hopefully no misquoting); do let me know if there are any changes / clarifications you would like to make.

Kind regards

Rhianna

---

Julia Samuels <julia@20storieshigh.org.uk>

Mon 26/07/2021 11:49

Hi Rhianna

Ah that made me quite emotional actually!

I can't remember exactly when we spoke but really sadly Philp Osment died a couple of years ago, but it was lovely reading me quoting him and referencing him in this.

I've made a few tweaks, shown by crossing out the odd word and replacements/clarifications in red.

Hope that makes sense. I think it reads a bit more easily, and I've also just edited a couple of things where I don't feel comfortable with [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Hope that's OK!

I've also added a couple of bits of info to things I reference in square brackets in red, but do disregard those if they aren't helpful.

So to clarify, you have my permission to use the extract with the changes below.

You also have permission to remove the square brackets and the words enclosed in them if you'd prefer.

Good luck with it!

best wishes

Julia

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## **Appendix D – Emailed correspondence and questions to Helen Monk/LUNG with replies for Chapter**

### **Five**

On Fri, Jul 24, 2020 at 3:50 PM Rhianna Elsdon [REDACTED] wrote:

Dear Helen, Matt and all the Lung team

I am completing a PhD on verbatim theatre and I would love to ask you some questions about your processes and methodologies.

I could either send you some questions, or give a call at a suitable time - if either would be okay it would certainly help me to develop the relevance and richness of my final chapter.

Please can you let me know if you could help out and I can give further details.

many kind regards and best wishes to you all  
Rhianna

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**From:** LUNG Theatre <info@lungtheatre.co.uk>

**Sent:** 26 July 2020 17:24

**To:** Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED]

**Subject:** Re: interview for publication enquiry

Hi Rhianna,

Thanks for getting in touch! So great you'd like to write about LUNG!

Send across any questions and we'll take a look. And if there's anything better chatted through I'll let you know!

Thanks again and speak soon!

Helen

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On Mon, Jul 27, 2020 at 2:25 PM Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED] wrote:

Hi Helen (and Matt)

thank you for getting back in touch and agreeing to give me some material that will prove amazing for the depth and originality of my thesis.

My questions are below - some are specific to a Lung production, some are general about your processes. You will note a theme in the questions; the theme runs throughout my thesis about the potential tension between using real people's words in verbatim performance VS the need to edit for artistic reasons and what this potentially does in terms of making the work 'truthful'. It might be therefore that your response to one question is relevant and answers another.

If a phone call is easier - let me know - and thank you again for any time / help you can give.

Best wishes  
Rhianna

1) I believe you started the company whilst still at Sheffield University with the piece on the Bradford City stadium fire disaster of 1985. What did you know about the verbatim form when you set out on doing

this piece? What attracted you to working in the style? Do you think you will continue to work in this style with your campaign-led work?

2) For *E15* what were your methods in getting the material and how did you shape it?

3) In interviews I've managed to find already, you talk about the responsibility you feel towards the people and the communities you are representing in your work. Has there ever been a tension in this between representing someone/ using real words and the need to edit for the piece to work theatrically and to engage the audience? As mentioned, my thesis is really interested in the dilemmas that verbatim practitioners face with editing real people's words.

4) Can you recall in any of your work having to cut, splice characters together etc because you could see that theatrically this would be better, but also feeling a pull of 'but are we now misrepresenting/ changing the way the person meant this/ said this'? Are there any examples you could give specific to a character/play?

5) Has anyone ever objected to how you represented them and if so how did you resolve this?

6) I looked at the many documents you researched on top of the interviews you did for *Trojan Horse* and you talked about there the problem of distilling it down into a show – what kind of decisions did you make/ how did you set about this?

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LUNG Theatre <info@lungtheatre.co.uk>

Thu 06/08/2020 11:32

To:

- You

Hi Rhianna,

Sorry about the delay in reply! Below is a stab at some answers!

**1) I believe you started the company whilst still at Sheffield University with the piece on the Bradford City stadium fire disaster of 1985. What did you know about the verbatim form when you set out on doing this piece? What attracted you to working in the style? Do you think you will continue to work in this style with your campaign-led work?**

Matt Woodhead and Gemma Wilson, who wrote *The 56*, knew a lot about the city of Bradford. Matt had spent a lot of time there growing up, and Gemma was a Bradford local and Bradford City Fan. But something they knew was that people didn't really talk about the disaster. The original idea for the play came from wanting to open up a dialogue about what had happened, in order to pass the legacy and memory of the club on to a younger generation. As a company, we were students at the time, and didn't know a huge amount about Verbatim. We definitely learnt through doing! But we made sure that during the making of *The 56* and since, we read and learn about the genre and the different practitioners within



Verbatim. We studied Peter Cheeseman, Alecky Blythe, The Tribunal plays, and peers like Breach theatre. We've taken a lot of learning from the different approaches of different practitioners.

Definitely for the foreseeable it's the form we will continue to work in. As a company, our engagement is very interwoven to the creation of each show. Our projects are as much about the process of being made as they are about the final performance. Through the making of each show we create long term relationships with the people we interview.

For example, our next show – *The Children's Inquiry* (in association with The Queens Theatre Hornchurch) – has been made over the course of a year long programme with looked after children in Havering and Essex. The young people signed up for a weekly drama group running from September 2019 to November 2020. During the year, through workshops, discussion and interviews their words will create a new Verbatim Musical about the care system. The young people also have a creative, safe place to discuss their views. They receive an arts award and a scholarship into the Queens Youth Theatre.

Verbatim is also a fantastic form for campaigning. By presenting the human stories behind certain issues, it allows audiences to understand the reality of something that otherwise might be dry or theoretical. For example, in our show *Who Cares*, we present the voices and stories of young carers in Salford. While many audiences already might have a theoretical understanding of what it means to be a young carer, the Verbatim form allows an insight into the very real, lived experiences. Alongside the play, we launched the Who Cares Campaign which continues to campaign for better services for young carers. Audiences were very responsive to signing up to join the campaign after seeing the show.

## **2) For E15 what were your methods in getting the material and how did you shape it?**

We went to meet the Focus E15 mums and campaigners at their street stall in Stratford, and ended up joining their campaign for 2 years. It was campaigning with them that we also interviewed them for the play. We recorded these interviews at campaign meetings, housing occupations, on marches etc. We interviewed people individually and in groups. We worked with the group to make the play itself feel like a protest. When the mums came to the show they would be on stage with the actors at the beginning, campaigning, getting on the mic as the audience came in. They would feedback on drafts of the script to make sure it felt right and truthful to their story and their voices. We had 'bubble' sections in the play, which were taken to more formalised interviews we conducted with politicians, advice workers etc, that then intercut the main through line of the mums.

We shaped the words by mapping out the timeline of events, and then after over 2 years of interviewing the campaign, we colour coded the interviews in relation to that part of the timeline. We worked with the campaign to get this right. For example, their occupation of the Carpenters Estate was green, and any time anyone had spoken about that, we put it in the green section. Once we had everything divided up, we intersected the different voices and accounts to create a shared narrative of events.

**3) In interviews I've managed to find already, you talk about the responsibility you feel towards the people and the communities you are representing in your work. Has there ever been a tension in this between representing someone/ using real words and the need to edit for the piece to work theatrically and to engage the audience? As mentioned, my thesis is really interested in the dilemmas that verbatim practitioners face with editing real people's words.**

If we are working with someone closely to make the show, we give them the right to withdraw their interview, or anything they've said, at any time. We are not interested in putting anything on stage that misrepresents anybody. We also find that if people know they have the power to retract anything they say, they talk much more freely.

When we shared a script with one person involved in a project, they asked us to remove details that they were worried identified them. Although this didn't impact the structure of the story, theatrically as a writer you're aware that detail - locations, landmarks that other locals might recognise etc - can make a play much more creatively interesting. But in this example, we just made sure we looked for those interesting details in other characters.

**4) Can you recall in any of your work having to cut, splice characters together etc because you could see that theatrically this would be better, but also feeling a pull of 'but are we now misrepresenting/ changing the way the person meant this/ said this'? Are there any examples you could give specific to a character/play?**

Yes - we have amalgamated characters in our work! This has always been in consultation with the people we're representing, and often it's as much for anonymity as it is for artistic licence. For example in *Trojan Horse* the character of Rashid is written out of several interviews with 3 individuals, who at the time did not want to be identifiable. It allowed them to speak freely in interviews, without fear. We then combined their experiences into one. When we shared the script with them, there was a real joy in them recognising their own voice within the fabric of it. And we found that in this case, because the Trojan Horse Inquiry impacted so many teachers, by amalgamating stories the character becomes much more representative of audiences experiences. If an audience member had been directly affected by what happened in Birmingham, they would often spot an element of their story and experience in the character.

In *Trojan Horse*, with the character of the Councillor, this was an amalgamation of different people we had met at Birmingham City Council, in consultation with key interviewees. There were some voices we would have liked to include in that character, who said interesting things about the case and had an interesting perspective, but it felt very different from the other people whose voices we were amalgamating and so we chose to keep those interviews out. It sometimes feels a shame to lose interesting perspectives, particularly when during the interview you've felt certain that what they're saying is going to move the story forward. But we always make sure that we're character driven. Both in representing the real-life Councillors, and in terms of the audience experiences, you want to feel assured that a character is truthful and consistent.

**5) Has anyone ever objected to how you represented them and if so how did you resolve this?**

The journalist Andrew Gilligan didn't like the way he was represented in *Trojan Horse*. He wasn't a character – his voice was never directly in the play – he was just talked about. That always has been the biggest objection people have had: not the characters themselves, but the things characters have *said*. The question of truth comes up a lot in our writing process, because in Verbatim you are not presenting the truth, but you are presenting perspective. And you are making a choice about who's perspective of events you are putting on the stage. Andrew Gilligan didn't like that we chose to put on stage a perspective that wasn't favourable of him.

In *Trojan Horse*, because we were aware of this sensitivity, we decided to triangulate any factual information we were presenting. We made sure to only include things that had been corroborated by 3 reliable sources. With other stories there wouldn't be the same responsibility, but we were very cautious that we weren't adding more 'hearsay' to a story built on rumours and whispers, but that we were evidence based in our storytelling.

**6) I looked at the many documents you researched on top of the interviews you did for *Trojan Horse* and you talked about there the problem of distilling it down into a show – what kind of decisions did you make/ how did you set about this?**

We had some support from lawyers and from eye witnesses who were at the trials at the time, and we also had the support of our academic advisor Professor John Holmwood. Our main focus was finding the key arguments that had been made in the press at the time, and had been left unchallenged, and then finding the evidence from Select Committees, Reports and the Trial that had gone unreported. We were aware that this play didn't exist in a vacuum, but was entering a very long, on-going discussion about what had happened in these schools that at the time, had a very specific agenda.

There were many, many things in these documents that we just couldn't fit into an hour and 15 minutes. Which is why when we toured the show we made sure there was a post show discussion after every performance. Professor John Holmwood toured with the show and sat on every panel, alongside our engagement manager Madiha Ansari. We did not want *Trojan Horse* to be the definitive narrative of what happened, but a springboard for the beginning of a discussion.

Feel free to call if you have any other questions or want to follow up any of the answers above!!

Thanks Rhianna,

Helen

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On Fri, 23 Jul 2021, 11:25 Rhianna Elsdon, [REDACTED] wrote:

Dear Helen

once again, thank you for your help with my thesis.

It is off to the proof readers in a couple of weeks and then it will be submitted - but before I send it, could I ask one more very quick favour?

I just need you to email me back to say 'I consent to my words being used in Rhianna Elsdon's thesis' - it's a formality, but I then include this email in the appendices. It also means that if I ever published it beyond University I couldn't do so without again getting your permission. A protection for your words, in effect.

Kind regards  
Rhianna



---

LUNG Theatre <info@lungtheatre.co.uk>  
Fri 23/07/2021 11:35

Of course!! Here you go -

'I consent to my words being used in Rhianna Elsden's thesis'

[Redacted]

Helen xx

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**Appendix E – Emailed correspondence and questions to Cate Hollis with replies for Kindness: A Legacy of the Holocaust - Chapter Four**

**From:** Cate Hollis <cate.voices@live.com>  
**Sent:** 18 March 2022 16:42  
**To:** Rhianna Elsden [Redacted]  
**Subject:** [Ext Sender] Invoice

Hello!

Please find attached the Kindness invoice. Let me know if you have any thoughts regarding any follow up work you might want for your Kindness Project. And also, of course, if / when you want me for interview, discussion etc for your PhD work - happy to be of help.

[Redacted]

We'll be in touch again after easter regarding further Kindness support and so forth but for now, have a lovely weekend,  
Cate  
Cate Hollis  
Artistic Director

Voices of the Holocaust

(Holocaust theatre and education through drama)

Telephone +44 (0)7981437359

Email [cate.voices@outlook.com](mailto:cate.voices@outlook.com)

Website <http://www.voicesoftheholocaust.org.uk>

Linked in <https://www.linkedin.com/company/voices-of-the-holocaust>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/VoicesTheatre/>

Donate <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/voicesoftheholocaust-kindness>

---

**From:** Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** 21 March 2022 08:42  
**To:** 'Cate Hollis' <[cate.voices@live.com](mailto:cate.voices@live.com)>  
**Subject:** RE: [Ext Sender] Invoice

Hi Cate

[REDACTED] Thank you again for getting in touch and giving us what proved to be a great opportunity.

I thought the performance was great, and the Q&A was really useful on many levels for the students. I know the 10's really enjoyed the workshop as well afterwards.

Are you available on any of the following days for me to give a call, or alternatively I can send you some questions for you to type responses – whatever is easiest?

Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> April, Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> April, Friday 8<sup>th</sup> April?

My questions are around how the piece came together, how you edited, the sense of responsibility in using real people's testimonies in performance – you mentioned some of this in the Q&A and I wish I'd recorded it, but alas instead hopefully you can help out with a call and then I'll transcribe what you say and use some of it in the TIE verbatim chapter of my thesis.

As I say, I can send the questions for you to type responses if that suits you more.

Look forward to hearing from you

Best wishes  
Rhianna

---

**From:** Cate Hollis <[cate.voices@live.com](mailto:cate.voices@live.com)>  
**Sent:** 21 March 2022 16:28  
**To:** Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** [Ext Reply]Re: [Ext Sender] Invoice

Hi!

I could probably do a call on the afternoon of the 7<sup>th</sup> but would it be better for me (given my inclination to waffle and go off on tangents!) to type responses? You might get something more composed and focused that way? Just a thought!

Warmest wishes,

cate

Cate Hollis

Artistic Director

Voices of the Holocaust

(Holocaust theatre and education through drama)

Telephone +44 (0)7981437359

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Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/VoicesTheatre/>

Donate <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/voicesoftheholocaust-kindness>

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**From:** Rhianna Elsdon [REDACTED]

**Sent:** 21 March 2022 17:17

**To:** 'Cate Hollis' <[cate.voices@live.com](mailto:cate.voices@live.com)>

**Subject:** RE: [Ext Reply]Re: [Ext Sender] Invoice

Hi Cate

Thank you for your reply.

If you are happy to type responses, that helps me because I then don't have to transcribe, and it would be very kind of you.

Here are my questions (feel free to have short or longer responses, whatever seems appropriate and whatever you have time to be able to send me, ignore some if not relevant – anything gratefully received ):

Can you run through again how the piece came together?

I am interested in how Mark did Susan's interview and then edited, and then your interludes were part verbatim, part research – can you talk about what that entailed from your side?

How did you make decisions about where to put your parts in with her testimony? Did you sit with Mark and find natural fits? Did he have the edited transcript and you then punctuated as a separate process?

How do you feel working with real people's stories and their words? Does it bring challenges in representing the person more carefully?

Have you faced challenges having to edit and leave parts out for the play? How did you resolve these if you did face these challenges?

Do you think the play has more impact because it has actual verbatim material in it and real people's stories?

Are you able to give me any of the responses from students – maybe some of their feedback in your questionnaire? Is there something that you've had about the impact that especially struck you from a student response?

In order to gain funding, are you having to 'prove' through the questionnaire responses that the piece is having impact? Am I right that this is what you are hoping will happen?

Has Susan seen the piece? If so, what did she feel about it? I see there is a quote from her in the book – there may be nothing further to add here.


In terms of directing, are you trying to get the actors to be the people that you have met ie Susan for example – in which case, is it that they are a copy, an embodiment, the essence of the person – how would you describe it and any challenges with the directing?

Also – if you could send this to the actress playing Susan:

Did you meet with Susan and if so, what did you take form that and how did you use it?

Do you feel a sense of further pressure because the person you are playing is real and these are their testimonies?

Many thanks Cate if you have the time to send me anything – very kind of you to help me out.



Best wishes  
Rhianna

---

**From:** Cate Hollis <cate.voices@live.com>

**Sent:** 21 March 2022 17:25

**To:** Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** [Ext Reply]Re: [Ext Reply]Re: [Ext Sender] Invoice

Haha! That's no problem. In all honesty, everything you ask are things that I wanted to pin down on paper anyway. The publisher has approached me to ask if we would like to turn all our support materials as they are developing, into a published formal 'Guidelines' book and this would all be a very useful addition I think. I now need to make the time. Can you give me a deadline Rhianna? I do better when I can prioritise and block out time for tasks.

On another note - I totally forgot to give you your complimentary copy of the script and a copy of the programme from the premiere. I imagine you already have a copy having reviewed it though! And there's a link to the programme on our website if it's useful to students. That said, if you would like me to pop them in the post I will of course!

Best,  
Cate

---

**From:** Rhianna Elsden [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** 21 March 2022 17:31  
**To:** 'Cate Hollis' <cate.voices@live.com>  
**Subject:** RE: [Ext Reply]Re: [Ext Reply]Re: [Ext Sender] Invoice

Hi Cate

I do have a copy and it's here in the department, but thank you for offering.

I plan to be adding this to my PhD in w/b 4<sup>th</sup> April, so if I could have it be 6/7<sup>th</sup> that week it would be amazing.

Thank you again - although my PhD has passed, I think adding this in will be amazing to bring it right up to date and it seems a wasted opportunity if I don't put in this as a case study.

Best wishes

Rhianna

---

Hi Rhianna,

Sooooo sorry for the delay with this. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] So please find attached a rather hurried series of responses  
- I'm aware that they are already late.

If there is anything you would like me to rework into a more cohesive response rather than the attached ramblings from last night and this morning just let me know and I will do my very best!



I hope it'll be useful but let me know if I have missed anything

Warmest wishes for now,  
cate

Cate Hollis  
Artistic Director  
Voices of the Holocaust  
(Holocaust theatre and education through drama)  
Telephone +44 (0)7981437359  
Email [cate.voices@outlook.com](mailto:cate.voices@outlook.com)

Website <http://www.voicesoftheholocaust.org.uk>  
Linked in <https://www.linkedin.com/company/voices-of-the-holocaust>  
Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/VoicesTheatre/>  
Donate <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/voicesoftheholocaust-kindness>

### **Can you run through again how the piece came together?**

The core principle that Voices of the Holocaust was founded on was to ensure that the voices of survivors and victims of the Holocaust would not be lost in the post survivor era and that, if the stories were told in the right way, theatre could be a powerful surrogate human voice to continue telling stories that needed to be told. We work in a variety of styles and techniques and always grounded in some core principles and pedagogy.

We had already created 4 very different plays – some solely from testimony, others integrating testimony with deep research into the stories we were telling. The key driving force for the company was an awareness that the single most espoused approach amongst Holocaust educators to stimulate engagement in young people was to bring a survivor to school to testify – the in person human connection – and that that approach will soon not be an option as our survivor numbers dwindle and living memory moves increasingly towards a more distant history.

Susan had visited a couple of schools with us in our opening season, answering questions after our performances and had offered a hand of friendship to us having seen our plays and appreciating the way we approached our work, so it felt very natural when we discussed and agreed that we would work together to tell her story. I then approached Mark, as someone who was very skilled and experienced at working with testimony about working together on the project; he had the depth of experience in the process of working with testimony in emotional complex experiences (Too Much Punch For Judy, Dan Nolan etc) and we had the experience, knowledge and understanding of the complexities of the Holocaust history and related challenges within the arts so it felt that our collective experiences and strengths would ensure that we did justice to Susan's story and create an educational play that could be uniquely powerful and engaging.

**I am interested in how Mark did Susan's interview and then edited, and then your interludes were part verbatim, part research – can you talk about what that entailed from your side?**

We interviewed Susan together. We conducted it in the comfort of Susan's home over the course of a day with a good deal of mindful preparation beforehand. Voices' technician recorded both vocal and video recordings to ensure we had as much to work with as possible. Whilst Susan has been testifying for over 30 years, we were acutely aware that we would be asking Susan to go into a lot more depth and detail than she usually would so we were incredibly mindful of our collective preparation, breaks and so forth. Mark led much of this given his experience. My involvement was to ensure that core questions were not missed given my prior knowledge of Susan's story and my broader Holocaust history knowledge. Anything we realised we had missed or felt we needed more detail and we went back to her at later stages. In fact, Susan was involved at every stage in the process offering amendments / revisions along the way.

The recorded testimonies were transcribed by postgraduate student volunteers and once we had that, Mark began an initial editing process. I guided him on the pedagogy and balance – prewar family life was crucial, the increasing persecution, the nature of the dehumanisation, the importance of liberation, the inclusion of post-Holocaust narratives. Mark then had to find a way of using Susan's words work in the mouths of her family and the other characters in the play; this took some refining – would her mother have said that? Can Dad vocalise something in a given situation based on his experiences at that point and so forth. Indeed, even some years later, in rehearsal some of those lines we found needed to be reassigned and have since been revised in the published script.

Whilst Mark was working on that, I was beginning to consider the counter narratives; the scale and complexity of the Holocaust meant other stories would have to be told and Susan's individual perspective would need to be contrasted. For example, the Hungarian experience of the Holocaust was very different to the Polish one to the experiences of those in Eastern Europe who were victims of the 'Holocaust by bullets' / the Einsatzgruppen, equally Susan's experience at Auschwitz and time in camps was much more limited so I began there knowing that I needed to open out the broader experiences and complexities of such places.

I began sorting through other survivor testimonies about arriving at Auschwitz and, having taken a short section of Susan's testimony that described her initial experience, I looked to create balance and contrast between 3 others. That's how Zigi, Arek and Kitty's monologues were included. All 3 were still alive and actively testifying with a lot of readily available information for students to be able to learn more about their experiences if they studied the play.

I also felt strongly very early on that the play would need some kind of framing device; that students / audiences would need tools for reflection and considering complex ideas. In addition, one of Voices' guiding principles is to embed within our work Jewish culture, traditions and religion in a way that counters their attempted annihilation. An amalgamation of these things led me toward the character of the Rabbi. He was influenced by Rabbi Meir Lau – himself a survivor and a lay preacher and Rabbi from our own community helped to shape his commentary. The tree of life, stone setting imagery and the use of music also helped to support these core principles.

Mala and Edek and the characters in the 'Body and Soul' section came later. Mala and Edek as a resistance narrative were crucially important. They came as a result of Mark feeling the need for a contrast in experience. He had found an escape story and had tried to write a scene for it. I felt it was wrong – another

story of survival unbalanced the play and would create a misperception in young people. One of my core irritations (if you can call it that) is how frequently we find 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' taught in schools. It's a dreadful, damaging and offensive book that does substantial harm in Holocaust education; it misleads in many ways when it comes to a place like Auschwitz. Children were NOT kept alive for labour, nor allowed to sit around in peace, nor would any fence be unsecured / unelectrified and so easy to crawl in or out of. I had known of Mala and Edek for a long time and theirs had been a story I had long since wanted to tell. Their deaths were tragic but their resistance and the power of their characters and love for one another I knew would be the right story to tell. So, whilst Mark worked away at finding form for Susan's story and words, I went into deep academic research to find the right way of telling their story. They actually 'say' very little – the narration done by them and the Rabbi sits alongside the style that Mark had been developing.

The most complex parts for me to write were the sections in 'Body and Soul'. These came down to years of research, study and understandings. They are amalgamations of listening to and reading survivor testimonies including Susan's. The women's duologue addresses the practicalities of survival – the 'grey zone' as Primo Levi described it – and the choiceless choices that had to be made. It was important to include in the play other victim groups outside of the Holocaust, hence the older woman became Roma. The men's duologue contrasted that and incorporated the core theological discussion of 'where was God?'. Both included a core foundation of the characters' humanity and pre-war lives as well as moments of kindness and compassion – the sharing of advice and wisdom, a reminder of culture and heritage, and the offering of a ration of bread. These all helped to act as a counterbalance to the growing understandings of inhumanity and the horrors of the Holocaust, allowing the audience time to breathe, reflect and remain connected to the human narratives.

Finally, the British soldier was woven in – a symbolic representation of another perspective and an amalgamation of a number of individuals that Susan had met. The complexity of liberation, the liberator's experiences and the rawness of his understandings were important and the liberator's monologue opened out the concept of the Operation Reinhard camps that followed the Einsatzgruppen murders to begin building understandings beyond Auschwitz as an 'atypical' death camp. His speech also helps to contextualise, albeit minimally, the progression to Laci's story and reinforcing what Susan says of liberation – that it wasn't a happy ending and further that there isn't a place for redemptive endings here.

**How did you make decisions about where to put your parts in with her testimony? Did you sit with Mark and find natural fits? Did he have the edited transcript and you then punctuated as a separate process?**

I think of it as weaving. My job is to weave the counter-narratives, the educational elements – accurate Holocaust history, religion, culture, core philosophical ideas, the psychology of survival / perpetration etc – in a way that all moulds together and feels 'natural'. So, I'm talking to Mark and saying – "well Shabbat is important, can we put it in here because it also helps to slow the play down a bit for a transition towards a change in atmosphere?" or "this section needs to be split into shorter lines because the 'process' from this point to this one was much faster than the text feels" or "if we put a reference to Mala and Edek at this point then we give students a clearer timeline" etc. We bounced things backwards and forwards quite a bit. Occasionally we wrestled a bit – Shavuot, for example took us a while to iron out. The lack of the 'right' food at a festival and the pain of that was important but getting the reference to sit naturally within the narrative took some toing and froing. I wanted to get more overt commentary in on other religious aspects in relation to the Holocaust, on other countries' contrasting experiences eg Denmark's atypical

narrative of rescue, the Evian conference and almost universal refusal to help, other victim groups in addition to the Roma. The challenge was to keep everything in balance and in a one hour play you can't cover it all. I think overall we got a good balance and provided enough 'hooks' through the play for a teacher to open up a substantial amount of teaching and learning. For example, the Rabbi says "and then there is the story of Maximilian Kolbe, but that is another story for another time." That simple line creates an opportunity for further teaching of non-Jewish victims and extraordinary acts of courage.

**How do you feel working with real people's stories and their words? Does it bring challenges in representing the person more carefully?**

Absolutely. It's an enormous responsibility. That said, we had Susan to work with all the way through so in a way that was easier than the other characters. We also have an enormous responsibility to her family who did not get to speak for themselves. We only had Susan's memories to work with so I'm constantly mindful that we have to give them their greatest truth, not just in the writing but in the direction and the actors' portrayals. I think of it as a process of re-remembering; re-humanising people rather than presenting them as victims. That's the hardest part. Laci, Susan's parents etc were individuals with their own stories and personalities and we only had Susan's memories to work from, so we are mindful of working hard at building them in as three dimensional a way as possible. Once we had cast the play and had begun initial rehearsals and the actors had begun their Holocaust learning programme we spent a day again at Susan's house. We talked in depth about her family, Mrs Schwartz and the other characters from her life. We looked again at photographs, they asked every conceivable question about their relationships, everyday life and so on. Her mother and father's relationship began to fill out- the laughter and love, her great affection for her father and Laci's admiration of him through to little details that came into the staging like the football.

With the other survivor monologues at Auschwitz, the actors spent many hours watching their testimonies in recordings and interviews. Their vocal patterns and accents were worked on with our voice and accent coach to hold their truth. That said, different monologues were positioned differently. Testimonies are retrospective so one of the core challenges is to find when a character is 'within' the narrative and when they are looking in from the outside. Further, when that 'outside' of the experience is in play one has to question how far outside the character is. For example, the third of the Auschwitz monologues (Arek) was about the fear and panic – it worked best as lived experience in the moment, whereas the fourth (Kitty) felt much more effective as an older woman looking back and reflecting with the perspective of time. The second (Zigi) had a sense of bewilderment and felt slower and, after workshopping different versions, it felt right to pitch it somewhere between the two – outside the moment but reflecting from a closer time and place. Perhaps these are just reflections of Arek, Kitty and Zigi as people, but the tone and content of what and how they were speaking helped inform the staging choices as we went.

**Have you faced challenges having to edit and leave parts out for the play? How did you resolve these if you did face these challenges?**

As above. Because one of our starting points was the agreement to keep the play to within one hour we knew it would be very condensed and that, as I said before, there would only be so much that we could cover. I would have loved more of Gissy and Erno's story (Susan's mother and father) and their earlier days together. I would have liked more of the joy of their ordinary family life. But I think what we have balances with the rest of the play given those time limitations and we worked hard in the direction of the

play to make sure that the energy and joy and normality with all the singing and dancing found its way in. It would have been nice to open out the idea of 'the banality of evil' in relation to perpetrators and much more on the long history of antisemitism but, again, it's such an enormous subject and in one play alone you just can't do it all. If you do then things start to feel 'shoehorned' in and something else has to give way and that doesn't do justice to Susan's story to which we have a core responsibility. I'm very happy with the way the play balances its responsibilities and the way it weaves everything together – like a loaf of challah!

**Do you think the play has more impact because it has actual verbatim material in it and real people's stories?**

Of course. Our research and fact based approach is crucial to our plays' validity. Our responsibility to a truthful telling of these stories is fundamental. It is the theatrical tools that we use around the words that extends that impact and makes our work so powerful. We use artistic means to shape / convey those truths rather than make up narratives for dramatic effect. The words 'drama' or 'dramatic' are unfortunate ones – we are very resistant to 'dramatise' the Holocaust. Rather, we use a range of techniques to help the audience to stay connected to the words and ideas. If anything, when the words convey the horror and atrocity of one of the most fundamentally challenging periods of human history – when factories were coldly and consciously constructed to murder people as efficiently as possible – we move away from dramatizing and instead simplify, or use abstract forms or choreography to support and encourage audiences to focus on the words, the feelings and experiences. As Michael Berenbaum (former director of USHMM) says "it is the counterweight – the counter-testimony". The theatrical conventions that we use are consciously chosen to support the testimonies and stories. Theatrical form is powerful specifically because it can bring those voices closer to us and, in the increasing absence of survivors' in – person voices in classrooms and communities this immediate human connection has tremendous power but, with that comes enormous responsibility to convey those words sensitively and appropriately. As Daniel Schwartz says; "if ever the past needs a human shape, it is the Holocaust".

**Are you able to give me any of the responses from students – maybe some of their feedback in your questionnaire? Is there something that you've had about the impact that especially struck you from a student response?**

To be honest, the data is so moving. Almost every response, quantitative and qualitative is top end of the spectrum. Once we have done more data analysis I can share that. For me, personally, it's knowing that we have found the right way to tell Susan, her family and the other stories to support schools to engage students in Holocaust education and to take the legacy that Susan has entrusted with us and to continue the important work that she has done for over 30 years.

We are still in the process of gathering responses. I think you have a copy of the premiere responses from the public (can send again if not). A sample so far from tour;

TEACHERS:

As Head of RE at the Hemel Hempstead School, I was absolutely blown away by the performance of Kindness: A Legacy of the Holocaust. It was not only incredibly moving but absolutely pertinent for the GCSE Religious Studies course that our students complete with its references to Human Rights and Social Justice and War and Peace topics in addition to religious responses to those issues. The religious content was spot on. In addition to this, our A-Level Philosophy course also touches on aspects of what was shown

on stage with reference to moral philosophy by asking the questions of when do you stand up against authority? And when do you stand up for your moral beliefs?

I would highly recommend this performance for all students of Religion, Ethics and Philosophy.

**Alex Little John**

Head of RE, Hemel Hempstead School

Did it meet your expectations? Yes! and more! It was a fantastic and eye opening experience for our pupils both drama and history. The drama students were fascinated by the characterisation, set and physical theatre as well as the moving and historical content.

It surpassed them! It was so much more than a piece of Theatre In Education. Alongside a clear message and genuine educational value, the acting and stagecraft were both superb.

It was stronger, harder-hitting than I expected, which was brave of you.

The structure of the play and the information the students received was phenomenal. It was a beautiful addition to the lessons we provide to our students on the Holocaust.

Supports our year 9 History curriculum and GCSE Germany module. Also helps pupils to see that History does not just have to be learnt from a text book. Motivating and engaging. Brings stories to 'life' the resilience and bravery of the persecuted was truly moving.

STUDENTS:

Because it feels real and makes you think without being boring like a normal school lesson

It engages people who may not like reading, or learning about historical things. This performance made it feel so raw and down to earth.

The play was amazing and engaging - every storyline was emotional and made me feel like I was there. The play captured all the right scenes and emotions, and it gave me a huge insight into the Holocaust and the horrors that happened there.

yes because it helps people understand what it is and how it affected people and gives people a higher understanding if they already have this information because they show a real person's perspective

It is a great way because it is easier for students to see the reality of the events rather than simply reading texts from a page that start to become blurred and the same. I also liked how it had a broader meaning and showed how we can learn from the Holocaust to spread kindness and respect across humanity and our environment.

Yes. It is a good way of telling the story without making it too gory or disturbing like a movie would. Educating through theatre is such a powerful tool as it provides a more real way of learning than being lectured in a classroom

Yes. It gives an alternate and enjoyable option in contrary to textbooks and documentation. Also, since teenagers are going to be even less engaged in such 'boring activities', a play that the students are encouraged to see is very much a splendid idea.

Yes because it brings the stories of real people to life, rather than them being left as stone faces with silent words.

Having a real life experience being displayed to you really strikes you, because you know that it happened but it doesn't quite stick with you that survivors are still out there and being reminded that they are just reminds us how recent these horror events were.

**In order to gain funding, are you having to 'prove' through the questionnaire responses that the piece is having impact? Am I right that this is what you are hoping will happen?**

Well, we don't 'have' to per se, but it will certainly go a long way to helping to evidence the type and quality of engagement that this play is able to achieve. Our summer work consists of two strands – continuing to engage our partner schools to help develop their Holocaust education programmes and undertake their Mitzvah Projects, and to complete funding bids to help continue this work so schools can afford to bring Voices in.

**Has Susan seen the piece? If so, what did she feel about it? I see there is a quote from her in the book – there may be nothing further to add here.**

Susan, as discussed, has been involved in the whole journey of Kindness – from inception, writing, refining, rehearsing and into production. We talk throughout the journey and catch up regularly. Her initial response after the premiere;

"I'm overwhelmed with this wonderful play you have created. The actors were just fabulous and your direction is just remarkable. You made it so real and so convincing and so full of hope and full of everything I can think of. It's wonderful. I don't know how to thank you. It will be so successful. It will have a long long life and do wonderful and important work. Thank you very much."

**Susanne Pollack**

Survivor of the Holocaust

I think it's fair to say that she feels very settled in the knowledge that her story continues to make differences and will work on her behalf for a long time to come. It's a great honour and responsibility to be able to be doing that.

---

**From:** Rhianna Elsdon <[REDACTED]>

**Sent:** 28 July 2022 16:28

**To:** cate.voices@live.com <cate.voices@live.com>

**Subject:** Final request before thesis publication

Dear Cate

once again, thank you for your help with my thesis and for spending the time that you did typing replies to my questions; everything you gave was incredibly insightful and interesting regarding the verbatim and writing process and has added great value to my thesis.

As I said I would, I took your words and the research and added it to a chapter that looks at verbatim that is used in schools, or made with or by young people, such as other plays by Mark.

It will be submitted for publishing soon but I need one more favour - a formality of you emailing me back to say 'I consent to my words being used in Rhianna Elsdon's thesis' - it's a formality, but I then include this email in the appendices. It also means that if I ever published it beyond University I couldn't do so without again getting your permission. A protection for your words, in effect.

Kind regards  
Rhianna

---

On 31 Jul 2022, at 10:07, Cate Hollis <cate.voices@live.com> wrote:

Good morning Rhianna!

Lovely to hear from you. Well done you. It must be a very nice feeling after so much hard work so congratulations. Will I have an opportunity to read it? I would really love to! In the meantime;

'I consent to my words being used in Rhianna Elsdon's thesis'

With warmest wishes,

Cate

Cate Hollis

Artistic Director

Voices of the Holocaust

(Holocaust theatre and education through drama)

Telephone +44 (0)7981437359

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