Imitations of Authenticity: the Uses of Verbatim

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Appendices

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CROSSING THE LINE: RECONSTRUCTION/RECONCILIATION

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Abstract: Crossing the Line: Reconstruction/Reconcilliation
This paper is concerned with the work of the Serbian company Dah Teatar, aka the Dah women, specifically their 2009 piece Prelazeci Liniju (Crossing the Line), an adaptation of Women's Side of War, a collection of testimonies published by the human rights activists Women in Black (itself an account of the wars in the area of the former Yugoslavia).
The paper records my visit to Dah Theatre's performance space in Belgrade, and refers to the interviews I conducted there with the company, recording some of the insights that provided me with an intimate access to their working process and an account of the issues that faced them through the development of Crossing the Line - issues that are, I shall argue, intrinsic to the treatment of verbatim material in the theatre and specific to their own highly sensitive position in confronting, through the project, the recent histories of their homeland.

Keywords: Dah Teatar, reconstruction, reconciliation, crossing the line, verbatim theatre.

Dah Teatar was formed in 1991 by Jadranka Andjelic and Dijana Milosevic 'out of the need for profound experimental work.' (Milosevic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* theatre programme). My visit to the Dah Teatar Centar – their Theatre Research Centre in Belgrade – to see the Dah Theatre's performance of *Crossing the Line* in May 2009 presented the opportunity to interview the directress Dijana Milosevic about the project ('directress' and 'actress' are terms used by the Dah women that will be respected here). Conducted over a two-day period, the interviews explore how the company set about reducing the book, *Woman's Side of War*, into a concise performance text of twenty-three short episodes, some no longer, on the page, than a paragraph (a published version of the piece does not exist at the time of writing, but an English translation of the spoken text was handed out to audiences in pamphlet form); their working processes, the history of the piece; their association with the Women in Black and in general, the historical and political context in which they work.

Referring throughout to the contemporary debates surrounding the dominant forms within a genre that has garnered the term 'verbatim theatre' (variously fact-based, transcript, tribunal or documentary theatre), I intend to explain how the artists' individual responses to the original transcript material sourced for the spoken text of *Crossing the Line* profoundly influenced Dah Theatre's dramaturgical strategies in devising the per-

formance, and evaluate its subsequent, radical departures from those that typically characterise examples of the genre (see, for example: Bottoms, 2006). My intention to place their *Crossing the Line* project at the forefront of formal innovation with the verbatim genre is timely: we are seeing, in the UK, welcome attempts to develop the form – to name two recent, but very different, examples, James Fritz's *Lines* (2011), Alecky Blythe's *London Road* (2011) and I argue here that the work of the Dah women in 2009 should be counted among them.

Interviewing the directress of *Crossing the Line*, Dijana Milosevic, I set out to establish how the project was conceived: 'Dah Theatre was approached by the Women in Black when they had just published [*Women's Side of War*], and they wanted to do a launch of the book. We [have] collaborated with Women in Black for many years now, because by chance we were formed at about the same time [1993] and from the very beginning we somehow found each other and they invited us to do different actions with them (we did performances with them and so on), and so when they invited us to promote the book we said yes, sure, we would always do things with you but we are not classical theatre. For me promotion is boring if actresses or actors are just coming and sitting and reading the text, but we're going to do something that is kind of performance art.'

In her gentle appraisal of the prospect of merely 'sitting and reading' as 'boring', Milosevic appears to have quite innocently dismissed the majority of verbatim theatre recently witnessed in the UK. How did it become possible to realise the intention to produce 'performance art' when verbatim material, in the careful hands of scores of previous (and subsequent) collaborators, appears to demand of its custodians such anxious attachment to notions of 'authenticity' and 'truth' that the work produced can only be abashed of its performance context – stationary austerity being the only safeguard against accusations of 'improper', or at least frivolous theatricality? While it may be the case that 'contemporary documentary theatre engages with the real but ... eschews any analytical and theoretical metalanguage' (Taylor, 2011, 227), significant departures in Dah Theatre's dramaturgical treatment distinguishes *Crossing the Line* from the type of contemporary documentary theatre such as *Guantanamo* (2004), that typically frames the utterances within the context of the events they describe or, in the case of tribunal plays such as *The Colour of Justice* (1999) and *Tactical Questioning* (2011), within a naturalistic replication of the court or interview room; and from that which strips the playing space of any signification whatsoever, numerous examples of which had, in the year before Dah Theatre's project, prompted playwright David Edgar to ask, 'Why is the first question for an audience at a political play not "how have they shown the horrors of terrorism and war?" but "will it be stools or chairs?"'(*Guardian*, 27 September 2008). While ostensibly posed in a playful spirit, Edgar's wry summation is nonetheless relevant to directress Milosevic's stated concerns about the piece. As if to escape such

predictable speculation, *Crossing the Line* draws from the actresses' subjective interpretation of the spoken text (the raw interview material) to create what is arguably a beguiling, richly symbolic and, crucially, *subjective* signifying field, a mise-en-scene projected as interior landscape often at odds with the literal meaning and location of the spoken words, obscuring, if not entirely disguising their origins.

As a way of approaching analysis of the ways in which the piece can be seen as a progressive departure from verbatim theatre of the 'sitting and reading' sort, we need to consider the Dah women's process of working with the text and discover how their unique compositional strategies came about. This is crucial to an understanding of their dramaturgical decisions and will be seen to have influenced their responses to unavoidable ethical questions surrounding the genre, questions that permeated every aspect of their production from editing through to performance and reception.

Having implied that Dah Theatre's finished work – the *product*, if you like – is antithetical to recent examples of verbatim theatre, still one may speculate that the questions and doubts encountered by the company as they came to terms, during the process of making the piece, with the extremities of the source texts were very close to those felt by collaborators in similar working contexts. I will posit that these are tied up with a sense of *accountability* towards the originators of the text (in this case the women, perceived in this context as innocent victims of war, whose voices are captured in their moment of recollection). This intrinsic dilemma is well documented elsewhere; for example, in her article evaluating the rehearsal process for *Walking Away* (2007), a verbatim play about domestic violence, director Helena Enright addresses the singular issues, identified as both 'accountability' and 'responsibility', encountered by actors in the performance of testimonies, or literally 'the words of others':

> 'The actors therefore were faced with not just re-presenting the testimony in an authentic manner and inhabiting the world of the testifier during the performance but also the responsibility of *speaking for* that person' (Enright, 2011, 187)

Further, Enright notes that the actors must surrender their instinct for building a 'complete' character and instead '*embody the words* previously spoken by real people so that they could speak them in performance without losing their original significance and intent. It became clear that the actor needed to avoid over-emotionalizing the text so that the testimony could find the space to breathe. This required surrendering to the words and trusting that they contained 'the echoes of the other's utterance''. (Enright, 2011, 187, original emphasis). Significantly, Enright goes on to consider the position of the interviewee, pointing out that 'when words are spoken to a playwright during the course of an interview, not only are the interviewees communicating with the playwright, they are potentially communicating with future audiences' (Enright, 2011, 184).

While this can be true of many fact-based plays, it is not so for *Crossing the Line,* which, as I have stated, took its material from *Women's Side of War*, a compilation of edited personal testimonies. In this case we must assume that the original interviewees had, if anyone, solitary readers, not theatre audiences in mind.

I raised the question of accountability with directress Milosevic, asking whether company had felt an acute responsibility towards material gathered from living people. Milosevic: '*Yes, oh yes, here especially was a huge responsibility – we didn't want to give nationalistic meaning to any of the stories – we have to be careful because people would read it this way. How not to betray the voice of that woman? It was an enormous responsibility for me as the author to faithful to what was being said in the story – you can take one sentence out of context and create another meaning.*' Further, the director strove to avoid a sense of hopelessness, implicitly guarding against stirring feelings of pity: *'Things are tragic clearly but it's how not to make them pathetic – this is the last thing these women would want – so it's very difficult – you have very moving texts, so how not to cross the line into sentimentality? How not corrupt their words with political meaning they didn't give?'* Moreover, Milosevic was aware, during the initial tour of *Crossing the Line*, of the presence in the audience of some of the women quoted in the piece – ultimately, a reassuring presence: '*When we were in Bosnia we had some of the women whose texts were in the book, or who were their close relatives or friends, and they were very pleased and that was fantastic, that gave us huge faith in what we were doing. The biggest fear I had before any of the performances was: what would they say? I spoke with a woman who lost four members of her family and it's incomprehensible.*'

Yet directors and actors alike must move towards interpretation, and concrete representation, if not full comprehension, of their material. I suspect that any claim of 'comprehension', far from being an admission of some failure of the imagination, would seem ethically questionable. Amanda Stuart Fisher, in her article concerned with the ethics of 'appropriation, replacement and misrecognition' of others' words, addresses the process of identification, of literally *taking the place of another* in performance, questioning the extent to which the actor inhabits (or has the *right* to inhabit) the voice and subject position of the 'victim':

> To what extent does the enactment of the verbatim subject seek to portray a totalizing representation of the other? Does verbatim theatre, in other words, 'point' to its artifice and the production of simulacrum? Or does it invite the audience into a process of 'unchecked identification' where they are no longer sure who is standing before them? (Stuart Fisher, 2011, 202)

Lib Taylor, in her instructive analyses of the tribunal and documentary plays *Guantanamo* and *Black Watch* argues that the invitation to identify emotionally with an individual or 'victim' through the recounting of his or her singular experience is a necessary

step towards an audience member's 'enlistment' to a particular (political) cause, and identifies this process as an intentional *strategy*. With reference to 'fact-based theatre' (a generic term broadly encompassing the forms or 'tendencies' she usefully distinguishes as verbatim, tribunal and documentary theatre), Taylor explains how the process of emotional engagement functions as a catalyst for recruitment, arguing that it 'develops strategies of enlistment, to align audiences with particular political perspectives on recent events and controversies – and to align them both rationally and emotionally'; further, *'the audience gets on-side, not of the individual characters, but of the case made by the drama.'* (Taylor, 2011, 228). While we cannot exactly evidence this claim, the possibility suggested here, of raising audiences' political awareness through empathetic connection to the plight of individuals, again shifts a considerable burden of accountability towards makers of fact-based theatre: not only for the individuals represented, but the education of audiences too. I raised this thorny issue with Milosevic in 2009, asking her whether it was her belief that through an emotional connection (to characters) people begin to recognise and understand the political context of the work. Her response is far less straightforward, seeming to eschew sentimentality in favour of rigorous exposure, refusing, in her call for mobilisation and change, to identify any specific enemy or 'cause'. Elliptical as they are, Milosevic's answers betray the complexity of the situation and her profound mistrust of political rhetoric: *'If we use the language of politicians and [media images] we would preach to the converted, so the question was how to open up people's hearts, even the nationalists', people who didn't want to see the truth and so on, and on the other hand was [the question of] how to get any kind of catharsis – not to go out with a feeling of: "it's terrible, I don't know what to do with that", but to give the possibility of transformation – shedding necessary light on some things – this will maybe help us transform this whole legacy.'* Milosevic states that a non-partisan approach suited their aims: *'The stories don't use the language of politicians. That was important. So there is no woman who starts to give political speeches. They were speaking out of experience. They do not name their enemy [or] oppressors.'*

In order to examine the extent to which the Dah Theatre's work with verbatim material departs from the typical dramaturgical strategies identified with the genre it is necessary to summarise, briefly, the familiar traits evident in numerous examples – these are well rehearsed, perhaps to the extent that they have acquired a sense of truth all of their own; but they are of course widely debated elsewhere (see, for example, Bottoms, 2006), and should not be read as a model or doctrine. Verbatim is about clarity of delivery, allowing us to absorb information – facts – with a minimum of interpretative activity, letting words, voices, not visuals and action, dominate our experience. We anticipate a deliberate contrast between the coolness of the environment of enquiry and the chaos of the events being discussed. Post 9/11 verbatim plays such as *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) – there are several others – rely on testimony, tribunal, or lived experience, the eyewitness account, to tell their stories. There is very little in the way of clutter, or

of creative mediation, of any attempt to reconstruct or re-enact the locations and events under scrutiny; we rely solely on reportage to gain any kind of sense of what actually happened, in the same way that we might read a newspaper report after the event. Indeed, the genre's relationship, even likeness to journalism is one of its most widely debated qualities. Verbatim theatre has been lauded for its 'immediacy' (certainly the post 9/11 plays were way ahead of the emergent cinematic responses to the crisis in the middle-east) but it can never be as immediate as the live news camera, or, as we're increasingly seeing, the hastily streamed footage from the camera-phone of a rapt witness. Verbatim is necessarily retrospective, past-tense. Yet it seems to offer us an intimacy, a kind of access to the truth that such forms of journalism cannot: to the delivery of personal testimonies and experiences of those directly involved – the insider's stories. In this way it allows us 'behind the scenes'; it grants us privileged access to all areas, to be somehow present in the (re)constructed 'here-and-now' of that moment of delivery. In the case of the tribunal or verbatim play there might be an attempt to depict a courtroom, or the various locations in which interviews took place. This is probably because in order for verbatim theatre to work, the audience must be reminded and must believe that at some point *prior* to the editing process, the series of interviews – the original utterances – that became the raw material for the play *actually happened.* (Indeed, the ways in which material is collected, collated, and processed, as well as the framing of its presentation, influences definitions of fact-based work; see Taylor 2011). Should the authenticity of the spoken word – and the means by which those words were sourced – be doubted for an instant, the fragile edifice or conceit of the verbatim event – one that relies, I think, on trust – would collapse. There is usually a 'fragile conceit' operating in fictional theatre, of course, but as Jenny Hughes has observed: '*Paradoxically, the representation of the real or evidential via performance leaves the audience asking ''is it real?'' in a more insistent way, perhaps, than in response to more explicitly fictional plays.*' (Hughes, 2007, 152). The paradox is that this material is being quoted through a medium that is traditionally in the business of construction and illusion; this is perhaps *why* verbatim theatre is typically so self-effacing about its own theatricality. The words are what matters: we are bearing witness to recollection, not reconstruction, of events; events that are, in their political and ideological implications, extremely complex. It is as if to add to these voices any deliberate sense of style or allegory or metaphor would disrespectfully 'pollute' the experience; the 'truth' has no need for processing of this kind. Yet what happens in the process of editing? What is left out? How are choices made about what remains? It is certainly within these questions that ethical concerns are raised, for of course, there is a degree of fiction in any reconstruction or retelling, and we know for sure that the editing process requires a guiding – even "authorial" hand; in the interests of dramatic structure, or, say, 'enlistment' to a particular cause, history can be reorganised, rewritten, even, of course, effaced.

In preparation for the *Crossing the Line* project Dah Theatre's directress Dijana Milosevic had some of the initial editorial decisions made for her: *'The editor [of Women's Side of War] gave us her choice of text and I must admit that it was excellent. It's difficult to talk of the texts in terms of 'liking' them because they are about human tragedies. But they presented different sides, different situations and already had a certain dramaturgical rhythm and meaning'.* But still the harrowing experience of fully absorbing the material lay ahead*: 'Around February 2008 we read the stories and that was really tough – they inhabit you, they start reappearing at night and all of that. But I had to do it, and read and re-read it because I had to be objective – the "objective director/dramaturg."'* Fortunately Milosevic was able to undertake subsequent editing in response to audience feedback to the company's work-in-progress: *'Women in Black wanted to promote the book in Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia, and they invited us to promote it through theatre performance, and to have talks afterward with the audience, and so we went to four cities in Bosnia, two in Croatia and three here including Belgrade, and it was fantastic because this is really what helped me, and the whole group to deal with this material ... I had this fantastic advantage as a theatre director to follow the performance [as a] work in progress, through the reactions of the audience.'* I should point out here that, as a spectator of the *Crossing the Line* performance in Belgrade, I was one of the only audience members who had not been directly affected by the events described so that distance actually meant I was less preoccupied with accuracy and authenticity, or with being convinced of the authority of the text, prepared to come to the material with an open mind – a different kind of receptiveness, perhaps. (Besides, their staging meant that we were not about to get a history lesson anyway.)

Speaking candidly in her introduction to *Crossing the Line* (printed and translated in its accompanying theatre programme), Milosevic shares her concerns about the project with audiences, from the point of view of the political activist, dramaturg, co-ordinator and collaborator:

> Reading the moving, true, personal stories I could see images, hear voices and witness events of the past. And that felt like descending into hell. The challenge and the responsibility was not to stay in that place, but to return to light as soon as possible, like in the Greek myths; the way to re-enter light, in the company of others, is actually the power and law of theatre – to transform darkness or the horrific picture into a clear physical and spiritual presence on stage, to shed light on darkness. The process would pose difficult questions about responsibility, the right to deal with hard experiences of others, to encounter my own fears. (Milosevic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* programme)

We can shed light on the process of coming to terms with these questions by exploring the creative process from the performer's point of view. Speaking about their ex-

perience (again in the *Crossing the Line* programme, from which I shall quote at length in this section), the actresses are responding to questions posed by their directress, significantly 'Which moment during this work was hardest for you?'; 'How do you see the connection between your artistic and your political engagement in the performance?' and 'What does reconciliation mean to you personally?' It strikes me that, perhaps because the material bears such gravitas, there appears to have been no suggestion throughout their working process of detachment in their delivery, ironic or otherwise; that they might be read, in the piece, not as 'characters', but as performers reading texts. Still, the piece might be as much *about* their process and the many concerns, moral, ethical and otherwise, they shared in coming to terms with the project. As the following extracts from the programme reveal, the actresses explore and transpose thoughts, feelings, memories about and prompted by the material *through* their interpretation and delivery of it; this is a different kind of 'ghosting', perhaps, than the problematic notion of actor as vessel or intermediary (literally 'standing in for' the individuals represented by the text), although, while their process is ever present in performance, it is never directly signalled or *explicitly* flagged within the work. As actresses, they understand their first responsibility to the material and to the audience to be that of capturing an authentic voice; a tangibly human presence.

Sanja Krsmanovic Tasic, one of the Dah Theatre's founders and principal actresses raises the issue of 'reconstruction' in her discussion of her portrayal of Mother Mejra, one of the speakers represented in *Women's Side of War*. There follows an excerpt of her text, episode 13 in the piece:

> *As soon as I heard the remains had been transported, I went and put my name in the book of those who were searching for their missing. When I entered the room, I said a prayer, of course. Then we were shown a bag with remains which was marked 014 KV 004. The doctor opened the bag, took out the upper part of the skull...and the forehead and the jaw...he put the skull in place where the eyes and nose should be...In that moment, I could almost see... my Edvin. I said, "Doctor, this is my child." Then the doctor took one part of the thigh, a bone and the lower part of the leg out of the bag. Then he took out the arms and the back...so, it all fit together. The age and the height. Edvin was 194cm tall. This is how I found Edvin's remains.* (*Crossing the Line*, 2009)

Krsmanovic Tasic: *'This performance is the rounding up of a long path of searching for truth in my personal theatre language. There were hard moments, but not the hardest. To find the voice of mother Mejra who finds words and wants to speak about her hardship in searching for her son Edvin in the morgue. To be the conductor of these stories I tried to stay open for the words that brought images that were the truth of what actually happened to the women of these stories.'* So how can they be spoken, or repli-

cated? How can they be shown or performed? The actress insists that the character came to her: *'It was not easy to say [Mejra's] text. I would wait for her to come over me. When we recorded the trial version it was easier. Alone with my directress Dijana, mother Mejra would come. Burdened with pain, translucent with life she managed to preserve in herself. When we recorded in the studio I could not beckon her. I asked for a chair to sit, to have the microphone down. I sat, and she came.'* I found this notion of waiting patiently for a meeting or encounter with her character interesting in its apparent down-playing of creativity or invention on her part (as if claiming any credit would have felt somehow disrespectful). The stage action she finds to accompany her speaking is a traditional, almost cosy domestic task, at once devoid of the horror expressed by her words but nonetheless appropriate, somehow containing all the quiet power of any simple demonstration of maternal duty: '*In the scene, I just sew Edvin's name on the shirt just as I used to sew my son's name on his underwear when he was little and would go on school trips. In the scene I have goose bumps, I am quivering inside, but I am overwhelmed with love, with mother's love.'*

In performance, there is indeed nothing in her voice that outwardly betrays the mild trauma expressed here; it is gentle, soothing almost. (Of course the brutal realism of the words prevents the image from being over-sentimental). Significantly the actress drew from her own experience, her subjective, emotional response to the text and offered the image and action, perhaps as a way of conveying her empathy with the 'character', perhaps as a way of dignifying the relationship between mother and son. There are several layers in the performance that were inserted in this way; it is an intensely personal work. It is crucial to actress Krsmanovic Tasic and to the Dah women collectively that, despite the cool detachment often required of verbatim material, its humanity is expressed through connection with individuals. This is not sentimental; they share the activist's mistrust of censorship and propaganda:

> When I tell these women's stories with my colleagues on stage, I give them a dignified place and respect. I reveal them for others who have never heard of these women. I help the wars of the nineties be seen from the peephole of intimate, sometimes harsh truths, and not through the screens of one-sided TVs, or through the mouths of covetous politicians. Because only through these personal stories and immediate contacts can we encounter humanity in ourselves and realize the essence of the relation of ME and YOU, against that of US and THEM. (Krsmanovic Tasic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* programme)

Actress Maja Mitic addresses the question of 'reconciliation' by implying that coming to terms (with her homeland's troubled history) has come about through *transformative* engagement with the project. In saying, below, *'I can see the beauty and not feel guilty'*, the implication is that her recognition of the consoling presence of beauty (or

perhaps hope) has seemed to be uncomfortably close to denial or even betrayal; now, having lived and worked with the victims of conflict, she is in a position to accept the relative privileges of peace. Mitic alludes to her participation in the creative process as a kind of *catharsis*:

> At last I reconciled with my country and its decisions, mistakes and errors! It took me almost 20 years, half of my life! Now again I can see the beauty, and not feel guilty. I do not have to judge or condemn myself because of that. Anger and helplessness transformed into my own action of understanding. (Mitic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* programme)

At first there is a very palpable sense of the actress being overwhelmed by the material, disturbed and troubled by it to the extent that it blocks creativity, although interestingly she does try to remind herself that she is essentially playing a role, or 'character.' The issue here is of course that the role is not fictional. Because of this, Mitic speaks of 'resistance' to the texts, but goes on to express an all-consuming empathy and identification: *'I was with them.'* Eventually it is only through distance and objectivity that Mitic is able to work: by imagining these women not as protagonists within their stories (that is, in the moment the events *happened*), but in the calm, reflective moment of recollection and *retelling* – a distinction that is surely familiar to most performers of verbatim material. Ultimately, perhaps, Mitic's 'action of understanding' assumes the respectful distance (and dignified acceptance?) of an act of remembrance:

> In theatre art the feeling 'it is hard for me' transforms into a challenge to dive into all the layers of the character I am working on – I enter a process and work on it. I just know I resisted learning the texts, the personal testimonies. The resistance came from knowing the fact that it actually happened! Rationally I knew that these were all the contemporary Antigones, Iphigenias and Medeas, but I was haunted in the night by these women from the book [...] I ran the same paths they ran, hid like they hid, was with them [...] then I imagined how the ones that survived are now sitting, drinking coffee and with a calm voice, as if talking as another person, telling stories to people who write them down, not to be forgotten and not to happen again. (Mitic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* programme)

It appears to have been both a survival strategy and creative impulse for the Dah women to attempt ownership, to import something of their subjective response; to consider how these stories resonate, to offer their own memories, associations, images and work them into the piece. It is partly in this respect, this relative flexibility, that the work differs from much verbatim theatre and where, speaking as a spectator of the piece, some of the difficulties in reading the performance text can be located, since there are no clear reference points in the spoken, source text that might explain, say, the pres-

ence of spilled apples (see below), or the ritualised usage of large quantities of salt that closes the piece in episode 23. We can only gain a retrospective insight and understanding from listening to the makers. Mitic, wrestling with her conscience, asked herself: *'Do I have the right to enter so intimately into the unhealed wounds of these people? To write their stories down is one thing, but to have the power to say these stories on stage is another. And then, because of the great darkness that all of them were in, my brain sent me incredible associations of simplicity and beauty.'* She goes on to recall a college classmate who took his own life, referring to his 'own choice' in a 'private war', a bittersweet memory that reveals the purpose of the apples to be a symbol of lost youth, or perhaps thwarted ambition:

> I remember him from exercises in our first year, working on a text by Neil Simon. We used just one prop all that term – an apple! In one exercise we spilled baskets of apples on the stage that rolled all over! That was a scene of our youth and expectations! That image overcame me during [rehearsal] and so the spilled apples from 1983 rolled into the performance in 2009. (Mitic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* programme)

Discussing the working relationship shared by the company, directress Milosevic also refers to this moment, explaining the presence of what I shall refer to as *imported elements* in the work:

> When I work on a performance my own idea stops being important – I rather surrender to the process of conducting, where the ideas of my actors and actresses blend into my ideas. There was the process, born from intuition and proceeding months of reading and thinking, in which I asked my actresses what they would like to give to the audience in one moment in the performance. I received the answer that it should be apples; the apples needed to be spilled. In that moment we lose the division between director's and actor's ideas and we do everything for a greater cause. (Milosevic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* programme)

Milosevic's methodology as a directress, of drawing from experience outside the rehearsal room and of delighting in the unplanned, in chance and co-incidence, is not new or surprising but it does begin to explain why the work is not at all times in service to the text, how the primacy of the verbatim material is subverted – if always intentionally supported – by an elliptical, often cryptic score, by images and impressions gathered from somewhere outside and later imported:

> The work on a performance is not only work at a desk or work in the space. It is work that occurs while I travel or when an exhibition gives me an idea for an improvisation [...] when the sentence "Blood does not go into salt" that Sura Dumanic

> said, explains why we have salt in the performance, and this same sentence demands from me the cleansing of ourselves with this salt. And this process continues while we travel through New Mexico, where on the other side of the world we find out that the natives of New Mexico used salt in the ritual of cleansing. (Milosevic, 2009, *Crossing the Line* programme)

Whilst it is true that those elements, being unrelated to the spoken words, are impossible to read (in performance) with any certainty of their precise meaning, what they are doing with the text is not, in fact, an attempt at reconstruction – it is opening up a *space for interpretation*, making the audience work to connect action and image to their speech acts (or leaving them free to accept this lack of correlation), something rarely seen in the treatment of verbatim material, but no less authentic, certainly no less respectful, since the performers are, in that moment, offering, or 'giving' something of their own history in response to it; making their presence felt in a sense that is not subservient to the text but rather, exploring their confrontation with it. The process is visible in the work, demonstrating that an admission of the *divide* between the performer and the authors of the text can be seen as fertile creative territory.

Jenny Hughes, in her analysis of British theatrical responses to the War on Terror, turns to 'verbatim' plays *Talking to Terrorists* (2004) and *Stuff Happens* (2004), suggesting that although 'verbatim theatre, like all theatre, sustains itself not by means of the authority of the real but from the authority of the *"account" – representation and performance – of the real'* (Hughes, 2007: 152), it could be the case that *'the verbatim form can be described more accurately as permitting an audience to consider the limitations of representations of truth rather than convincing by means of the evidential.'* (Hughes, 2007, 152). When artists confronted with the responsibility of adapting material of this kind abandon any attempt to impose 'order' or reproduce the moment or circumstances of the original utterances, they free themselves from preoccupations with 'truth' and 'reality'. There is a carefully structured series of 'episodes' but no narrative or formal coherence to *Crossing the Line*, so we are not concerned with deciphering its meaning within these constraints. Actually it could be argued that the lack of coherence more accurately reflects the chaos of war, thus escaping the criticism levelled by Hughes at *Talking to Terrorists*, that it *'simplifies an extremely complex subject.'* (Hughes, 2007, 153). Hughes goes on to say that *'the coherence of [the play] privilege[s] a position of the world as ordered, liberal and reasonable over the chaos, incoherence and fantastic of war and terror'* (Hughes, 2007, 153). Lest we begin to accept the theatre as 'a means by which we attempt to deceive ourselves into a sense of stability', Hughes calls for an interventionist engagement with the symbolic and imaginary realm, so that 'rather than a kind of actual, there is a competition of the unreal, insertion of a space for critique and emergence of an alternative view'. (Hughes, 2007, 156). Although directress Milosevic steadfastly refuses to 'name oppressors' specifically, Hughes's sugges-

tion that theatre's response to war might be invested with a subjective relationship to the material (expressed as much through the body as the spoken word), where a space might be opened up for the active participation of the spectator, is, I think, uncannily resonant of the Dah Women's work – and there must be parallels, too, with the interventionist strategies of the Women in Black:

> The processes of symbolisation in relation to the body, that is, in theatre and performance, play out diverse and dynamic manifestations of self and other within the limits in our own skin – processes that might help to engender ethical perspectives, prevent violence and/or fix the other as an enemy to be obliterated.
> (Hughes, 2007, 164)

In summary it must be said that the Dah women's creative decisions and interventions as explored here suggest that the sensitivity of the material and the context in which it is performed inhibits clear, external expression, within the work, of a coherent and emphatic political statement on their part. Nonetheless in several important respects, the development of a performance aesthetic by the Dah Women as evidenced in *Crossing the Line* – as a much as that of the celebrated UK practitioners whose work is beginning to explore new ways of staging verbatim text – opens up possibilities for the future development of the genre.

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Chapter 2

Nothing but the truth: Narrative, authenticity and the dramatic in tribunal theatre

Shane Kinghorn

Abstract

In critical discussion of the space between fact and fiction that verbatim performance is seen to inhabit, the issue of 'authenticity' resonates frequently, calling into question the relationship between the real-life event and its account within the verbatim text. Further, critical inquiries into spectatorship – the act of 'witnessing' verbatim performance – reveal anxieties about the reliability of the account. This paper considers the verbatim play as completed performance text and the flow of news media and reportage - the 'unfinished narratives' - upon which it draws and to which, at the stage of public engagement, it ultimately contributes. Analysis of the sub-genre of verbatim theatre known as 'tribunal' theatre will reveal the ways it adheres to or departs from the conventions we identify as 'dramatic'. In their juxtaposition of various narrative strands, in the inevitable privileging of some stories over others, can writers manipulate and generate readings/meanings through the editing process? Despite an implicit obligation towards neutrality of reportage, does political bias result from such practices, thus, potentially, placing both actor and spectator in the position of 'false witness'?

Have we reached the end of the story? Richard Kearney (2002) concludes his book *On Stories* with this very question. While acknowledging the challenges posed by current technologies, Kearney believes 'storytelling will never end, for there will always be someone to say "Tell me a story", and somebody else who will respond "Once upon a time …" (Kearney, 2002: 126). From our current perspective, cynically

acquainted with post-modern critical discourse, Kearney's assertion may sound retrograde, but he extends his analysis through the chapter into complex critical territories. While Kearney's argument is not explicitly concerned with any specific examples of theatre and performance, it will prove useful to us in an assessment of the extent to which the sub-genre of verbatim practice known as 'tribunal' theatre fulfils or betrays expectations of authenticity and neutrality. Kearney posits a reading of the narrative text that 'belies the structuralist maxim that the text relates to nothing but itself' (Kearney, 2002: 133), and argues that a post-structuralist approach to narrative overstresses the receptive role of the 'reader'.

The theorists introduced below, to whom I refer in this chapter, share Kearney's ready acceptance 'that narrative is a world-*making* as well as world-*disclosing* process' (Kearney, 2002: 145) but also fundamentally contest post-modern discourse in their analysis of verbatim practice.

Paola Botham (2008), in her article *From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: A Habermasian Framework for Contemporary Political Theatre*, acknowledges the effectiveness of deconstruction for theatre theory and practice, but 'proposes an alternative path, examining contemporary verbatim plays in light of the philosophy of Habermas ... a known challenger of postmodernism' (Botham, 2008: 308). Botham detects 'a new assertiveness in verbatim forms' within the context of British political theatre, recognising that 'whereas their reliance on alleged authenticity ought to be problematised, their pervasiveness tests the dominance of postmodern theory in theatre scholarship' (Botham, 2008: 308).

The premise I am starting from is a well-established one: that audiences to verbatim theatre share certain preconceptions of its formal qualities. Janelle Reinelt (2008) in her chapter *The Promise of Documentary*, cautions against 'pessimistic postmodern scepticism', a position that, whilst it rightly questions 'assumptions about the truth-value of documents' (Reinelt, 2008: 3), is 'over-determined by anti-theatricalism's distrust of mimesis' (Reinelt, 2008: 4).

Kearney champions the art of the story through analysis of Aristotelian *Poetics* under five summary headings: 'plot (*mythos*), recreation (*mimesis*), release (*catharsis*), wisdom (*phronesis*) and ethics (*ethos*)'. His objective is to 'bring the most ancient of theories into critical dialogue with their most cutting-edge counterparts today' (Kearney, 2002: 128). Using the current critical discourse around verbatim theatre as 'counterpart' to Aristotle's model, my own strategy will be to dovetail the core structure and drive of Kearney's analysis, and in doing so, examine the particularities of established narrative conventions in tribunal theatre.

The section of this chapter that deals with tribunal theatre, and of Richard Norton-Taylor's exemplary play *The Colour of Justice* (1999), draws substantially from interviews with the playwright and its director Nicholas Kent in *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (2008: Hammond, W and Steward, D). As its artistic director, Kent staged several plays based on official inquiries at the Tricycle theatre, London from 1994 - 2012. The most successful of these 'tribunal' plays, *The Colour of Justice,* is particularly significant as in many ways it forged the template for the work that followed, and as Norton-Taylor points out:

> The play's impact was enormous. [...] Watching the recreation of the inquiry opened people's eyes to what Billington called the 'negligence and reflex racism of the British police'. The play highlighted a potent issue and provoked anger; it bought a wave of youngsters, many of them black, into the theatre for the first time; it was put on the syllabus of police colleges, and is regularly performed in schools.
> (Norton-Taylor in Hammond, W and Steward, D, 2008: 109)

What do we mean by 'authentic'? Is authenticity the same as truth? Is neutrality (by which we mean a lack of persuasive/pervasive ideological or political bias) possible even in the well-behaved reportage of history? If story telling, in the form of narrative structure, is *necessary* in the presentation of a form that may seem straightforwardly concerned with reportage, with the conveying of facts, there must be specific expectations bound up with tribunal plays that demand or lend

themselves to particular narrative treatment in the formulation of dramatic material (at the editing stage). Speaking about his work, Richard Norton-Taylor offers this interpretation of the advantages theatre has over journalism, and in doing so expresses the *modus operandi* of every tribunal play:

> I realised just what scope the theatre had, compared to what we now call the media: newspapers, radio and television. What before might have been written about haphazardly in short newspaper articles, or mentioned all too briefly in television and radio bulletins, could be put together into a coherent piece of two hours or more - incorporating thousands of words. A theatre audience could listen together and inwardly - indeed outwardly - digest and understand properly what all the fuss was about.
> (Norton-Taylor in Hammond, W and Steward, D, 2008: 21 - 22)

Is a more interactive role offered to audiences than that implied by this phlegmatic mandate: an opportunity to participate in the production of meaning? The question opens up discussion of the ethical concerns being placed, not only upon the collaborators involved in making verbatim theatre, but upon its audiences. Tribunal theatre is intrinsically bound with quasi-legal discourse. Audiences, as well as characters, are often referred to as 'witnesses'; we do not hear dialogue so much as 'testimony' or 'evidence'. We need to explore this notion of the witness, reliable or otherwise, looking closely at the ways tribunal plays have negotiated the explicitly legal context and innate narrative framework of high-profile public inquiries.

First, we will consider tribunal plays' intersection with the 'unfinished narratives' of news media and reportage.[1] The reception of any tribunal play happens in the public sphere, and is temporally located within the wider, ongoing narrative to which it has referred and has potentially contributed: a narrative that is unfinished, unpredictable, and lacking the essential element that we traditionally expect from a (fictional) story: closure. Press interest in a story can be revoked or revived; arguably, unresolved news stories are 'closed' when the scent of a story is detected elsewhere, and the newshounds move on. The Stephen Lawrence story, to which

The Colour of Justice pertains, is a case in point. Subsequent to the play's inception in 1999, significant news items have included the arrest and conviction of two of the chief suspects (on 3 January 2012, Dobson and Norris were found guilty of Lawrence's murder). In June 2013, revelations by police officer Peter Francis uncovered an operation to spy on and attempt to 'smear' the Lawrence family (unproven at the time of writing).

Janelle Reinelt, in her analysis of *Justifying War*, points out that because *The Colour of Justice* was timed for production between the public inquiry itself and subsequent official reports of it, the play was 'performed [in 1999] while the jury was still out' (Reinelt, 2008: 16). She goes on to suggest, however, that the purpose of tribunal plays is not necessarily to serve up fresh revelations through the construction of ersatz legal discourse, but offer a counter-discourse to the main event: 'Additional emphasis through repetition can be seen as the creative method of tribunal plays, and also their performative efficacy' (Reinelt, 2008: 16-17). Botham echoes Reinelt's notion of 'emphasis through repetition', suggesting that 'rather than making public politically relevant private experiences, these productions act as a kind of amplifier of events already in the public domain' (Botham, 2008: 315).

There is another, related issue here, to do with the extent to which written texts formulate a permanent *version* of history that is obviously contestable but is, arguably, granted the status and gravitas of the genuine article. We can only speculate as to the lasting impact of output produced over the last fifteen or so years. Nicholas Kent doubts the survival of tribunal theatre:

> I'm not expecting these plays to last. They're a response to moment. I'm not looking at them as art [but] as a journalistic response to what is happening. (Kent, 2008: 165).

We can still legitimately ask whether such play texts should be considered authentic, or 'official' records. The answer would appear to be contingent upon compulsions towards accuracy and neutrality. With reference to the authorship of history as

narrative, Reinelt asks to what extent, in the writing of history, the writer's subjectivity influences the construction of the past. Botham acknowledges that verbatim theatre's articulation of 'discourses of public interest …leans heavily on the selection of the material' (Botham, 2008: 315), but suggests that theatre practice is not bound by the same constraints as journalism, granting artistic license to those responsible for *making* the selection: 'The playwright/editor has legitimate (and unavoidable) entitlement to add his/her own artistic voice to the verbatim chorus, either explicitly or implicitly, as long as the most marginal sources are not just exploited to support an overall message' (Botham, 2008: 313).

The authors of history have unique powers: people and events can be omitted; narratives can privilege certain points of view; myths can be created as well as unraveled. Nonetheless, Reinelt cautions that while 'the tension between objective shards or fragments of reality and subjective treatments of it forms a structuring fault-line of all such representations', arguments that set up a binary opposition between 'purity or contamination … have since obfuscated the recognition that an examination of reality and a dramatization of its results is in touch with the real but not a copy of it' (Reinelt, 2008: 4). As far back as 1971, Weiss's definition of documentary theatre 'affirmed the dialectical relationship between the raw material and the theatrical apparatus' (Reinelt, 2008: 5).

Kearney's study of re-creation or *mimesis* is useful to us because, according to the *Poetics*, it holds the potential to reveal inherent *truths* about the world. Richard Norton-Taylor has expressed his relationship to the notion of truth in terms of a quest: 'Truth may be a difficult concept, but the search for it and the denial of it have been constant themes of our tribunal plays' (Norton-Taylor, 2008: 108). What interests us is the processing of raw (factual) material into pre-existing narrative models, for it is within this transposition of fact into the familiar apparatus of fiction - of story telling - that notions of 'authenticity' have been problematised. Critiques of verbatim theatre have called for greater reflexivity, a deliberate and visible rupturing of the naturalistic or realistic conventions to which they typically adhere

(see for example Bottoms, 2006, Megson: 2007), as if such strategies will 'serve' the material more meritoriously.

If, as Kearney argues, *mimesis* involves a 'responsibility to real life', that responsibility is surely enhanced in the presentation of verbatim material, which can be seen to inhabit the space between fact and fiction - the 'gap' to which he refers:

> The key to mimesis resides in a certain 'gap' demarcating the narrated world from the lived one, opened up by the fact that every narrative is told from a certain point of view and a certain style and genre.
> (Kearney, 2002: 133-134)

Kearney is not concerned by the possibility that audience reception to mimetic representation may unwittingly fail to acknowledge the 'gap':

> I think most people recognise when they are passing from the real to the imaginary or back again - without the need ... to signal the transition. These things are implied. The rules of poetic license are generally understood by people sitting in a darkened cinema or theatre.
> (Kearney, 2002: 134)

Within the presentation of verbatim material we never entirely pass into an 'imaginary' realm, even if we accept that there is a gap between the 'real' and 'narrated' world; ambiguities in the transposition from one to another may even transpire to close or deny the gap, because the 'narrated' world is also 'real' (inasmuch as it is not substantively fictional). Kearney's analysis is useful in its discussion of *historical* narratives, because they, in contrast to fictional ones, 'hold that their accounts refer to things that actually happened - regardless of how varied and contested those interpretations of what happened may be.' In summary, 'once a story is told as history it makes very different claims on the past from those made by fiction' (Kearney, 2002: 135). Surely, however, it is precisely the question of *interpretation* that destabilizes trust in any narrative organization of the past? It is

widely argued that verbatim theatre practitioners, through their juxtaposition of various narrative strands, in their inevitable privileging of some stories over others, can manipulate and generate readings and meanings through the process of editing source material. Kearney goes on to acknowledge that

> even the presumption that the past can be told as it truly happened still contains the gap of the figural 'as'. [...] It is always at least in part figurative, to the extent that it involves telling according to a certain selection, sequencing, emplotment and perspective. But it does try to be *truthful*.' (Kearney, 2002: 136)

The historical narrative, then, is authenticated by the truth-quest; it somehow circumvents the doubts raised by the vagaries of (fictional) story telling because it intrinsically *endeavours* to tell the truth.

There is a further, important perspective to be borne in mind when we look closely, in due course, at tribunal plays. Their legal framework is, perhaps, reassuring to audiences because it appears to be constructed in service to the obligatory quest for a body of *proof*. Kearney goes on to argue that 'phronetic' understanding of narrativity results from this intrinsic *overlapping*, re-iterating the view that 'there is always a certain fictionality our representing history' but crucially acknowledging that 'the body of ascertainable *evidence* pertaining to a historical event deeply determines our ultimate interpretation' (Kearney, 2002: 145, my emphasis).

There is, of course, an ethical dimension to the critical territories we encounter in discussion of verbatim theatre. Kearney insists that 'it is necessary to add ethical [criteria], that is to serve justice as well as truth', that in comparing and evaluating the legitimacy of historical accounts, 'we need to invoke as many solid criteria as possible - linguistic, scientific and moral' (Kearney, 2002: 146). The delivery of testimony within the generic framework of tribunal plays (ostensibly mounted precisely in order to 'serve justice', through simulacra of judicial processes) is especially pertinent here, I would argue. There are, undeniably, dimensions to

testimony, of subjectivity and the possible unreliability of memory, which expose it to particular scrutiny in the assessment of its (factual) authenticity: 'evidence' is not necessarily to be read as 'truth'. Kearney calls for acceptance of the *co-existence* of the subjective and objective [2] that resides in narrative accounts:

> Dogmatic appeals to 'pure facts' are not sufficient when it comes to historical testimony. [...] The best way of respecting historical memory against revisionism is ... to combine the most effective forms of narrative witness with the most objective forms of archival, forensic and empirical evidence. For truth is not the sole prerogative of the so-called exact sciences. There is also a truth, with its corresponding understanding, that we may properly call 'narrative'. We need both.
> (Kearney, 2002: 148)

The dismissal of reliance upon 'pure facts' is further problematised when we closely consider the position of the spectator to verbatim theatre, and the extent to which we engage with the frequently applied term 'witness' as an accurate or appropriate appellation.

Why do we need to make a distinction between the concept of the 'spectator' and that of the 'witness'? One of the reasons is because the term 'witness' is very often used in the context of tribunal theatre and because it implies an audience position that is somehow more significant, more 'weighted' than that of 'mere' spectator. It may have moral or *ethical* considerations and suggests also that the performance work we are witness *to* has particular qualities or dimensions, that it operates in different ways to the kinds of performance that 'only' require spectatorship.

Caroline Wake (2009) investigates the idea of the 'spectatorial witness', positing two categories of witness: the Primary and the Secondary. The distinction is significant because the notion of 'secondary' witness, applied here to tribunal theatre, becomes, according to her arguments, a more appropriate category: the particular

qualities of spectatorship, and their ethical implications, are usefully explored within her definition.

Wake asks precisely what is meant by 'witnessing', taking the argument away from issues of activity and ethics towards a discussion of *time*, looking at spectatorship of the event as a process whereby something can be experienced directly – such as an accident or trauma – and something can be relived or replayed.

In her discussion of the secondary witness, Wake comes closer to describing the kinds of material we have become familiar with: *second-hand accounts* of events. In this, the performance is not the 'accident' or 'trauma' but an enactment or account of it. Spectators become witness *to* the witness, so their position is twice removed or, as Wake has it, 'secondary'. Wake goes on to posit the notion that the actor, in documentary theatre, becomes a kind of 'false witness' (since they are *acting* the role of a witness). If we accept this notion, our status would appear to be diminished somehow, and we are back yet again to the question of how far we accept the testimonies in question as reliable, or as 'factual'.

If we absorb Wake's notion of a 'twice-removed' spectator, our position as 'witness' to tribunal theatre requires reassessment of the event and its reconstruction. If public inquiries really are set up in response to real and complex cases in order to uncover truths and assign accountability, and the 'tribunal' plays upon which they are based are, in turn, severely edited versions of those carefully constructed proceedings, then clearly we are not, as spectators to verbatim *theatre* - a re-enactment offering an *interpretation* - looking at facsimiles at all. In a theatre where, arguably, the view is always partially restricted, we are not 'witnesses', we are no more than intermediaries required to piece together a version of events from a distanced perspective: if not through a glass, darkly, then through an opaque, refracting lens.

An additional element of controversy and doubt emerges when we consider the possibility that the institution of the public inquiry, the very *source* of the tribunal

plays' material, is *itself* unreliable and insubstantial; duplicitous, even. What if public inquiries are no more than self-serving smokescreens designed to obscure their publicly stated intentions? An article published in the *Guardian* on 25 June 2013, and from which I will quote substantially, is entitled 'Politicians who order inquiries should be taken out and shot'. Its author, Simon Jenkins, was reacting to the Prime Minister's immediate call for an inquiry following the latest, widely reported episode in the Stephen Lawrence story: the accusation by Peter Francis that 'his superiors wanted him to find 'dirt' that could be used against members of the Lawrence family in the period shortly after Lawrence's racist murder in April 1993' (*Guardian*, 24 June 2013). The core of Jenkins' argument interprets the motivation for politicians' tactics as being little more than a cynical decoy; that public inquiries 'soften the line of blame, fog the argument, postpone the day of reckoning' (Jenkins, 2013). Jenkins' objection to the public inquiry rests upon his conviction that, far from ensuring that justice is served, it 'merely replaces the straight, sure arrow of accountability with the crooked line of pseudo justice. It is the establishment's get out of jail free card' (Jenkins, 2013). How does a device so emphatically associated with the idea of impartiality and exposure, reassuring in its implication of *risk* for the 'establishment', achieve this unsettling sleight-of-hand? How can it be both rigorous and obfuscating?

> An inquiry defers blame. It throws the ball into the long grass and kicks the can down the road. This week's call for yet another inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence murder – by some counts the 17th – must make it the most interrogated death in history. As with Bloody Sunday and Hillsborough, a British scandal is measured not in deaths but in juridical longevity.
>
> (Jenkins, 2013)

The more persuasive aspect of Jenkins' polemic, the most useful in our assessment of tribunal theatre, is his criticism of the status afforded to lawyers. Jenkins questions the efficacy of legal discourse in serving the public interest:

> Government by retrospective inquiry is not government at all. It is a first rough stab at history. Its strangest feature is the deference shown to lawyers and legal process. All professions have their biases and the law is no exception. The sanctity of court process, important in trying a criminal case, is hardly relevant to the politicised context of a modern public inquiry. Judges, for good reason, do not speak the language of politics.
> (Jenkins, 2013)

Whether or not we agree with Jenkins, it is worth asking whether we should readily place our trust in the public inquiry as an impartial and autonomous process and, more importantly, the extent to which the faithful, televisual replications of public inquiries typically seen in tribunal plays actually reinforce rather than undermine the 'deference shown to lawyers and the legal process' to which the journalist objects. As Reinelt has observed:

> Documentaries set up structural-spatial conditions of judgment with their associations to the legal system on stages that explicitly represent or metaphorically evoke courtrooms, often using these rubrics of legality as guarantors of their truth-claims.
> (Reinelt, 2008: 9)

Theatre, through *constructing* reality, has the potential to rupture illusionism, offer a critique of the material it depicts; there is room for the licentious presence of reflexivity, of simultaneous commentary and analysis. The tribunal plays, in their generic presentation of virtual simulacra, in their adherence to realist conventions, resolutely maintain the fourth wall device throughout.[3] There is no compelling invitation for the audience to participate in decoding the material before them, to engage in the composition of a meta-discourse. Thus, structures of power are staunchly upheld: the status of the legal personnel as guardians of justice is never questioned. The predisposition, then, is the passive assumption that they are working for *us*. So persuasive is the illusion that the temptation as a spectator is to cast oneself as a member of a 'jury', sifting through the 'evidence' offered by

'witnesses'. Botham has observed that 'the unresolved issue [in tribunal theatre] ... is whether practitioners and audiences are investing excessively or naively in the truth-value of certain words, especially when they have been sanctioned by legal procedures' (Botham, 2008: 316). Yet we are not actually participating in a criminal trial, even the reenactment of one: a public inquiry does not lead directly to conviction. Norton-Taylor prompts us to

> notice the distinction between a trial, in which one party is seeking to triumph over the other by attaining the desired verdict, and an inquiry, in which the aim is to uncover and establish the most accurate version of events.
> (Norton-Taylor, 2008: 113).

Moreover the notion that we might, as spectators, have been invited to influence any kind of *process* is stifled by the likelihood that, by the time a tribunal play actually reaches audiences, outcomes are already known; accountability has been called and blame has already been assigned. As Jenkins observes, 'In almost every failure in a public service – run by or regulated by ministers – we know perfectly well what happened and who was in charge.' (Jenkins, 2013).

I do not mean to imply that we are somehow intentionally duped by verbatim theatre. But it is commonplace to question, not the *source* of verbatim material but its imitation, interpretation and bias; should we not also be alert to the possibility that, on occasion, sources may be unreliable?

In the construction of tribunal plays, techniques of sourcing material differ significantly to those described by renowned verbatim practitioners such as Alecky Blythe (*London Road*, 2011) and Robin Soans (*Talking to Terrorists,* 2005). Their methods rely upon conducting interviews with a cross-section of people, rather than editing down existing transcripts.[4] Narrative structure is held to be important in either context, but is the product of notably dissimilar techniques of questioning. Soans is looking for a degree of introspection:

> A verbatim play should still be built around a narrative, and it must set up dramatic conflicts and attempt to resolve them. Characters should be shown to undertake journeys of discovery of some kind, even if these journeys take place while the character is sat in a chair, talking.
> (Soans, 2008: 26)

Or sat in a tribunal, being cross-examined? The opportunity for self-discovery would seem limited under the jurisdiction of a trained lawyer, whose sole motivation is to extract evidence through an unswerving line of questioning. The raw material available to editors of tribunal hearings is absolutely limited to whichever exchanges took place, but this apparent embargo on creative intervention actually reinforces the credibility of claims to authenticity: opportunity for manipulation is significantly reduced in a format where the *questions* are heard as well as the answers. Alecky Blythe has admitted that she 'may steer an interview in a certain direction' (Blythe, 2008: 88), while Robin Soans admits to occasional 'cheating' and contends that his method 'depends on what is meant by being truthful: literal truth or truth in spirit?' (Soans, 2008: 41). Kent and Norton-Taylor set up rules for themselves so that words are not changed from the source documents and the correct question and answer chronology is maintained, however inconvenient this may be: 'If you suddenly chuck in something you made up because it's easier, I think you distort the truth.' (Kent, 2008: 153).

Another important difference lies in the circumstances surrounding the characters' inclusion. Interviewees used in verbatim plays have usually volunteered their presence, or given in to persuasion (and in doing so, implied a willingness to speak); in tribunal plays, they have been *summoned*. We presume that their position of being under oath should be a positive factor in the quest for truth. However, the diversity of voices we hear is limited to those called to account and is outside the playwrights' jurisdiction, undermining one of the advantages of the genre stated by Soans: that it '*allows* people to speak for themselves' (Soans, 2008:33, my emphasis). Tribunal theatre records a process that *commands* them to speak, and

not always for themselves: the consequences of doing so might be detrimental to their own interests. But we should not, by the same token, discount the probability that, in some instances, the speaker *wants* to be heard. Arguably, it is this dialectical relationship - between truth that is volunteered, and that extracted under duress - which ignites the element of conflict sought by theatre audiences, and informs their assessment of the hearing.

The dynamic expressed above is essential to the narrative motor driving tribunal theatre through its typical two-hour duration. In the first place the tribunal play is undoubtedly an attractive proposition to a dramatist because an intrinsic narrative structure is already present, correct and familiar: an inquiry of any kind has a beginning, middle and end. Kent points to this convenience in his observation that 'there is a sort of storytelling. Any inquiry is rather like a good courtroom drama, because they always follow the same narrative form' (Kent, 2008: 139). He has made an apparently casual, yet loaded statement, for courtroom dramas lead to only one conclusion: a verdict. That is, the judgment of innocence or guilt. Furthermore, argues Kent, the nuances within speech acts compelled by the cross-examination procedure, and the process of conflict within, are a source of fascination for audiences:

> I think what particularly rivets an audience is trying to sort out the truth. By watching how people give evidence, the way they react to questioning, I think an audience feels ... empowered and able to arrive quite dispassionately at the truth in their own minds.
> (Kent, 2008:139)

Kent has exposed another important distinction. His strong implication is that audiences (to tribunal theatre) behave as if offered the role of a jury, a responsibility that is, if not actually more serious, then perhaps more generically *defined* than the process conveyed by Soans, whereby 'transferring a deeply personal conversation onto the stage ... confers a responsibility on the audience [which] accounts for the increased intensity of their listening' (Soans, 2008: 24).

Richard Norton-Taylor distilled *The Colour of Justice* from a transcript of 11,000 pages to around 100. The playwright states in the preface that 'brutal choices' were made about which moments to include. He has left out the most widely reported evidence and taken the audience to the less publicised moments of the McPherson inquiry. Looking at the play in the in the light of Jenkins' concerns reveals an interesting tension, as it sensationally exposed serious fault lines in the legal framework to which, in its 'tribunal' structure, it inevitably adheres.

> Stephen Lawrence was brutally murdered. The attack upon him was obviously cowardly, was unprovoked and was demonstrably racist. He was attacked in the street. He was black. His attackers were white.
>
> No one has been convicted for his murder.
>
> It is apparent that [...] the police conduct of the investigation went badly wrong, not least in the decision to delay the arrests of the principle suspects [Neil and Jamie Acourt, Norris, Dobson and Knight] who were identified [...] immediately after the murder. We will be inviting you to consider [...] the question: were any of the errors due to simple [...] or gross incompetence, or were they, as some vociferously asserted - and as police officers have vigorously denied - attributable to [...] racism?
> (Norton-Taylor, 1999: 19 - 20)

The extract above, from the opening statement of Edmund Lawson (counsel to the inquiry), establishes the facts of the case and the chief objectives of the play with absolute transparency. Similarly, the first statement from Michael Mansfield, QC, counsel for the Lawrence family, leaves us in no doubt as to where its searchlight is aimed:

> The magnitude of the failure in this case, we say, cannot be explained by mere incompetence, or a lack of direction by senior officers or a lack of

> execution and application by junior officers, nor by woeful under-resourcing. So much was missed by so many that deeper causes and forces must be considered.
>
> We suggest that these forces relate to two main propositions. The first is that the victim was black and racism, both conscious and unconscious, permeated the investigation. Secondly, the fact that the perpetrators were white and were expecting some form of protection.
> (Norton-Taylor, 1999: 21)

These accusations, in common with the play as a whole, are simply stated but nonetheless incendiary. Mansfield effectively decrees that everything we hear subsequently will either support or refute his propositions; once planted, they will prove all but impossible to displace. Before we even encounter the first witness, the response from the counsel for the commissioner of the metropolitan police has about it the air of defensive retaliation. Gompertz QC attempts to shift the emphasis from the police back to Lawrence's murderers: 'it is they and they alone who should bear the guilt for ending such a promising and optimistic young life' (Norton-Taylor, 1999: 23). But it is already too late. Audiences in 1999 would have picked up the scent and realised that the play was leading them in a different direction. Prior to the inquiry, chief suspects had already been named and widely condemned, if not yet actually convicted; the prospect of exposure of *police* corruption gave the play an unexpected urgency and clarity of purpose.

The constraints of the form mean that we swiftly tune into the editor's requirement to provide factual summary. For instance the first few minutes establish the following: that key witness Duwayne Brooks' account and descriptions of the crime were radioed immediately but not recorded; that PC Gleason wrote his witness report alone with Stephen's dead body; that no information with specific names of suspects was passed to investigating officers. Both Norton-Taylor and Kent have claimed that their work goes for 'balance' in its depiction of inquiries, 'with both sides giving their version of events' (Norton-Taylor, 2008: 122) so that 'you get a very

rounded, unbiased overview of the evidence' (Kent, 2008: 154). As signaled by the opening statements, however, the play condenses the inquiry into a catalogue of police incompetence: the risk of bias in their favour is eradicated. This is not so much an indication of Norton-Taylor's craft, I would argue, as a reflection of the lawyers' intentions.

The presence of institutional racism emerges in a subtler way: through gradual clarification of ambiguities that have, up to this point, protected the police from exposure. Norton-Taylor has referred to the 'disingenuous disputes over meanings and definitions' (Norton-Taylor in Hammond, W and Steward, D, 2008: 115) that feature in *The Colour of Justice*, and a number of scenes reveal, even in the heat of cross-examination, reluctance on the part of the police to define racism as a motive for the murder, thus deflecting the possibility that the procedural 'incompetencies' listed were, in fact, racially motivated derelictions of duty. The scenes serve the playwright's stated objective to expose the 'casual evasion tactics' (Norton-Taylor, 2008: 114) of people in positions of authority.

If there is detectable partiality in Norton-Taylor's editing, it is in the amount of space or 'air-time' allocated to Lawrence's family. Neville Lawrence's statement (see Norton-Taylor, 1999: 60 - 62) is quoted at length because it humanises the absent protagonist, Stephen Lawrence, giving us background that achieves emotional resonance. Stephen's last moments, and his interests at school, are poignantly detailed. The details are sparing: little is required to convey the dreadful sense of loss endured. In his role as playwright, I think Norton-Taylor does permit poetry, sentiment – metaphor, even – to infuse the text. Earlier, we hear an extraordinary speech by first recorded witness Conor Taffe in which he describes his actions directly after encountering Stephen Lawrence:

> This isn't material but I will say it anyway - I went home and washed the blood off my hands with some water in a container, and there is a rose bush in our back garden, a very, very old, rose bush - rose tree is I suppose more

> appropriate - and I poured the water with his blood in it into the bottom of that rose tree. So in a way I suppose he is living on a bit.
> (Norton-Taylor, 1999: 35-36)

Is the decision to include this detail (thought not to be 'material' by its speaker) where the playwright's supersedes the journalist's instinct? The speech presents us with an image, a metaphor of poetic intensity. Norton-Taylor has illustrated how, in his quest to expose prejudice, the selections he made seem to transcend dry reportage:

> Stephen's mother, Doreen, described how when she went to the police station she handed an officer a piece of paper with names of suspects written on it. She continued: 'He took the paper from me, he folded it in small pieces in his hand, and then he had it in his hands like this, crunched it up in his hand like a ball, and he held it like that, and as I was walking out through the door, I said to him: 'You are going to put that in the bin now, aren't you?' And he was shocked because he didn't realise I was watching him.
> (Norton-Taylor in Hammond, W and Steward, D, 2008: 127)

Again, the detail conveyed within this moment gives us a sharply defined action, a tangible, indelible image. It seems to have been chosen for the potential to read this violation of trust as metaphor for the apparent disposability, not only of evidence, but also of the victim and his family. The playwright felt it necessary to add texture to his frank exposure of callous officialdom; by the same token, he has acknowledged that 'the experience of watching leads to an understanding that goes beyond the mere intake of information; it involves empathy for the victims.' (Norton-Taylor, 2008: 124).

We must conclude that it is this element of empathy that is essential to our perception of narrative composition, even when it is principally intended to provide information; human stories are not only understood, but also *felt*. We learn through identification with others as well as through absorption of facts; theatre holds the

unique potential to elevate us, through recognition, to 'a new understanding of ourselves' (Soans, 2008: 41). In this respect tribunal theatre does have the capacity to reflect the definition of *catharsis* offered by Kearney, 'this double-take of difference and identity - experiencing oneself as another and another as oneself - that provokes a reversal of our natural attitude to things' (Kearney, 2002: 142). Kearney's suggestion is that catharsis, or empathy, far from being sentimental, is in fact 'a major test not just of poetic imagination but of ethical sensitivity' (Kearney, 2002: 139). There is, I think, a case for arguing that if we are, through narrative reenactment, enabled to recognise ourselves, the way to heightened awareness, recognition and learning (and therefore, potentially, recovery and change) is truly revealed. In the light of this possibility could the emphasis upon authenticity that tends to dominate the conversation lose some of its influence? Kearney puts it this way:

> Every story is a play of at least three persons (author/actor/addressee) whose outcome is never final. That is why narrative is an open-ended invitation to ethical and poetic responsiveness.
> (Kearney, 2002: 156)

For the time being, Norton-Taylor's extraordinary creative partnership with Nicholas Kent has reached a hiatus, and with Kent's artistic directorship of the Tricycle at an end, the theatre itself will have moved beyond ready identification as the 'home of tribunal theatre'. I doubt that we will see its like again. Not because there are no great causes left worth fighting for; rather, I think, because the targets are becoming harder to pin down, and sources of information more scattered and less reliable. Increasingly the populace favours the ceaseless chatter of social media over the practiced commentary of journalism. What need have we for a theatre that depends on an outmoded form of communication? Jenkins has raised legitimate concerns about the motivation for calling for public inquiry: politicians hoping for the redemption, or collective amnesia promised by the long line of history. Less than a month later, he condemns the emerging bigotry and hatred the social media has let loose, and concludes by describing this new Pandora's box as 'a masked ball, whose

concealed dancers may be corporations or governments, paedophiles or rapists, weirdos or fools. It must be regulated' (*Guardian*, 31 July 2013). The new narratives are being played out in cyberspace, where significant legal frameworks have not yet trespassed; the place for theatrical interpretation, if any, has still to be determined.

Notes

1
The web link http://www.theguardian.com/uk/lawrence?INTCMP=SRCH&INTCMP=SRCH opens several important features including updates on the latest developments, and a timeline of the Stephen Lawrence case. I have used this in my research of the factual and chronological aspects of the story as it unfolds.

2
Kearney's proposition may be revealing and potentially liberating to those of us exhausted with the deathless perception of a binary opposition that troubles verbatim theatre: the so-called paradox, often identified and never quite resolved, that once it is transposed from the contexts of journalism, the reportage of the real is being transmitted through a medium associated with fabrication and excess (or at least with the nullifying constraints of genre). The core of Kearney's argument is that, actually, we can all relax about it: it is within the presentation of historical narrative that fact and fiction can, quite securely, co-exist. Indeed, one can thrive upon the other, or the contradistinction might enhance perception of one or the other by throwing its complexities and limitations into sharp relief.

3
Nicholas Kent has spoken of the necessity for detail in his staging of tribunal plays (see Kent, 2008: pp. 153 - 156, interviewed in *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (eds. Will Hammond and Dan Steward, London: Oberon). His hyper-real style, juxtaposing the sensational with the ordinary, was acknowledged to serve the material appropriately by critics at the time, including Susanna Clapp in the *Observer*:

> None of this would be so powerful were the staging more histrionic. A background of constant humdrum activity accompanies even the most gruelling evidence: people chew, tap pencils, drop sheets of paper (http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/susannahclapp)

4
For a useful definition and summary of the distinctions between 'sub-genres' of verbatim theatre see page 227 of Lib Taylor (2011) 'The experience of Immediacy: Emotion and enlistment in fact-based theatre' in *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 31:2, pp. 223 - 237

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Attempts On Their Lives: Absent Protagonists in Verbatim Theatre

Atentat la viața lor: protagoniști absenți în teatrul Verbatim

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Rezumat:
Noțiunea de „ghosting" oferă suficiente informații despre reacția critică referitoare la genul verbatim, în cadrul căruia performerul se află în situația de a reproduce în detaliu cuvintele protagoniștilor absenți, replicile și vocile lor fiind înregistrate în interviuri. Teatrul Verbatim plasează protagonistul într-o relație unică față de textul performance-ului, iar integrarea și insistarea asupra tehnologiei trece drept prezență „autentică". Acest studiu examinează în ce măsură acest gen de practică „justifică" și problematizează viața actorului, funcția interpretativă, luând ca exemplu cea mai recentă producție a lui Alecky Blythe *Where Have I Been All My Life*? (Unde am fost toată viața mea?)

Cuvinte cheie:
Teatru Verbatim, documentar, autenticitate, ghosting, Alecky Blythe, Konstantin Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht

The development of verbatim theatre in the UK owes much to a town in the North West of England called Stoke-on-Trent, otherwise known as The Potteries – formerly the home of the ceramics industry in Great Britain – and a theatre called the New Vic. Based in Newcastle-Under-Lyme, the theatre is formerly the home of pioneering experiments, led by Peter Cheeseman, in documentary theatre, a form that has lately generated a sub-genre known as 'verbatim' theatre in the United Kingdom.[1] At the heart of this paper is a talent show called *Stoke's Top Talent* (a local, annual talent competition based on the globally familiar *X-Factor*

[1] Various definitions exist, but the term 'verbatim' is generally understood to mean work that uses word-for-word transcripts of words actually spoken by real people; for an instructive overview see Carol Martin, *'Bodies of Evidence'*, in: *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. Carol Martin, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp.17 – 26.

format)[2] and the play by Alecky Blythe entirely transcribed from interviews with some of its contestants: a play called *Where Have I Been All My Life?* (2012).

There is another, parallel story to be told: because the play is centred in the local community, I will begin by sketching a picture of the location itself. As we shall see, one of the dilemmas facing the makers was their obligation to depict an honest representation of the town: one that did not disguise its hardships, while satisfying its people that it had not merely reinforced the clichés about 'grim', working-class, Northern towns in decline. But the twin factors of industrial degeneration and economic hardship have cast such a deep and immutable shadow across the region that the facts make for dispiriting reading. Stoke-on-Trent was built upon the coal mining and ceramics industries, but like so many similar towns in the North of England, its manufacturing base has been gradually eroded, just as it has declined so steeply across the whole of the UK, and Stoke has become a town where the traces of its past stand as contradictory monuments: the shells of factories that remain are indelible reminders of loss. Despite signs of regeneration in some areas, Stoke has never quite recovered its identity as a proud and prosperous industrial heartland: unemployment and social deprivation exceed the national average.[3] It was against this background that the making of the playtook place, and that which informs its thematic constitution.

An additional narrative becomes important here when we consider the history and development of the form of documentary theatre we are referring to as 'verbatim' theatre. The perceived resurgence of the form has been attributed to prolific output over the past ten or so years in the UK. Much of the credit for this has latterly (and justifiably) centred around Richard Norton-Taylor's celebrated run of 'tribunal' plays at Nicholas Kent's Tricycle theatre in Kilburn, London, to the extent that the Tricycle was, during Kent's tenure, perceived as the 'home' of verbatim theatre.[4] However, the origins of the now-familiar techniques of gathering, recording, processing and staging verbatim material can be traced back to the innovations of Peter Cheeseman's local documentary work at Stoke's (then) Victoria Theatre from 1965 onwards, to the extent that it, too, became a venue synonymous with a form.[5] We shall see

[2] In case the reader has escaped the phenomenon, X-Factor UK has a dedicated website, http://xfactor.itv.com/; information about Stoke's Top Talent can be found at http://www.thisisstaffordshire.co.uk.

[3] For further information and latest statistics see www.stoke.gov.uk.

[4] Various links to press articles about the work of Nicholas Kent at the Tricycle can be found at http://www.nicolaskent.com; see also http://www.tricycle.co.uk for archive material, and for an instructive interview, see Kent in *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, eds. Will Hammond and Dan Steward, London: Oberon, 2008, pp. 134 - 168.

[5] *See*: Derek Paget, '*Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques*', in: "*New Theatre Quarterly*", 3.2 (1987), pp. 317 - 36

that, although Blythe is working decades later, her crudely simple techniques have changed very little: interviewees are still speaking into a portable device, albeit that the tape recorder has been replaced by a Dictaphone. If the journalistic process involved in gathering raw material is markedly similar, have the political aims and objectives remained?

Where Cheeseman's pioneering approach was informed by Marxist-socialist ideologies, and established 'a tradition of social observation and oral documentation',[6] giving voice and thereby empowerment to a community, Teresa Heskins, the director of *Where Have I Been All My Life?* was mindful, as we shall see, of the legacy he left to the New Vic and of her own sense of responsibility to the immediate context and community. Significantly her designer Patrick Connellan was one of Cheeseman's original creative team, and contributed to the show its most stridently political statement in the form of his highly symbolic *mise-en-scene*, a semiotic analysis of which is provided later.

This particular example of verbatim theatre is significant to an article concerned with the performer's relationship with technology because Alecky Blythe, through her work with the company Recorded Delivery, pioneered a technique that became her trademark: the actors in her shows, rather than learning their lines from a script in rehearsal, will, in the moment of live performance, have every one of their lines fed to them through a disguised earpiece so that they are listening to and repeating exactly what they hear. There will be a split-second's delay between the exact moment that they receive their sound cue and their performance of it to a live audience. The aim is that actors achieve absolute authenticity in their performance: they are encouraged to replicate exactly what they hear, from accent and tone of voice to every pause, stutter, 'um' and 'ah'.[7]

What is it that the actors are listening to? Significantly, the recorded voices fed to the actors are always the original, unprocessed voices of the people interviewed by the writer – or editor – Alecky Blythe during the process of research. Blythe, in preparation for a new play, will interview dozens of volunteers, using a simple recording device, with the eventual aim of condensing hours' worth of interviews into a play text of conventional duration. She does not deliver a 'script' in the established sense so much as a series of tightly edited statements, dialogues and conversations: she will interview individuals or groups of people, all of whom are responding to a particular event – in this instance, participation in a local talent show: *Stoke's Top Talent*. At the time of writing this article, the workexists not as a published play *text*, but as a pile of CDs, all of which contain (in no particular, ordered sequence)

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 317.

[7] *See*: Blythe, in: *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, eds. Will Hammond and Dan Steward, London: Oberon, 2008, pp. 77 – 102.

the original recordings, some barely audible, of Blythe's interviews with the people whose utterances might eventually be selected for inclusion in the finished piece. In the absence of any traditional publication the origin of the play has become its only substantial trace.

Arguably, in terms of the playwrights' and actors' search for replication of the patterns and nuances of everyday speech, it is the closest we will ever come to experiencing depictions of the 'real', but of course, this technique has ethical implications for both actors and audiences that will be further explored in this paper and have, within different performance contexts, been discussed elsewhere.[8]

Blythe has a great deal of control over the process from first to last, in ways that are explicit and pragmatic, and in more subtle, problematic ways that we will explore later. In all cases Blythe conducts the interviews, will choose who should be interviewed and, eventually, whose words to select for the final edit, and the order in which the interviews are recorded, delivered and experienced by audiences. Alecky Blythe frequently participates in the rehearsal process, writing and re-writing as a play takes shape in the rehearsal room, and is, in a sense, omnipresent, since interviewees are responding to her questions, her prompts, her encouragements and observations; despite verbatimtheatre's familiar promise of unbiased access to the truth, we are not witnessing the world so much as the world according to Alecky Blythe. The playwright has stated that 'ideally, I want the audience in the theatre to experience what I experience – an intimate encounter with an otherwise secret world – so I adopt a 'fly on the wall' approach', but that she also finds it impossible not to 'participate in some way.' Later, Blythe goes so far as to define her role not as voyeur, but *participant*.[9]

In preparation for this paper, I conducted an interview myself, with the director of *Where Have I Been All My Life?* Theresa Heskins is artistic director of the New Vic theatre and has collaborated with Blythe on previous shows. I will quote substantially from this interview material, since it sheds light on the rehearsal process and the particular problems and responsibilities of dealing with Blythe's recorded delivery technique. Here, we will encounter some of the specific issues with the performance of verbatim material, in particular the actors' sense of responsibility to the original utterance and, therefore, to the individuals who provided the interviews. The actor must play one or more characters, but not fictional ones; rather, each 'character' is in fact a real person who, in some cases, will be in the audience watching an

[8] *See*: Tom Cantrell, '*Playing for real in Max Stafford-Clark's Talking to Terrorists*', in: *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31: 2 (2011), pp. 167 - 80; Helena Enright, *'Letting it breathe: Writing and performing the words of others'*, in: *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31: 2 (2011), pp. 181 – 92.

[9] Blythe, (2008) in: *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, p. 86.

actor 'impersonate' them. The danger of offending people through apparent misrepresentation is unusually augmented through this intimateand unique encounter, and raises questions about the extent to which the actors' impulse to interpret and invent and possibly, embellish, is compromised. How much creative freedom are they allowed? Are they merely ventriloquists?

Heskins, as we shall see, suggests that working with actors on verbatim material, in this context, opens up a space where, the director argues, the methodological approaches of both Stanislavski and Brecht – often supposed to be in opposition – can be utilized in ways that allow them to co-exist, if not in harmony then through the emphatic presence of a *dialectic*:

I think the great thing about Alecky's work is that she always puts on stage a dialectic: she can put somebody on stage who says something quite offensive that you feel should not be aired on the stage but then she contrasts it with somebody who might say something that informs a completely opposite point of view afterwards. [10]

Because Blythe interviews people in isolation of various ages and backgrounds and social status, whose only common ground is the shared experience of an event – in this instance, a local talent show – then arguably there is a dialectic in the text itself (in the multiple and contrasting voices and points of view), but several contradictions arise most tangibly in the narrative strands of the piece: there is the story of the contest itself, and the values promoted by the contest, its emphasis on finding one, uniquely talented and special winner; the individual stories of the contestants, often inviting us to identify emotionally with one or more of them, to follow their progress and share their hope of success; and the intrinsic structure or narrative arc – of auditioning, competing and narrowing down to a semi-final and grand final – that will be familiar to anyone who watches *X-Factor*; but then, the lure of glamour and promise of stardom is shown in stark contrast to the ordinary situations and circumstances of the contestants. Under Heskins' direction, the play not only follows the progress of contestants through the talent show (until we find out who wins) but also is careful to reflect, particularly through elements of its mise-en-scene, a sense of locality and a reminder of Stoke's industrial past.

Theresa Heskins' interest in the potentially 'Brechtian' elements of the text finds, I would argue, its most explicit expression in her designer's work with the scenography. I felt there to be a tension between her own feelings about talent shows – she readily admits to being dubious about them – and her intention to give the audience a sense of the show's locality, its history and the social problems it currently faces; this contradiction is emphatically articulated through Patrick Connellan's design. The set features a floor entirely covered with pieces of coal and smashed porcelain (the

[10] This and all subsequent quotes, in italics, from my interview with Theresa Heskins, interviewed in person, 4 July 2012.

mining and ceramic industries, now broken and discarded); appearing to break through that are a number of television sets, upon which genuine footage of working mines occasionally flickers; and far above that, out of reach of the performers, suspended from the rig above our heads, there are several glittering and beguiling musical instruments and stage costumes. Heskins explains its thematic significance thus:

When Alecky was researching I asked her to make sure that she included that back story of the potteries, the coal mines, the sense of what had been a great manufacturing city and no longer had a manufacturing base; I asked Patrick [Connellan] to design it because he'd worked here over twenty years ago, and he'd worked on some of the original documentaries – so I knew that he had all that knowledge and would incorporate that into the work; I knew Patrick would have that awareness of the ceramics industry and of the coalmines and we very, very early on talked about the idea that the narrative is of people who are "in the mud but looking at the stars".

Despite my suspicion that the transient, vainglorious appeal of the talent show would appeal more to Warhol than Wilde, the implication here is that the format gives people hope for a possible future, even that it *surpasses* the expectations and possibilities afforded by a town in steep decline:

When [Connellan] started to bring in sketches, we both thought of technology rising; it's got [a sense of] aspiration in it, that sense of a great civilization that's gone – that's why his televisions break through that surface, that aspiration for fame and success and the future.

I am aware that I am writing as (and, in all probability *to*) an academic who may be sceptical about the value of popular entertainment such as the talent show and feel, as I do, that they are disposable or trivial, that they are manipulative and exploitative. Yet their format and structure have several aspects in common with dramatic conventions, as the director discovered. Janelle Reinelt, in her analysis of tribunal theatre, has spoken of the 'theatricalization' of everyday life, citing reality TV's 'emergence as a reflexive form of mimesis, a *mise en abyme* of performance [...], merely the most banal evidence of a society that understands itself through dramaturgical structures.'[11] Heskins revealed to me that she had to overcome her own dislike of talent shows, but described the moment when, as a spectator of *Stoke's Top Talent*, she felt her scepticism dissolve as she realized their dramatic potential:

And then the first act came on – a young woman dressed in a leopard-skin cat suit – and there she was, singing a song I can't remember, and halfway through she forgot her lines, and suddenly my heart went out to her, it was an incredibly

[11] Janelle Reinelt, *'Toward a Poetics of theatre and Public Events. In the Case of Stephen Lawrence'*, in: *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. Carol Martin, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 27 - 44 (here p. 28).

emotional moment, I just thought: 'this poor girl', and she was in tears and I was close to tears and at that moment I realised why we watch them: it's for the incredible power of that emotional engagement; it's for the same reason that we watch drama: we want to empathise, we want to go on that dramatic journey with these characters. Blythe's eventual shaping of the material disrupts the cause-and-effect narrative implicit in this notion of a 'dramatic journey' and is, in fact, more episodic. The surprising element of the show's structure, then, is the decision to end on the 'winning song' (a rendition of Robbie Williams' *Let Me Entertain You*) in a fully staged performance that encourages spectators to 'become' the audience of the *Stoke's Top Talent* final, ostensibly sharing the actual moment of 'victory'. In my experience as an audience member, though, it was difficult to become enthused (to quite the extent that I felt we were intended to) when, in previous scenes, we had already been shown the aftermath of the competition, and had experienced the disappointment and disillusionment of other competitors. In other words, the structure had not been entirely chronological, entirely in service to the 'narrative' of the competition itself, but had seemed to attempt exposure of the real lives and concomitant social issues happening around it. Heskins had wanted the song to be Journey's anthem *Don't Stop Believin'*,[12] so that the play finished on *a message of hope, that uses the pronoun* we, but when the rights to that song were not granted *it was very disappointing, and we sought hard to find one and I never really was as satisfied with* Let Me Entertain You[13] *– the pronoun it used is 'I' and 'me' and it's about being a star and being a success, and about personal, individual achievement.*

It is worth pointing out that Robbie Williams was born and raised in Stoke and, after ceramics, remains the town's most famous export; it was indeed impossible to hear the song in this context without being reminded of his stratospheric ascent. Herein lies Heskins' central dichotomy in her attempt to bring a 'Brechtian' perspective to the work: talent shows *are* about *being a star and being a success* and Blythe's decision to end with a winning song was bound to emphasise '*individual achievement*', overwhelming the elements that may have intended to undermine such emphasis. Ultimately, the play could not quite decide whether it was an unabashed advocate of personal ambition or an elegy for Stoke's lost industrial past. (Note that an early couplet in Williams' song is *I'm a burning effigy / Of everything I used to be*).[14] Perhaps conflict is inevitable where Stanislavski and Brecht are perceived by the director as bedfellows: our vague sense, through the play, of unraveling social fabric

[12] From *Don't Stop Believin'* (1981), recorded by Journey, written by Jonathan Cain, Steve Perry and Neal Schon.

[13] A hit song by Robbie Williams, hugely successful in the UK as a solo artist (and member of the band Take That), famously born and raised in Stoke-on-Trent.

[14] From *Let Me Entertain You* (1997), recorded by Robbie Williams, written by Guy Chambers and Robbie Williams.

that once bound the community together is upstaged by bombastic celebration of individual success. It is a contradiction that the show simply fails to resolve; not that Heskins was unaware of this tension.

In conversation with Heskins, I discussed the implicit temptation to merely replicate a popular formula – one that works with a familiar narrative structure, encouraging emotional connection (and, by implication, a kind of catharsis, however superficial and fleeting) – and the danger that this may have worked against her intention to present the audience with a genuine Brechtian dialectic and foreground the immediate social framework of the characters (since adhering to the familiar 'rages-to-riches' narrative arc is not achieving the same thing). It transpires that the idea of staging a documentary based on a talent show format raised concerns for the writer, Alecky Blythe, and for her director:

In terms of structuring the piece, that was a concern for Alecky: how much do you give people the talent show shape, and how much do you try to undermine it by giving them a different perspective? She was very clear that she wanted to give them a performer's eye view, so the stars of the show wouldn't be the judges; it wouldn't be all about how the cameras enjoy it; it would be almost looking over the performers' shoulder, about their dressing-room experience. What happened on stage would take back seat.

Blythe did not, after all, offer Heskins a subversive treatment. *X-Factor* is similarly edited in such a way that 'on-stage' moments actually take up relatively little screen time: the unfolding, 'off-stage' dramas interest the producers at least as much as the actual competition, since it is (correctly) supposed that they compel viewers to invest (in more than just an empathetic sense) in the competitors. The 'backstage musical' structure, and its emphasis of with individual, cause-and-effect narratives is clearly not in service to Heskins' notion of a 'Brechtian' reading of the material (where the audience would, at least in theory, be held at a distance from emotional engagement). We may be on safer, certainly more accurate territory if we turn to the influence of Stanislavski.

Speaking of her work with the actors, one of the things Heskins said (about the process) was that it was *more Stanislavski than Stanislavski*, a statement that intrigued me because I had already made my own, anodyne assumptions about actors being subjected to Blythe's Recorded Delivery technique: are they not merely mimicking, merely parroting? Because they get a voice fed to them, they are in this quite unusual position of being able to replicate almost exactly the voice of the original interviewee – so how much is there for them to *do*? What kind of journey are they on? Are there any blanks to fill in? I asked Heskins: What is the nature of your work with them?

It's fascinating, isn't it, to have a piece of theatre where you can talk about Brecht and Stanislavski in the same breath? That's what's so exciting about Alecky's work I

think. For the actor, it is an unusual experience; it's a very particular actor who can do it. Some actors hate it; I think (because it requires actors surrendering a great deal) that the kind of actor who likes to stay in control, who likes to decide exactly what their cadence is going to be or what move they're going to make, can find it quite difficult, so the actor who can surrender to the voice in their head is the actor who enjoys it.

Precisely what is being surrendered?

It takes away from the actor all responsibility for how their sentence is structured, how it sounds, because they are trying just to mimic exactly what they're hearing, but although they start just by mimicking it, they end up somewhere quite different because they have to mimic that moment where somebody takes an intake of breath – and they can do that sound but it's only after a little while that you start to feel that [the instance of] physicalizing something gives rise to a thought or an emotion; it's not just that that thought or emotion gives rise to a physicality; one of the things we learn is that it can go both ways: when [do we cross the line between] acting something, experiencing something? When you're kissing somebody on stage, you might be acting that the two characters are kissing each other but you're literally kissing another person. I think it starts to do that.

In other words, the process and performance cannot possibly be entirely mechanical; something else must always come in: conjecture, imagination, physicalisation: aspects of the actors' craft that we attribute to the building of fictional and functional (interior/exterior) worlds. Actors working through this method have found that voices quite literally inside their head *suggest* the physicality of characters to them – another way, perhaps, of thinking about the notion of making the internal external. Blythe has spoken of the influence of the pioneering American artist Anna DeVere Smith, whose work in the mid-nineteen-nineties is instructive in the technique and the ethical concerns *surrounding* performance of verbatim material collected from interviews with the inhabitants of a specific community - in the case of *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) inhabitants of an area of Brooklyn, New York, called Crown Heights.[15]

I am interested in how, through this unique approach to rehearsal, a director is able to measure progress? Is it when the actors seem to take a kind of ownership of it? Or find an ease or comfort with it?

What they do first of all when they're working on it is sit, and they might well get the voice and the cadence, but you're not getting any performance, and it's the moment when you say [as the director], "now look at me, talk to me, cast me as Alecky [Blythe] and we'll have a conversation" that it starts to come alive, and that's

[15] Blythe (2008) in: *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, p. 80; see also Anna DeVere Smith (1993), *Fires in the Mirror*, (Anchor, 1993).

the moment when it starts to become a dialogue. *That's when it starts to become theatrical: even though what [the actor]* sounds *like doesn't change, the moment between these two people changes and that's when it starts to be good. They need to know the* thought, *and that's where the Stanislavski comes in I think – you start to have the thought* before *the character says anything, at just the moment that the real person might have had that thought and you know what the thought* is.

Two significant things occur here: firstly that the actor is taking utterances from the past to the present tense, giving life to a thought or emotion in the moment of performance. The actors must find ways of externalizing those thoughts, of making them register with an audience, but first they must try to articulate and commit to a series of intentions. The source of these in the original recorded material is not always clear:

Sometimes the thought isn't evident in the speech, sometimes what you'll hear is that someone stops, and then they start saying something else in a different way, and you have to ask yourself, why did they not want to carry on with that sentence, what were they going to say? Or you hear that catch in somebody's breath and you start to ask, why are they uncomfortable? So again, you're not just imitating the result of that catch, you start to find what the tension is in their lungs or in their respiratory system or in their diaphragm that's making that catch, and once you start to do that you start to feel that tension in your body, and you start to ask yourself: "This is a character who's nervous, what else is evidencing itself in that nervousness and what else am I finding in myself that contributes to that?" That's when I think it starts to become more Stanislavskian and in a way, it liberates you from intellectualizing, from [worrying] about how you're going to say it, or how it's coming across, because there's no time to think about how it's landing, all you can do is be in the moment – *and isn't that pure Stanislavski?*

My second point is that, in a sense, Alecky Blythe is omnipresent: as the interviewer she is the first audience to this material, and the director is asking the actors to imagine themselves in dialogue with Alecky Blythe in order to bring the material to life. Eventually, then, every member of the audience, as we finally witness the result of this process, will be cast as Alecky Blythe. More importantly, it is Blythe's choice of interviewees – of raw material – that colours and shapes our view of a place and time under the banner of 'documentary' theatre. How representative is it?

The work can tend towards caricature at times, begging the question: *is* it caricature or is it that these people really do exist but we just can't quite believe it in the context of this show? Is it heightened or exaggerated perhaps? Heskins claims that *Alecky's choosing the interesting people. Neither you nor I would make the cut, frankly: we're just not weird and wonderful enough.*

That is an important and troubling point. If Alecky gravitates towards eccentric or extreme or funny characters and individuals then they will inevitably populate the

stage; but then, one of the problems is that they then start to become, in a sense, representational or archetypal: if you have a cross-section of people, the character of the single, rather lonely middle-aged shop-keeper (the character of 'Graham' in *Where Have I Been All My Life?*) becomes all middle-aged shop-keepers and further, the cast of characters assembled becomes the whole of Stoke-on-Trent to the visiting audience. That is, I think, when it starts to become problematic. Heskins acknowledges that some locals who saw the show were offended by the way their town was portrayed:

It's about people wondering whether we were fair to them; I think sometimes people are very protective, and I understand that, they're right to worry about it, and I think that in this piece, a lot of the voices we heard were working class voices, and people were understandably concerned that we might be taking a frivolous, middle-class approach to laughing at the working classes. That's understandable.

One of the ways in which a sense of total parody is avoided is through the moments of direct communication with the audience. Where, in rehearsals, actors imagine they are responding to the interviewer, in performance the audience becomes the interviewer, locked in an intimate exchange. Rehearsals begin in a very confined space, but the issue with that is taking small-scale, intimate conversations into a theatre-in-the-round where the volume of what is being said does not quite correspond with the subdued quality of exchange on the original tapes. Heskins, the director, sees this as one of the strengths of the piece: that it can play with various registers and vocal textures, and generate an atmosphere of intimacy (though there were problems with projection through the rehearsal process). I wondered whether Heskins introduced strategies into her direction to disguise that? Another aspect of this technology is that it can lead to more practical, logistical problems, but these invite the actor to stray from exact replication of the recorded voice:

One of the characters, Woody, was too quiet on tape to get across, and our voice coach talked to the actor about what that does physically to the vocal chords: it makes them rub and it can be very damaging. So we had to find a different voice for that character that was as true to the voice as possible, but that would give him more projection and not damage his voice. The actors found that in trying to project, if the person that was speaking in their ear was quite quiet, they needed to be able to hear that person over themselves, so we'd often have to boost the volume of the person enormously.

The physical presence of technology is another is one of the things actors contend with, and influences every aspect of a performance. Actors in a Recorded Delivery show need to be able to adjust the volume, because the original material is so badly recorded; the technology needs to be in an accessible place. So that means the director is going to be restricted with what she can do with those actors physically: there is a microphone pack, a cable running up their backs, and then the earpieces;

and of course, physiologically people's ears are different sizes, so fitting this piece of technology becomes a similar procedure to fitting a costume. Members of the company become technicians as well as actors: they are running, as well as performing the show.

The close-fitting earpieces further influence the relationship or rapport with the audience, in that well tailored, good fitting equipment blocks out any sound coming to them. Actors could not tell whether the audience was even enjoying it because they could not hear any responses at all. Heskins was troubled by a sense of stasis and detachment:

I started to feel by the end of the run that the performance wasn't changing, and normally what happens when an audience gets in is it changes and that change is exciting – and it didn't develop; and they couldn't ride laughs, so sometimes you'd lose lines under the laughs, and they couldn't tell whether an audience was enjoying it so they weren't getting that sense of a job well done.

There two performers present: one through the earpiece, the original speaker, and one interpreting what they hear, in the very moment of performance: the live and the mediated co-exist. It could be said that the presence of the earpiece acts as a distancing device, or at least, our awareness of them does (if we are familiar with the technique) – yet they are disguised from us, so to the uninitiated or unaware, the impression is of a complete, arguably 'Stanislavskian' submergence in role. The actors are not merely puppets or ventriloquists; nor do they necessarily keep a distance from their characters, the absent protagonists whose presence is 'ghosted' through the actors' interpretations.

Carol Martin[16] cites Richard Schechner's theory of 'restored' or 'twice restored' behviour in her analysis of the tropes of 'twice-behaved behavior' apparent in documentary theatre, positing the idea that 'as a condition of performance, the actors … perform both as themselves and as the actual personages they present. The absent, unavailable, dead, and disappeared make an appearance by means of surrogation.' Documentary theatre requires live presence, 'but it also requires technology as an integral part of the means to embodied memory and as necessary for the verification of the factual accuracy of both the text and the performance.' The idea that the earpieces *justify* the presence of the actors (as authentic or accurate in their portrayals) is an interesting one; Blythe has, in conversation about her work, indicated her preference for the visibility of the technology (though does not articulate this in terms of a 'Brechtian' impulse).[17] It is worth pointing out here that contemporary theatre in general is very familiar with the visible and fully integrated presence of technology,

[16] Carol Martin, 'Bodies of Evidence' in: *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. Carol Martin, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp.17 - 26 (here p. 18).

[17] Blythe (2008), in: *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, p. 100.

but we do not often see it foregrounded in mainstream provincial playhouses. Heskins was very much aware of, and perhaps hindered by what 'her' audience (that is, the regular New Vic audience) would and would not like or expect to see, though she, too, feels that the technology *should* be visible:

I like it when you're aware of them because that reminds me that you're not seeing the real person in front of you, that these is another layer of this reality, and that's the real person that is not here but is represented by this piece of kit.

Perhaps, had it been more obvious in this production, the 'Brechtian', distancing device Heskins apparently sought may have been located in the awareness that the actors were resisting the illusion of full submergence in role. The closest any audience would have come to such awareness, however, would have been the moment when the technology failed:

One night, an actor had her change into her dress and while she was changing her cable came loose. I could see her gesturing to stage management; and the actors had thought that they'd know the lines, however much they tried not to learn them. Two lines in she had no feed coming to her, and she didn't know the lines, and she had to stop, and she had to say to the audience 'I'm so sorry, the sound's gone', and she went over to the sound desk, went off, came back and started it again.

Does she, I ask her directly, desire that kind of Brechtian distance; seek to prevent emotional empathy in case we are distracted from thinking about the political framework she has so carefully reflected in her design elements?

I want them to have that emotional empathy to be honest, but I don't want them to wallow in it, to completely surrender to it, I do want them to be able to go on that journey with [the character] Graham, to feel for Graham but then come out of it and be able to assess the framework of the world that's going on around him.

Does she think that's possible, that through emotional engagement we might genuinely be prompted towards political awareness or understanding?

I think that's the great thing that theatre does: it educates us by allowing us to imagine other worlds that we're not actually living, other ways that we might live and other thoughts that we might think without actually having to live or think them; but however much we surrender, at some point we leave that theatre, and at that point the emotional engagement, the memory of it might continue, but the actual direct engagement doesn't and that's the time that we can start to intellectualise or consider the experience. So they're not mutually exclusive for me at all.

Speaking Machines: the 'Dialectical' Voice in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre

Maşini vorbitoare: vocea „dialectică" în teatrul contemporan verbatim

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Abstract
Studiul explorează eficacitatea politică, analizând două exemple recente de teatru verbatim, *Sochi* 2014 (2014, Tess Berry-Hart) şi *Home* (2013, Nadia Fall), ambele expun elemente de dramaturgie 'epică' şi intenţii 'democratice' care includ o multitudine de voci marginalizate, atrăgând atenţia asupra situaţiei comunităţilor fără drept de vot.
Paget (2007) întrevede o legătură cu stilul de prezentare a genului specific pentru Brecht şi Piscator, şi anume cu 'tradiţia întreruptă' a teatrului politic. Practicile verbatim deschid un spaţiu în cadrul căruia metodele contradistinctive ale lui Stanislavski şi Brecht pot coexista. Dacă există o obligaţie implicită de a impune structura narativă şi de a încuraja relaţia emoţională cu individul, atunci apare întrebarea dacă acestea se află în contradicţie cu impulsul brechtian de a plasa în prim-plan cadrul social nemijlocit. Studiul examinează integrarea şi sublinierea mărturiei pentru o prezenţă autentificatoare şi viaţa actorului, funcţie interpretativă ('fantoma' protagoniştilor absenţi ale căror cuvinte publicate şi voci sunt captate prin interviu). Totodată se pune întrebarea dacă piesele montate în Islington şi South Bank, London, încurajează un angajament politic sau dacă doar reflectă unanimitatea liberală a audienţei.

Keywords:
teatru verbatim, Tess Berry-Hart, *Sochi 2014*, Nadia Fall, *Home*, dramaturgie 'epică', intenţii 'democratice', angajament politic

Documentary theatre practice has reached a stage in the UK where formal and technical innovations have opened up the space for material that is less in

service to issues-based content, and beginning to offer alternatives to realist approaches. Yet the cyclical debates that have dominated critical responses to the genre – concerning degrees of authenticity – still refuse to release their grip. Documentary theatre habitually places the audience and actor in a unique relationship to the performance text, and to the integration and foregrounding of technology as 'authenticating' presence. The notion of 'ghosting', or literally 'speaking for others' has informed discussion of the verbatim genre; that is, where the performer substitutes for the 'absent protagonists' whose words and voices have been captured through interview and edited prior to the event. Carol Martin, in *Bodies of Evidence*, cites Richard Schechner's theory of 'restored' or 'twice restored' behaviour in her analysis of the tropes of 'twice-behaved behavior' apparent in documentary theatre. She states that "as a condition of performance, the actors… perform both as themselves and as the actual personages they present. The absent, unavailable, dead, and disappeared make an appearance by means of surrogation."[1]

Since its resurgence in the late 1990s, a period of international political and religious crises, the documentary genre's intrinsic claims to 'authenticity' and 'truth' have dominated critical discussion. Inevitably, a form of theatre concerned with potent social issues, which intends to contemplate ethical and political questions, carries with it specific expectations and responsibilities. We should not, though, proceed with the assumption that audiences to non-fictional work of this kind are easily duped. If the steady rise of documentary practice from the subsidised margins to mainstream status is attributable to a collective quest for factual accuracy, desire for unmediated information has been tempered by exposure to the conventions of the form – and awareness of its limitations. As Janelle Reinelt states: "audiences *know* that documents, facts, and evidence are always mediated when they are received; they know there is no raw truth apart from interpretation"[2].

There are several definitions within the broader category of 'documentary' theatre. Academic analysis has been concerned with exposing the extent to which each of these forms or 'tendencies' has refined or obscured its sources and materials. The plays I will be referring to in this paper – Nadia Fall's *Home*, first shown in the National Theatre's temporary studio theatre, The Shed, in 2013, and Tess Berry-Hart's *Sochi 2014*, in the Hope Theatre, London, in 2014 – fit the typical

[1] Carol Martin, *Bodies of Evidence*, in: Carol Martin (editor), *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.18.

[2] Janelle Reinelt, *Toward a Poetics of Theatre and Public Events: In the Case of Stephen Lawrence,* in: Carol Martin (editor), *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 39.

definition of *verbatim* theatre. We should avoid further confusion by using that term from now on, with the understanding that the material intrinsically *lacks* the authenticating presence of the court transcript or legally encrypted document – that would make it *tribunal* theatre – and feature instead the assemblage of 'private narratives', thus inferring great authority to 'moments of utterance'[3]. Do private narratives, though, infer any *less* authority than 'factual' sources?

Since the pioneering documentary theatre of the nineteen-sixties, postmodernist discourse has already destabilised the notion of self-evident truth, destabilising also the notions of 'authorship' and 'authority.' Verbatim theatre is often misconceived as a form where presentation of the two is inseparably entwined, but we should attempt to separate *fact* from *truth*: if there is unease about the latter, facts we can trust more securely. By the time we encounter its manifestation in verbatim plays, something worth talking about has undoubtedly *happened* in real life, and has already been evidenced and reported in various ways; the reciprocal relationship between verbatim theatre and journalism was widely debated in immediate response to the resurrection of the form. *Sochi 2014* contrasts media commentary of the run-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics with testimonies from LGBT citizens in Russia whose voices are silenced by laws forbidding gay 'propaganda'. *Home* takes us inside an inner-city hostel, Target East, to hear the untold stories of its residents and staff.

Within pluralist models of twenty-first century verbatim theatre (of which *Home* and *Sochi 2014* are typical), the assembled presence of individuals speaking *about* an event or situation proposes a number of competing truths, often deliberately juxtaposed in the editing so that, in the absence of conventional narrative structure, 'dramatic' conflict ensues from the clash of opposing points of view. Duška Radosavljevic refers to this inclusive policy as recognition of "the potential of theatre to democratize without proselytizing"[4].

Little wonder that, within such a loose and subjective dramaturgical weave, we find it difficult to single out the reassuring thread that we might identify as authoritative; but then, the inclusion of marginalised voices is intended to *challenge* the authority of the 'official' narratives that conspire, through various operations of power, to exclude them. The Target East hostel depicted in *Home* shelters vulnerable young people who would otherwise be homeless; the testifiers in *Sochi 2014* have been silenced, in their homeland, by state-sanctioned persecution. Thus, the impression of postmodern montage in the formal construction of the work assumes a *political* guise and thus, as Amanda

[3] Carol Martin, *Bodies of Evidence*, in: Carol Martin (editor), *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.18.

[4] Duška Radosavljevic, *Theatre-Making,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p.149.

Stuart Fisher argues, the spectator is brought into an encounter with *testimony* rather than documentary. Stuart Fisher's distinction is instructive, as she sees a crucial difference in verbatim plays that intend to tell a community's story (as *Home* does) and those such as David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) that use verbatim text "simply as another form of research". She calls for a shift of emphasis in the assessment of verbatim practice, since "generating a 'technical' or even 'factual' truth is not necessarily [its] function, nor should the question of *truth* be expected to form the grounds of its critique"[5]. Her concluding statement – drawing from Shoshanna Felman's definition of the 'performative speech act' – repositions private narratives as being legitimised in their moment of expression by the individual – or verbatim *subject* – speaking of *lived experience*: "It is this act of speaking out in verbatim theatre, and the promise that this bears witness to a concrete situation or moment in history, that constitutes the truth claims of this practice."[6]

We should proceed with caution however, in asserting the *testifier's* ownership of the material, when clearly, the *actor's* interpretation of it is crucial to its dissemination. According to Radosavljevic, verbatim theatre 'allows for the *actors*' authority to assert itself at least through virtuosity if not through literal authorship' and becomes, in performance, 'ultimately more of a vehicle for an actor's artistry than that of a writer or director'[7]. Expressing a similar concern, Liz Tomlin sees that 'the perspective of the *artist* holds the ultimate authority, both over the political conclusions of the piece itself and over the representations of the individuals involved'[8]. The issue of 'authority' over the text will inform our discussion of verbatim theatre, as we interrogate the degrees of autonomy negotiated through its unique staging strategies.

Tomlin's discussion of fragmented and plural narratives, in her monograph *Acts and Apparitions*, is central to the concerns explored in this paper, and deserves further consideration. Tomlin begins with Lehmann's critique of a model of theatre that draws its representations from 'real' life. He argues that a theatrical representation of problems that are defined as 'political' in real life will do nothing to disrupt, and may even confirm, the existing consensus. Such a theatre, he continues, will inevitably *mirror* public discourse, and acts to obscure existing power relations. Rather than use the term 'postdramatic', Tomlin positions the

[5] Amanda Stuart-Fisher, *"That's who I'd be, if I could sing': Reflections on a verbatim project with mothers of sexually abused children*', in: *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31:2, 2011, pp.193-208.

[6] Amanda Stuart-Fisher, *"That's who I'd be, if I could sing': Reflections on a verbatim project with mothers of sexually abused children*', p.197.

[7] Duška Radosavljevic, *Theatre-Making,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p.129.

[8] Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions,* Manchester, 2013, p.123.

radical narrative as "allied to performance texts that offer, not the traditional linear and coherent narrative of the dramatic, but fragmented and plural narratives, with no recognisable plot structure to offer up an authorised 'meaning' to the spectator"[9]. However, she cautions that "[t]he shift away from dialogue… might also be read as better *concealing*… the still existent author"[10]. Tomlin cites Jon Erickson, who argues that, despite the multiplicity of performers, much avant-garde practice essentially operates from 'a base in monologue' where performers "are not "people" in the characterological sense" but "*speaking machines* for some overall intent of the group or director"[11]. He concludes by wondering "if splitting one monologue into many vocal parts really does indicate 'multiplicity' or if it ends up indicating the opposite: a weird kind of conformity. One might then view the multiplicities of the fragmented self as conducive to the habitation of an immense totalizing voice, which is everyone's and no one's."[12]
Tomlin acknowledges that political corruption and deception revived theatre practice that might, once again, seek to demystify the 'official' version of events, as the early Marxist documentary theatre had advocated, but sees that the Marxist ideology of the earlier documentary became an impossible position to sustain. Her concern is that artists working within a testimonial verbatim practice almost always hold a commitment to a particular narrative of opposition. *Sochi 2014* is careful in its construction to include material from both the oppressors and the oppressed; the presence of various narrative strands and perspectives suggest a dialectic, but the ideological gulf between them is so vast that is clear from the outset where our allegiances should lie. There would be few advocates of Putin's federal law attending a performance above an Islington pub.
In discussion of its performance strategies, verbatim practice has been widely perceived as a space where the contradistinctive approaches of Stanislavski and Brecht might co-exist; but if there is an implicit obligation to impose a narrative structure and encourage emotional connection with individuals, does this contradict the Brechtian impulse to foreground their immediate social framework? In the case of *Home* and *Sochi 2014*, as with verbatim plays in general, the subject matter is specific, geographically and politically. Verbatim theatre is promiscuous and opportunistic: the roving reporter of theatrical genres, driven by an instinct for the next big story to move from one trouble spot to the next. In this, there is rigidity to verbatim theatre that should preclude generalised application of ideological bias, in its representation of events or in their reading. It must be informative; it

[9] Idem, p. 58.
[10] Idem, p. 64.
[11] Jon Erickson, 2003, in: Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions,* Manchester, 2013, p. 64.
[12] *Ibidem.*

must be *current*. It has very little capacity for analysis and reflection; there is no guiding, authorial voice; metaphors may emerge by accident, never by design; it is interested more in the telling than the showing. It is a test of nerve: how do you keep audiences interested in the delivery of testimony, when the events described have already happened elsewhere? A degree of investment in character – which implies empathetic engagement – is an inevitable consequence of the actors' submergence in role.

Verbatim practice adheres to conventions in theatre that require strict parameters. Formally, the genre is limited because it is anchored to a version of mimesis that has little or no capacity to misrepresent its source, to distort the accurate reflection of its material referent. Any doubt in the accuracy and clarity of its corporeal apparitions, failure to recognise their equivalent in the 'real' world, would destabilise the fragile apparatus supporting the central conceit: that its absent protagonists have been summoned to the stage to speak their truths.

Arguably, though, a barrier to full emotional investment as an audience is achieved through 'ghosting', through our constant awareness of an 'Other' whose origin and habitat is known to exist somewhere in the world outside the stage. So, despite evidence of the actors' Stanislavskian investment in 'character' and submergence in 'role', the notion that verbatim theatre may represent a continuation of the British tradition of naturalism is misplaced. I have often thought it closer to the work of Beckett than any of the naturalists. The off-stage space is divested of its naturalist function (as extension of the constructed world) – there is no apparent continuation of fictional life indicated beyond the stage; bodies and voices exist only as surrogates; their identity is temporally frozen, and consigned, night after night, to project accounts of lived experience from spaces that are, more often than not, devoid of any superfluous signifying elements. Yet there is a parallel, in that we are shown how things *are*; we are not invited to imagine that things could be otherwise.

Speaking against naturalism, Brecht is first and foremost a dramaturg; his preoccupation with emotional alignment with the characters' 'super-objectives' lies chiefly with the Aristotelian structure of narrative. In his formulation of the antithesis to his Epic model, a cause-and-effect narrative equals a cathartic sense of closure, and thus negates our capacity to act. Brecht's parables bear as much persuasive symmetry as the conventional narrative arc, albeit that the currency is moral rather than emotional: the pay-off is not cathartic, but still imbues some kind of ethical responsibility. How should we *act* upon our knowledge? Do we still believe that we have the capacity to generate change?

If verbatim theatre so often leaves audiences feeling informed but powerless, it is because the technique of direct address that the material demands casts the audience as 'interviewers' with no questions. Indeed, the introductory note in

Home states: "The residents and workers at Target East are all speaking to an interviewer who, in performance, becomes the audience throughout."[13]. We are offered insight, but no opportunity for intervention. Because the contexts or 'given circumstances' are known to be real, the re-enactment of selected episodes offers no alternative, no possibility that outcomes could be any different: we can only watch, with a mute sense of helplessness, as events play out to their inevitable conclusion. The valiant activism depicted in *Sochi* fails to prevent the Games from going ahead with its full cohort of competitors and sponsors; the final words are spoken by an athlete: "The fact that we know we can't change anything shouldn't stop us from trying"[14]. *Home* leads us to the closure of the Target East hostel due to local funding cuts; it becomes all but impossible to read the play as anything other than a narrative of defeat. Recent history, devoid of allegorical function, cannot be undone, and we are too close to it to be able to foresee how we might draw lessons from it. At worst, it tends to reaffirm what we already know on a factual basis, and uphold the liberal consensus in our interpretation of events.

We are all familiar with – perhaps cynically immune to – the image of the helpless child that stares from the promotional material of numerous aid charities appealing to the Western world. The causes and organisations are various, but the strategy is universal: it aims for immediate emotional detonation, hoping for our subsequent enlistment and financial support. The positive interpretation is that we are given the choice to *act* and thereby imbued with the power to intervene, to circumvent the inevitable, to participate in narratives whose outcomes are yet to be decided. Awareness of a particular humanitarian crisis may prompt us to further inform ourselves of its wider political context. Arguably, verbatim theatre selects individuals or mascots, the characters caught up in political crossfires whose stories invite a response that Lib Taylor has called 'emotional enlistment', whereby empathy with their subjective experience – their testimonies – triggers allegiance (or 'enlistment') to the wider causes they represent:

"In the context of contemporary distrust of grand narratives, fact-based dramas about the failures and corruption of institutions can generate emotional enlistment and channel it towards a demand for the reform of institutions and the public sphere. This may not be the politics of revolution but it is the politics of reform."[15].

Rather than perceiving the accumulation of testimonies as a monologic, choric mass, Taylor sees their potential to "cultivate emotional engagement as a way of puncturing… insensitive complacency"[16]. Action may not be immediate, but

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[13] Nadia Fall, *Home*, Nick Hern, 2013, p. 10.

[14] Tess Berry-Hart, *Sochi 2014*, 2014, p. 42.

[15] Lib Taylor, 2011, '*The experience of Immediacy: Emotion and enlistment in fact-based theatre*' in: *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 31:2, pp. 233 – 234.

[16] Idem, p. 234.

verbatim plays undoubtedly generate awareness; it is ultimately your decision as to how you decide to utilise it. Ideally, then, 'enlistment' may change the way you perceive a marginalised group, donate to charity, interact with discussion threads, prioritise your cultural consumption, encourage you to the polling station, and even change the way you vote. It is perhaps a reflection of our times that the call to political engagement should be perceived as a consequence of emotional engagement, the antithesis of Brecht's formal legacy. Had we the tools of revolution to hand, would we know how to use them? Does Taylor's neoliberal position actually come close to an echo of those closing words in *Sochi 2014*? "The fact that we know we can't change anything shouldn't stop us from trying"[17].

[17] Tess Berry-Hart, *Sochi 2014*, 2014, p. 42.

The Mourning After: Structures of Feeling in Verbatim Theatre

Shane Kinghorn

Writer and director Peter Darney began researching his new verbatim piece, *5 Guys Chillin'*, in response to reports of a spike in HIV rates among gay men in London and Manchester, and the social phenomenon held responsible. The play manipulates testimony from users of the social networking site Grindr and explores the gay 'chill-out', or 'chemsex' scene (see Cormier, 2015: online). It premiered (as *4 Guys Chillin'*) at the Brighton Fringe Festival in May 2015 and transferred the King's Head theatre, London, in November 2015, returning in February 2016. My association with the project, in preparation for this chapter, allowed me access to Darney's creative process from the editing stage through to performance. The following discussion, illustrated by my interviews with Darney, interrogates the choices he made in collating and editing over fifty hours' worth of verbatim material. The production, as described in the King's Head theatre's publicity blurb, 'looks at changing attitudes to sex, relationships, dating, HIV and to our perception of what sexual relations can and should be' (King's Head Theatre, 2016: online).

According to Darney, the title *5 Guys Chillin'* is a customary invitation that 'came from Grindr. It's what people put on a profile: "4 guys chillin", "3 guys chillin"', and so on, 'although, in the last three months, people have moved more towards saying "H & H" – or "H, H & H"' – meaning, respectively, 'High and Horny' and 'High, Hung and Horny' (Darney, 2015). The various forms of shorthand prevalent in social media has proliferated a codified language that, for the uninitiated, requires translation; this is apparent in abbreviated references to

the various drugs, intrinsic to the scene, that infuse the script:

> 'ChemSex' is defined by the use of three specific drugs ("chems") in a sexual context. These three drugs are 'Tina', 'meph' and 'G', or methamphetamine (crystal/crystal meth/Tina/meth), mephedrone (meph/drone) and GHB/GBL (G, Gina).
>
> (reshapenow.org, 2014: online).

My engagement with Darney's project revealed dramaturgical insights into a decision-making process where verbatim form is taken in a fascinating direction, and potentially opens up a new taxonomy: the material is, I will argue, theatricalised in a fashion that builds a Chekhovian sensibility but retains an urgent political impetus. *5 Guys Chillin'* was marketed towards, and attracted a specific (male, gay) audience yet, I will argue, far from asserting liberal unanimity, forced it into confrontation with sexual behaviours that, while defiant and celebratory in their assertion of sub-cultural identity, clearly imply dangerous consequences. I will argue that, through its naturalistic framework, the piece ultimately exposes troubling contradictions: the grim stasis disguised by compulsive hedonism; the profoundly dark pulse driving the party, sounding a note of reflection, doubt and isolation.

Darney decided from the outset that his multiple testimonies would be voiced through four or five 'composite' characters: 'I knew […] that I didn't want my actors playing multiple characters – I knew that I wanted to set it in a party and I knew that I wanted to 'cheat it' so that they were talking to each other' (Darney,

2015). I pointed out to him that verbatim theatre typically uses direct address, and seldom, if ever, constructs a fictional narrative framework. Darney stressed that his first objective was to depict the events of a chill-out party that happens over the course of a single night: 'my mission was to create a journey, an arc, and that was created partly through the cutting of the text and partly through working specifically on subtext within the 'party' and its relationships and dynamics' (ibid). Editing his raw material, Darney selected the themes and individuals that most interested him, and set about 'splicing fragments into and around the main interviews' (ibid), thus building conversations about, for example, sexual racism, one of the prevalent issues that emerges from the piece.

Sustaining such a conceit defies the limitations imposed by verbatim material which, encumbered with the task of telling a story, is unlikely to behave accordingly. At no point in the gathering of testimony had individuals *spoken to each other*, and the interviewer had little or no influence over the content or quality of interviewee's responses. Darney prepared set questions:

> 'What made you go to a chill-out? Have you ever felt unsafe? Have you ever caught an STI? Do you practice safer sex? (To which everyone always says "yes", and then I [ask], "all the time?" and they [answer], "well, no, not *all* the time"). Would you date someone that you met at a chill-out? What do you get out of going to them? Has it ever impacted negatively on your life? Those questions I asked everyone'.
>
> (Darney, 2015)

Testimony, unlike dramatic conversation, lacks the essential capacity to multi-task: interviewees speak in ignorance of their potential contribution to an encompassing narrative arc; they are not aware of themselves as 'characters'; their utterances are not tailored to fit any generic style. Encounters with the original testifiers had receded from Darney's consciousness by the time he and his cast began to develop the 'subtext' of the chill-out party:

> 'All of that was gone, because the only way to tell the story of the party was to work specifically on the intentions and objectives of *doing things* to each other, and it was always about [asking actors], 'Why are you saying this? What are you trying to do to the others at this party? What's the status of this party? What is your position now? Who are you attacking? Who are you allying? Who are you flirting with? The subtext of the party was the focus.'
>
> (Darney, 2015)

This strategy allowed Darney to create a performance text that, in *5 Guys Chillin',* co-exists in an uneasy, but functioning tryst with the verbatim text, in which the spontaneous associations and smouldering tensions of a chill-out party are stoked through the course of the action. Reviews of the play picked up on the potential faults in this approach:

> From a dramaturgical point of view, the 80-minute presentation occasionally drifts into unreality: events occur and things are said which awkwardly strain the limits of credulity. […] The savage rawness of the words is gratifying, alarming, educational, revealing and captivating; but there is a subtlety, a texturing, a dramatic sensibility, which is missing. […] When

> the audience is totally, completely swept away in the hedonistic experience of the encounter of these five men, when the backstories don't seem obviously to be backstories, when the segues are sexually charged or devastatingly intimate, and therefore relaxed and insightful, this will be a major work.
>
> (Stephen Collins, 2015: online)

Similarly:

> There are moments where testimonies seem to slide very organically into a moment, but most of the time the contrivance is all too obvious, especially when questions are suddenly shouted out [by] one of the characters.
>
> (grumpygaycritic.co.uk, 2015: online)

An interesting tension certainly exists in the piece between the past tense, anecdotal quality of the dialogue and the present tense, 'here-and-now' contrivance of the setting and action. Critics felt confident, however, that gay audiences would recognise the environment, as Stephen Collins' review indicates:

> Gay men … will already know about what happens to these five men, two couples and one interloper, at this chill party. Not necessarily the specifics, but the generality. There will be sex. There will be drugs. There will be talk. There will be one-upmanship. There will be shared intimacy. There will be mobile phones. There will be uncoupled couples coupling with others. There will be excess. There will be laughter. There will be tears. There will be naked honesty. There will be sex.
>
> (Stephen Collins, 2015: online)

Londoncitynights.com emphasised the explicitness and authenticity of the company's reconstruction of experiences to which the testimony refers:

> By the time the curtain falls the five men have become burnt out zombies. One man's face is smeared with blood, his mucous membranes having finally collapsed under a crystallised onslaught. Two more are blank-faced, zoned out on the sofa, spikes dangling from their veins. Another is pale-faced and hunched, rocking back and forth, next to the motionless body of someone recovering from a seizure.
>
> It's a painfully accurate dramatisation of how drug-induced euphoria contrasts with the inevitable comedown.
>
> (londoncitynights, 2015: online)

Darney's strategy, then, allowed audiences to witness the consequences of behaviours discussed in the testimonies, making for a far more immediate, visceral and impactful experience than merely listening to them may have done.

Assessing the efficacy of the play's 'naturalistic' framework within a broader critical context, I have encountered concepts so deeply imbedded in the analysis of modern drama that they seem to contradict the notion of progressive practice. And yet, I will argue, there *is* a contradiction at the heart of Darney's treatment: through his utilisation of established dramatic devices as his organising principle, Darney has found the means to facilitate a significant reinterpretation of verbatim practice.

Reflecting qualities apparent in Chekhov's formulation of naturalist drama (as proposed in Williams, 1993: 101 - 111), Darney's strategy brings the audience into a relationship with the material that, I will argue, throws tried and tested verbatim strategies into sharp relief, and questions the extent to which those have fetishized the pursuit of 'authenticity' at the expense of narrative cohesion and absorption.

Of course, it is problematic to speak of 'conventions' without the offer of any serviceable definition, or as if they were irrefutably entwined with particular epochs. The field of semiotic analysis found important connections between 'theatrical' and 'social' conventions, existent in the reciprocal bond between the event and its audience (see, for instance, Aston and Savona, 1991). Raymond Williams, writing in 1952, acknowledged that, while 'the idea of convention is basic to any understanding of drama as a form', a firm definition was bound to be elusive 'in a period in which basic conventions are changing' (1993:12). He observes that although changes can occur, unexpectedly, in the moment of performance, or within the 'flux of present experience' (1993:16), we may be too close to the event to see them. Williams supports the necessity for modification and change, but stresses that where, in principle, any technical means – or convention – *could* be used, in practice, such freedom of choice is obstructed by the obligation to win the audience's consent. It could be that, in the moments of 'acceptance', experimentation (or, in Williams' terms, 'novelty and strangeness' (1993:16)) acquires the status of convention. He concludes that without the benefit of hindsight, in 'the flux of present experience', it is difficult to detect precisely where and when this process occurs, and 'it is here we find ourselves considering the … relations between convention and structures of feeling' (1993:16).

Williams' concept of 'structures of feeling' is one of the key reference points in the introduction to Michael Ingham's analysis of the stage adaptation phenomenon (see Ingham, 2004: 1 -24), and will presently inform my discussion of Darney's *5 Guys Chillin'*. While Ingham's analysis is broadly concerned with the adaptation of prose fiction, it exposes attendant conventions that will, in turn, help us expose the particular attitudes to the source exhibited by verbatim practice. From this perspective, I will indicate how Darney's play departs from familiar strategies in verbatim practice through a reversal of Williams' formulation of change: Darney has, I will argue, effectively modified recent conventions and 'introduced' long-established ones. Furthermore, we can assess how the piece captures the lived experience of individuals immersed in the rituals of a particular, counter-cultural network – the chill-out scene – and how this informs its dramaturgy, or the 'structure of feeling' that emerges from Darney's central conceit.

Williams' concept – which will be discussed at length in due course – is, in his own words, 'as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience … a form and a meaning, a feeling and a rhythm – in the work of art, the play, as a whole' (1993:18). The notion of a 'structure of feeling' becomes significant to us as we consider the play's status within its social and theatrical contexts: as a piece of work that connects with issues surrounding 'true' and imposed (homo)sexual identities; and as work that, in doing so, reflects the potential of verbatim practice to create 'a shared community of which testifiers, artists and spectators [are] all a part' (Tomlin, 2013: 123).

In his analysis of the adaptation process, Ingham differentiates between the terms dramatisation and adaptation, and posits this reason for the 'contemporary confusion of terminology' (2004:14):

> The essential difference between the two forms can be seen in terms of their respective attitudes to the source. The former's relationship with the source is, usually deliberately dependent and imitative, whilst the latter utilises and follows the source plot, but retains a considerable measure of autonomy.
>
> (Ingham, 2004:14)

Discussing narrative structure, Ingham alerts us to 'subtleties of distinction between the … parent text and the …reconstruction of it' (2004:14) within the adaptation process, suggesting that the performance of an adaptation is 'necessarily more oblique' (2004: 15) than the relationship between the play text and performance text. Further, referring to the Russian Formalist theory of *szujet* and *fabula* (plot and underlying fable), he argues that 'the inherently surface structure of the dramatisation [as distinct from the adaptation] is more concerned with *szujet*', whereas 'the adaptation's intuitive deep structure concept promotes the intertextual and intercultural resonances, which enable basic *fabulae* … to re-generate meaning' (2004:15). The adaptation, then, 'taps the source at a deeper level in relation to its significance in the socio-cultural psyche' (Ingham, 2004:15).

Ingham detects a parallel here with Raymond Williams' term 'structure of feeling', which defines 'the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this form

to a period' (Williams, 1969 cited in Ingham, 2004:15). The distinction Ingham makes between dramatisation and adaptation is that the former 'seeks to exist in a vacuum as an anachronistic *transcription*' (2004:15, my emphasis), since 'the dramatiser attempts to simply reproduce the source work's structure of feeling'; the latter 'contains its own structure of feeling with regard to the sum of its formal, aesthetic and thematic components' (2004:15).

Williams' notion of a structure of feeling is reaching for a way of capturing that essence of a play that speaks to the lived experience and *interior life* of a particular individual, or group of individuals, that cannot be reduced to a single 'characteristic'; cannot be expressed, explained or accounted for through an understanding of social or theatrical 'convention', or generic tropes; that somehow escapes definition and makes the work of art unique. Darney's play is exclusively concerned with the social and sexual behaviours of a particular faction of the male gay community whose shared experience, as revealed through their various testimonies, exposes the rules of engagement of a subterranean, counter-cultural trend. Bringing his survey to the present day, Ingham approaches contemporary adaptation, and adaptation criticism, through analysis of Patrice Pavis' concept of the filtering process from source to target culture (Pavis, 1990 cited in Ingham, 2004: 18). In doing so, he acknowledges the issues relevant to our discussion of *5 Guys Chillin'*: that 'it is problematic to talk of a unitary target culture, when in fact distinct subcultures and class characteristics enter into the equation, and the question of which audience these adaptations target is intrinsic to … discussion' (2004:18). I will go on to argue that the 'structure of feeling' that emerges from Darney's play is able to transcend such 'distinctiveness'. For, while *5 Guys* speaks directly to a marginal audience, the proclivities and

experiences described, which may be seen to subvert cultural norms, are harnessed to theatrical strategies that facilitate cross-cultural identification. It is to this potential in the work that Williams' analysis of the artefact and its social context bears a striking resemblance:

> It is probable that those to whom the new structure is most accessible, in whom indeed it is most clearly forming, will know their experience primarily as their own: as what cuts them off from other men, though what they are actually cut off from is the set of received formations and conventions and institutions which no longer satisfy their own most essential life. When such a man speaks, in his work, often against what is felt to be the grain of the time, it is surprising … that there can be recognition of what had seemed this most difficult, inaccessible, unshared life.
>
> (Williams, 1993: 18 – 19)

In order to clarify what I mean by 'culture' in the context of this chapter, I will, in due course, explore the particularities of the 'unshared life' exposed in *5 Guys Chillin'*, with reference to the codes and rituals of gay counter-cultures as disseminated by Ian Lucas in *Impertinent Decorum* (1994). First, I will consider the status of verbatim practice within the broader context of the stage adaptation, in order to reveal the concomitant and distinctive qualities that may be recognised as the 'conventions' of verbatim theatre.

It seems reasonable to suppose that spectators of adapted material possess some foreknowledge of the artefact Ingham has called the 'parent text'; there is probably a

tangible referent in mind, to which its adaptation is expected to retain a substantial – and respectful – likeness. In the examples of adaptations cited by Ingham, the recoverable 'original' source is *also fictitious*. This is relevant to my discussion of verbatim theatre because, among several clear disparities, comparison of the genre to fictional adaptations exposes a crucial distinction. While syndication provides easy access to the source material for any popular stage adaptation (in the case of *Wolf Hall* (Mike Poulton, 2014), one would not need to search beyond the foyer for Hilary Mantel's novel), the vast majority of verbatim theatre practice in the UK offers no such assurance.

Why should this matter? Since its resurgence in the late 1990s, a period of international political crises, the genre's intrinsic claims to 'authenticity' and 'truth' have dominated critical discussion. It is precisely the enigmatic nature of its source material, its fragmented, variable and elusive nature, which has alerted academics to potential duplicity. The 'origin' of verbatim material is not configured as a singular entity and cannot be irrefutably traced: 'there is no recoverable "original event" because the archive is already an operation of power (who decides what is archived, and how?) as well as sometimes a questionable arbiter of truth' (Martin, 2012: 18). Carol Martin's view - that documents, being open to distortion and falsification, fail to guarantee authenticity - runs counter to Liz Tomlin's assurance that they 'are more accessible to verification processes' (Tomlin, 2013: 116). Duska Radosavljevic implies that such liabilities are not so much deserved as *imposed*, and suggests that rather than anticipate complete authenticity (of a form that is unable to deliver it) we should 'stay faithful to the language of theatre which renders the real life story into a metaphorical framework' (Radosavljevic, 2013: 137-138).

Desire for unmediated information has been tempered by exposure to the conventions of the form – and awareness of its limitations. Janelle Reinelt posits the desire for 'a brute display of evidence as a reaction against the fear of total fiction when all else fails' but concedes that 'audiences know that documents, facts, and evidence are always mediated when they are received; they know there is no raw truth apart from interpretation' (Reinelt, 2012: 39). Looking to clarify precisely where, if at all, these 'facts' and 'evidence' may be located, we find sub-genres (within the broader grouping of documentary or fact-based theatre) that are important to us because their various means of sourcing raw material – the matter from which adaptations originate – comprises their categorical definition.

Academic analysis has been broadly concerned with exposing the extent to which each of these forms or 'tendencies' (Taylor 2011: 227) has refined or obscured its sources and materials. Given that Darney's work fits the definition of verbatim theatre offered by Taylor et al (see also Tomlin 2013: 118-120), I am using that term along with the clarification that the material intrinsically lacks the authenticating presence of the court transcript or legally encrypted document, and features instead the assemblage of 'private narratives', thus inferring 'great authority to moments of utterance' (Martin, 2012: 23).

The disparities discussed above point towards the difficulty of ascribing to verbatim practice a definitive set of 'conventions', but familiar strategies exist in the presentation of verbatim material that are notable, here, for their discrepancies with Darney's. Liz Tomlin has noted that the emphasis in the 'traditional documentary

form is firmly on the material as protagonist, with the theatrical (and ideological) structure presented as contingent' (2013:135). Darney's staging differs significantly from those in documentary practices outlined by Tomlin (see 2013: 133 -136). Darney invests in the journeys of five individual, invented protagonists, and in doing so eschews the Brechtian approach found in most documentary practice entailing 'a constant switching of roles that [prevents] any consistent identification on the part of the audience, or depth of psychological representation on the part of the actor' (Tomlin 2103:133). The vast majority of verbatim plays, among them *The Permanent Way* (David Hare, 2003) *Talking to Terrorists* (Robin Soans, 2005), and *The Riots* (Gillian Slovo, 2011) feature so many different testifiers that the decision to use this approach is surely as much pragmatic as ideological. Nonetheless, we need to explore the ramifications of Darney's strategies, since, as Tomlin points out, there are 'potential dangers in representing 'real' [people] through coherent psychological characterisation, particularly when elements of the representation that are entirely fictional have been seamlessly grafted onto the real' (2013:133).

The 'real' refers, in this case, to the fifty hours of interview material Darney gathered from interviews with subscribers to Grindr, who attend chill-outs on a more or less regular basis; some, compulsively, others less so, but taken as a whole, they comprise an insightful account of the scene. Darney's choice of subject matter is timely, because the first-hand experiences he solicited from the participants in his research process allow us intimate access to a sub-culture that has, as I have stated, alerted the media to its inherent dangers. In this respect, Darney's project is not untypical of verbatim plays such as Alecky Blythe's *Little Revolution* (2011) that intend to encourage informed, objective evaluation of a widely reported crisis. By the time we

encounter its manifestation in the theatre, something worth talking about has usually been evidenced and reported in various ways; the reciprocal relationship between journalism and verbatim theatre was widely debated in immediate response to its resurrection (see for example Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007).

Although Darney has possessed the Grindr app 'for a few years', he states his own position as being an outsider to the chemsex scene, one that allowed him a useful degree of objectivity: 'I wouldn't describe myself in any way as an active user of Grindr: I'm not somebody that goes on hook-ups; I'm not somebody that attends the parties that I've written about' (Darney, 2015). Direct contact with the users of Grindr and regulars on the chill-out scene granted Darney access to first-hand experience of the controversial aspects of the scene, now making waves in the public sphere. 'One of the people', he says, 'that is a subject of the play [had] just gone five days without drugs, and that's the first time he [hadn't] taken drugs in the day for over nine months' (ibid).

Darney realised that he was, through the process, up against the unethical risk that participants might be under the influence of drugs at the moment of interview. He decided he 'wasn't prepared to [knowingly] speak to anybody whilst they were high,' and as a consequence 'lost some interviews that I was desperate to get.' He gives the example of 'one guy I really wanted to speak to [who] had just been diagnosed HIV positive', who invited Darney to '"come round now, you'll get so much more out of me while I'm high", and I thought: I know I will, I know you'll really open up to me about your diagnosis and how it's changed your life; but then you're going to come down, and you're going to

regret having spoken to me' (Darney, 2015).

Aware of the risk of exploitation, Darney states that 'I felt that I had a responsibility, and I still feel I have a responsibility, to look after the people that I have spoken to'; the (real) identities of all participants are protected, 'buried' within the text under assumed names, so that 'there is no way that anyone could trace them.' Part of the reason for Darney's caution was his perception of a degree of self-delusion: 'they think that they're *empowered*, that they're doing what they want to do … and they're in control and in charge of their lives, and liberated, and maybe they are; but I [recognised] strong similarities between [them, and] some vulnerable people that I'd worked with in the past'(Darney, 2015).

Darney's sense of social responsibility is evident in the ways he attempted to inform and educate a cross-section of the gay community: 'one of the reasons that I had a lot of literature [outside the auditorium], and part of the reason that I had condoms on every seat … was [because] young people thinking of going to a chill out, or interested in exploring that side of themselves, come [to the play] to get a better idea of that world' (Darney, 2015). His aim was not, however, to deter them from participating:

> 'I didn't want to out them off. I wanted to help. I'm not about putting anyone off of anything: I'm about helping people make important choices and provoking conversation about it. Some of the characters in my play occasionally used crystal meth and were happy with that; some, in my opinion, are completely addicted to crystal meth. I have my own personal views on

> crystal meth but I'd like to think that I kept them out of it. I'd like to think that I help people make more of an informed decision.'
>
> (Darney 2015)

Yet the danger of this approach to staging *5 Guys Chillin'* may, of course, be that the characters become viewed as representative specimens, prone to our prurient judgement and disapproval. We are not invited to the party so much as invited to scrutinise the minutiae of its rites and rituals, and thus the piece may work against its intention to challenge the very worst preconception of the chemsex scene: as a siren call to oversexed junkies. Darney is careful to point out that much of the play deals with extremes, and makes a distinction between a 'hard-core' of drug users on the scene, and the 'recreational' drug users, those that 'dip in and out of these parties, [whom] I wouldn't call drug addicts.'
He was motivated, though, by the urge to challenge impulsive condemnation and dismissal of 'hard-core' users:

> 'I think understanding leads to tolerance, and that we need to understand, we need to not judge – it's very easy to call these people 'slutty' or 'sex addicts' or 'junkies' but actually, they're all real people, and they're all living their own lives, and we need to look at them and value them and not see them as a collective group of people who are on the outside of the gay community.'
>
> (Darney 2015)

One of the issues that emerges from wider media commentary on the chemsex scene is the implicit danger of setting up a polarity whereby the gay community

is falsely divided into responsible and irresponsible, or 'good' and 'bad' citizens. We have seen that reviews emphasised the play's explicit depiction of drug-Taking; Tom Knight in the *Gay Times* acknowledged, too, its invitation to consider the subject from an informed perspective:

> Parts of it might be very hard to watch, but it's important to leave judgement to one side and try and see deeper into what's happening. These are the kinds of topics that need to be discussed as a community. The 'chill out' scene is so much more than gay men meeting up for random sex. Many believe that it's about connecting with people, intimacy and acceptance.
>
> (Tom Knight, 2015: online)

Significantly, Darney came to realise that the reason he approached the project – an interest in how and why people become, to varying degrees, immersed in the scene – raised questions of universal significance: 'how can we connect? What does it mean to connect now? How does social media help and hinder that? I think my play *is* about connection. I think it takes in a whole host of issues, but I think it's about connection and intimacy.' Across a range of responses, positive and negative, 'the consecutive thing that I felt that I was seeing in people was a need to connect; a need to be intimate; a need to have that [intimacy] with someone, and the fact that [it] was never going to be found in that setting' (Darney, 2015).

The issue becomes, then, the extent to which the work *is* able to transcend its immediate context. Whether or not the audience agrees with, approves of or shares the experiences described, how does the play raise awareness of wider issues intrinsic to

the contemporary gay community? As a way into assessment of the broader socio-cultural significance of the play, I will now attempt to place *5 Guys Chillin'* within the context of relevant theatre practice in the UK, and assess the extent to which it addresses the complexities of gay identity politics.

Ian Lucas, in *Impertinent Decorum* (1994), concedes that gay theatre still occupies a marginal position in the British theatre scene, 'allowed to make guest appearances in large theatres, more often on the fringe' (1994: 9); and I would have to concede that this is still the case in 2016. *5 Guys Chillin'* transferred from the Brighton Fringe Festival to the King's Head, London, in October 2015, following a season of gay plays at the Islington venue. There can be no question of support for the play, which sold out and extended its run to the end of November, and returned in February 2016. The performances I attended in Brighton and London attracted audiences consisting almost entirely of gay men; the programming and marketing of the piece is targeted towards this demographic, and critical responses emphasise its relevance to gay sub-culture. Nonetheless I am resistant to absolute categorisation of the piece as 'gay theatre', because such categories can be reductive. Lucas points out that

> creating an aesthetic genre based on representations of (homo)sexuality is no less difficult than describing what homosexuality is, and simplifying definitions can lead to misinterpretation and a canon of works related only by what major and minor characters do or don't do in bed (on or off stage).
>
> (Lucas, 1994: 6).

Yet in its exclusive depiction of the chemsex scene, *5 Guys* foregrounds the rituals surrounding the impulsive pursuit of transient same-sex encounters, and culminates in graphic simulation of on-stage sexual activity. Herein, the piece is explicitly concerned with a singular dimension of gay sub-culture - or, as the current publicity blurb puts it, 'a drug-fuelled, hedonistic, highly secret world of Chem-Sex, Grindr and instant gratification' (King's Head Theatre, 2016: online) - and risks 'defining' gay men through proclivity for addictive, obsessive behaviours. Is there a dimension to the piece that reaches out to the complexities of gay identity politics? Lucas is concerned that 'to reject the politics of gay drama completely is to claim that (homo)sexuality is not shaped by, or has a primary relationship with, society's material structures' (1994: 7).

If we consider that sexualities are not only predetermined biologically, but are 'given and attach to themselves meanings which are socially and historically determined' (Lucas, 1994: 8), questions of identity become 'intrinsically linked with who makes and controls 'culture', how it is defined and controlled and where it takes place' (Lucas, 1994: 8). Lucas usefully cites the American writer Richard Hall (Hall, 1978 cited in Lucas, 1994: 9), who identifies four elements required to create 'gay theatre', these being community, identity, subject matter and audience. Hall recognises the liberating element of *choice* in the adoption of gay identity, equates sexuality with subject matter and 'welcomes the eroticisation of gay sexuality on stage' (Lucas, 1994: 9). The audience of any piece of gay theatre, he suggests, 'both supports and invents the text' (Lucas, 1994: 9). Hall's categories interest Lucas because they suggest that radical gay theatre is about more than the depiction of homosexuality, and are not confined within particular (that is, 'camp' or 'ironic') styles and forms.

Furthermore, the depiction of 'some sort of community … will be joined somehow to our choices offstage' (Lucas, 1994: 13). For Lucas, gay theatre is most successful when it is used to 'create and affirm personal and social identities' (1994:14). He goes on to posit that 'the struggle for identity, and debates around 'true' and imposed identities, have been at the centre of gay politics, and particularly gay drama, for decades' (1994:17). Frankly, it is hard, at first glance, to see where the chemsex scene connects with the body politic as conceived by Lucas: its attractions seem to lie in the hedonistic pursuit of self-gratification: liberating, perhaps, but hardly revolutionary. Beneath its exposure of an insatiable appetite for self-destruction, however, the play uncovers a deeper, more insistent and abiding hunger: the yearning for acceptance and stability that binds generations of gay people. Moreover, Darney argues:

> 'I think intimacy and connection are universal themes and I think that social media's intervention in our relationships is universal; I think issues of sexual health are universal, and I think issues of drug use are universal. So although I've zoned in on the gay – the male gay – community, and a particular scene, there is a heterosexual scene that's happening in the same way […] My initial motivation was because it's been blamed for the increase in HIV infection in London, and I felt that actually part of the reason is, people are making poor decisions while they are high, and having sex, and so [we need] more discussion about how you could keep yourself safe if you were going to do this.'
>
> (Darney, 2015)

For the purposes of his study of gay theatrical manoeuvres, Lucas makes use of sub-divisions that focus on the body, on semiotics (or encoded signals, where 'meaning can be read only by those on the inside' (1994: 24), and on space: 'Changing sexual identities have been accompanied by a changing use of spaces, legally and illicitly appropriated and/or seized' (1994: 25). Lucas' observation is interesting in relation to *5 Guys Chillin'*, since the chemsex scene is entirely sustained by the social networking (mostly through Grindr) that operates in a relatively recent conception of space: cyberspace. While announcements, invitations and interactions occur in this intangible realm, the ensuing bodily interactions happen in private, domestic spaces, undetectable to a wider, public sphere. Historically, spaces associated with the assertion or disguise of sexuality have fuelled political debate about gay identity and civil rights that bind the political with the private. As Lucas points out, 'space … has largely dictated how sexual identity has been constructed, how it has manifested itself and what theatrical manoeuvres are appropriate … in creating, defending or deconstructing that space' (1994:128-129). There is a certain irony in noting that the chemsex scene, a rapidly expanding subsection of contemporary gay life, should entail withdrawal to near-invisibility, and its theatrical representation, a return to the living room.

In a pragmatic sense, this retreat underground is understandable because the activities typically described by participants in the chemsex scene revolve around the consumption of alarming quantities of illegal drugs. The obvious dangers that accompany unsupervised drug taking, and the related potential for relaxation of guidelines surrounding safe sex, have brought discussion of the scene into the political arena (see Scalvini, 2015: online). Although many would assert their right to

explore and express their 'identity' in whichever ways they choose, there should be no doubt that concerns for the safety of partakers are justifiable. Arguably, the chemsex scene has cast a distorted reflection of circumstances at the height of the AIDS crisis; it is as if, today, gay men require education and protection, not from external ignorance and prejudice, but from themselves. *5 Guys Chillin'* emerged at a time when urgent calls for a public conversation about the situation were getting heard; its topicality has, no doubt, been a significant factor in the play's visibility and success. The debate has gained momentum since the project began, becoming the subject of an important film, *Chemsex* (William Fairman/Max Dogarty), in December 2015. (See Flynn, 2015: online). Among a proliferation of online commentary prompted by the chemsex scene, Matt Cain's raises a possibility that emerges in the film:

> I believe that … the chemsex phenomenon is a direct result of the lingering shame many of us still feel about our sexuality – and many of the men practising chemsex are looking for a sexual disinhibitor or a means to obliterate their traumatic pasts. Affordable drugs and the use of phone apps for sexual networking merely make it easier for them to respond to these urges.
>
> (Cain, 2015: online)

In the *Chemsex* documentary, the point is made explicitly and, once acknowledged, casts an indelible impression that a sense of collective, inverted homophobia is driving its subjects towards a self-destructive cycle of addictive behaviours. The point is not so explicitly made in *5 Guys Chillin'*, but there is, as I have stated, a subtler dimension to the play, emerging from its 'structure of feeling', that exposes the doubt and isolation felt by its characters. They appear to be seeking, through their involvement in the chemsex scene, fulfilment of

their desire for intimacy and connection. Yet the environments to which they are drawn, of which the party can be read as a representative example, ultimately fail to provide such fulfilment. Darney's conceit may not entirely succeed as a dramatic structure: the framework buckles in those moments where its contrivances are exposed by the strained manipulation of fragmented testimony. It succeeds, however, with regard to its structure of feeling, whereby the play expresses the prevailing sense of stasis and defeat that Williams finds in Chekhov's work – in his estimation, a significant development in naturalist drama:

> In *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* something new has happened: it is not the liberating individual against the complacent group; it is that the desire for liberation has passed into the group as a whole, but at the same time has become hopeless, inward-looking – in effect a defeat before the struggle has even begun.
>
> (Williams, 1993:106)

Richard Schechner's analysis of the Chekhovian 'model' (1994: 26 – 27) concurs that although his later plays have apparent resolutions, 'the situation at the end is only a reinforcing, a deepening, of what was at the beginning.' Indeed, the resolution is no more than an apparition: the 'open structure is the "ghost" of the play, operating quietly within the action, but not clearly visible until near the end' (1994: 26). Comparing his work with Ibsen's, Williams discovers that

> as Chekhov explores his world, he finds not deadlock – the active struggle in which no outcome is possible – but stalemate – the collective

> recognition, as it were before the struggle, that this is so. Virtually everyone wants to change; virtually no one believes it is possible.
>
> (Williams, 1993: 107).

When Williams states that he finds Chekhov's characters to be 'persistently concerned with explicit self-revelation: the desire and need to tell the truth about oneself' (1994:105), he refers, of course, to the 'truth' about a fictional character expressed in dialogue. Verbatim testimony behaves otherwise: the responses may differ among interviewees, but self-revelation is, in every case, prompted by a question, or series of questions. The stated likeness to Darney's play, given the huge discrepancies in time and social context, may seem implausible. But not, perhaps, so implausible when we consider that Darney has asked a number of individuals to speak about themselves – to express 'private and self-regarding feeling' – then devised a situation where they are put in a room together for ninety minutes. In Chekhov's work, Williams detects 'an unfamiliar rhythm' in the dialogue, whereby 'what is being said, essentially, is not said by any one of the characters, but, as it were inadvertently, by the group'(1993:109). As a consequence, therefore, 'what is being expressed is not a dealing between persons, or a series of self-definitions; it is a common, inadvertent mood – questioning, desiring, defeated' (Williams, 1993:110).

Darney achieves this Chekhovian sensibility with *5 Guys Chillin'*, I think, because he risks sustaining a binding narrative device and investing in five consistent characters, whose journey through the party spectators follow from beginning to end. While the 'common, inadvertent mood' may be perceived as sounding too pessimistic a note, the

positive outcome of such an approach is that the play offers access to a closed world, the inhabitants of which may be too easily vilified and condemned. Rather than imposing an external critique, the play allows verbatim testimony to sound out within a setting that often contradicts the expressions of desire voiced by its characters; ultimately, they are granted the space to tell their own story. Thus, the testifiers themselves author the structure of feeling in *5 Guys Chillin'*, of stagnation and isolation, that is the closest the play comes to an expression of outright censure. Darney does not offer solutions; he takes an unapologetically ambivalent stance: 'I'm not going to give you any answers, but I would like to make people talk about it. That's what I was hoping would happen, and that's what definitely did happen.' He is, however, clear about what he wanted from the outset:

> 'I wanted you to invest in the characters as people, and I wanted the spectrum of people [in the audience] to find someone that they could relate to, and identify with. I wanted to help you engage with these people and think a little bit more about them before you write them off.'
>
> (Darney, 2015)

The invitation to the party in *5 Guys Chillin'* is an invitation to assess participants in the chemsex scene as human beings, whose needs and desires may not be so very far removed from our own. Peter Darney's play is a call for understanding and tolerance that we need now more than ever.

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Free Speech: Body and text in DV8's verbatim trilogy

Shane Kinghorn

This article considers Lloyd Newson as a practitioner whose innovations have pushed the verbatim theatre form into unprecedented territories through the hybrid form of 'dance-theatre'. The important, internationally acclaimed trilogy of verbatim dance pieces by DV8 (*To be Straight With You* (2008), *Can We Talk About This?* (2012), culminating with *John* (2014)), have utilised verbatim material as their core text but harnessed it to the expressive, body-based languages of dance and physical theatre. Although it is precisely *within* its experimentation with form that claims to 'authenticity' are destabilized, detached and to some extent destroyed, the presence of testimony also serves to 'legitimize' the political and social significance of the work. I will consider whether this points to a credible future for verbatim material: as a tangible and immediate referent to the real world, untethered to realistic presentation, taking the genre beyond familiar tropes and cyclical debates previously explored in academic commentaries on verbatim practice.

Keywords:

authenticity

authorship/ownership

improvisation

narrative/narration

truth

verbatim theatre practice

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Between 1986 and 1990, Lloyd Newson's work as the director of physical theatre company DV8 'began with generalized themes rather than scripted scenarios' (Newson in Giannachi and Luckhurst 1999: 108). Since DV8's inception, its performances, among them *My Sex Our Dance* (1986), *Deep End* (1987), *My Body, Your Body* (1987) and *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1988), have explored 'gender, the body, sexuality and secrets' as well as 'issues of faith and morality, the use and abuse of power, and the oppression of minority groups in society' (ibid.). Newson has expressed his commitment to pulling 'the language of the stage away from the divisions imposed upon it by the dialects of theatre and dance' (Buckland 1995: 380) and '[f]inding fresh ways of saying things that resonate with the performers' own truths' (Newson in Giannachi and Luckhurst 1999: 109). Using a process of improvisation around given themes, his methodology has been concerned

with allowing the performers ‘a sense of ownership and authenticity over the final material’ (ibid.). Newson has aimed, in performance, for ‘ “specific ambiguity” [that] can hold the story together and at the same time allow individual audience members to have their own reading’ (ibid.). In recent years his work has relied increasingly on pre-existing, scripted scenarios – notably *Strange Fish* (1992), *MSM* (1993) and *Can We Afford This?* (2000) – placing more and more emphasis on the spoken word.

This article considers how Newson forged an alliance between movement and text in his last three DV8 shows, the trilogy of verbatim works *To Be Straight With You* (2008), *Can We Talk About This?* (2012), and *John* (2014). Focusing primarily on *John*, the article explores how Newson’s established compositional strategies were influenced by his decision to integrate verbatim material: how Newson’s practice evolved from the ‘specific ambiguity’ of previous work to his decision, in *John*, to make one of his interviewees into its central protagonist. Newson’s step into verbatim practice can be seen, not so much as a departure from his previous output as a foreseeable progression. He has expressed DV8’s underlying ethos as ‘[c]onnecting meaning to movement and making work that was socially relevant’, asserting that ‘if text, song, set, technology or naturalistic movement could say something more precisely than a dance phrase, then I had no qualms about ditching the “dance”’ (Newson 2008: online).

John, the latest in DV8’s verbatim trilogy, was initially conceived as documentary montage in the same vein as the previous two shows, the company devising movement while original interview transcripts were fed to

them through i-pods. Newson implemented this method of working with verbatim text while developing the first of these, having found that ‘the subject matter and our commitment to use the interviewees' own words’ (Newson 2008: online) led to tensions in finding appropriate movement for the piece: ‘How do you combine stylized movement with verbatim text? I didn't want to demean the interviewees' stories, which were often harrowing, with "nice" movement phrases’ (ibid.). Asking performers to listen to edited interviews while simultaneously repeating the interviewee's words out loud, Newson would then ‘give the performers different physical instructions whilst doing this exercise. Gradually … I began to see flashes of movement ideas that could be developed for different characters.’ (ibid.). The centrality of the text to the making process, and prominence of performers’ individual contributions, emerge in Ankur Bahl’s interview with dancer Seeta Patel, who stresses the collaborative nature of the process (see Bahl 2011). Instructive analysis of rehearsal strategies reveals a complex process wherein each extract of verbatim text is scrutinised for potential translation into aspects of performance, among them spatial relationships, character traits, physical metaphors, gestural movement and speech rhythms.

Critics lauded the thematic complexity of Newson’s investigation, in *To Be Straight With You*, ‘of how a society reconciles religious beliefs with an individual's human rights’ (Newson 2008: online) but questioned the alliance of form and content in the work. Michael Billington found that ‘the prodigious inventiveness of Newson's production sometimes obscured the spoken material’ (Billington 2008: online) while Charles Spencer was ‘not convinced that verbatim speech and physical movement make good partners. It’s a bit

like a gay man getting into bed with a lesbian – they have different priorities' (Spencer 2008: online). While echoing their endorsement of the show's thematic discourse, Lyn Gardner agreed: 'there are problems. For the first 10 minutes, the dialogue is hard to hear. It is also visually over-busy; the monologue form is limiting' (Gardner 2008: online).

Newson had anticipated, in press interviews, the controversy provoked by the overtly political polemic *Can We Talk About This?*, a montage of testimonials concerning Islam, multiculturalism and free speech: 'A lot of Muslims might be irritated by me as a white atheist making a piece about this sensitive subject' (Newson in Cavendish 2012: online). The ensuing critical backlash, alleging Newson's oversimplification of complex debates (see, for example, Mazoor 2012), is summarised in Sunder Katwala's critique. While Katawala applauds, in the choreography, the embodiment of 'liberal dilemmas of intolerance' (Katwala 2012: online) he detects the lack of 'any serious interrogation of the play's central themes of Islam and multiculturalism' (ibid.). The central indictment in the piece – that 'liberalism has lapsed into relativism, so that accusations of racism and Islamophobia prevent challenges to honour killings or forced marriages' (ibid.) – is, for Katwala, essentially an Islamophobic one; it is 'vigorously prosecuted and rarely contested seriously on the stage. More often than not, the challenge to it comes from an extreme Islamism, to reinforce the core narrative about brave liberals taking on intolerance' (ibid.).

Newson was moved to defend similar allegations made by one of the contributors to the piece, Kenan Malik, in his review of *Can We Talk About This?* (see Malik 2012: online). His defence is instructive, as it highlights one

of the potential issues with verbatim montage. Its inclusion of a broad spectrum of voices and perspectives requires a rigorous editing process that can raise doubts about which voices have been silenced by their exclusion, and can weaken the capacity for nuanced detail. There is also the issue of running time in performance: 'If we were obliged to present every detail of each person and their story/body of work in order for the production to be seen as valid, I'm afraid we'd all still be sitting in the theatre watching the show' (Newson in Malik 2012: online).

Although the starting point for *John* 'was a desire to explore men's relationship with love and sexuality, which Newson did by interviewing a range of men who went to gay saunas' (Montgomery 2014: online) the work soon shifted its emphasis to a single character:

> [T]he piece came into focus as soon as one particular man, the eponymous protagonist, entered the interview room. John, 52, was a man seeking to reconfigure his life, in more ways than one.[…]Five weeks out of jail at the point Newson met him, he was living in a probation hostel and seeking to reform … while at the same time searching for his first proper relationship with a man, having had girlfriends all his life.
>
> (Montgomery 2014: online)

Critical responses to the piece imply that the techniques Newson refined through his previous verbatim practice coalesced, in *John*, to overcome distracting incongruities in movement and spoken text. *John* reveals the potential, in Newson's treatment, for both enhancement and restraint: 'His

combination of verbatim theatre and sinuous, metaphorical movement is bold, involving and utterly unique. The words give the movement purpose; the movement restrains the words from sentimentality or sententiousness' (Crompton 2014: online). However, the sequence in *John* that features the clients and owners of a gay sauna drew universal censure, as much for its 'unsatisfying and slightly confusing' (Gardner 2014: online) disruption of narrative coherence as its explicit content: 'The revelations of the men in the sauna are glib and uninvolving, set against John's story. You just want to get back to him and find out more about his life' (ibid.).

The following analysis refers to my own participation as an audience member to *John*, prompted here by a live recording accessible on DV8's website (see dv8.co.uk). Anna Fleische's revolving stage design depicts a carousel of cramped, dimly lit rooms and narrow corridors; there is just enough scenographic detail to convey a domestic interior, and sparse visual and aural signs contribute an approximation of time and place. The mechanism allows for the swift assemblage, by a cast of nine, of several episodes from John's family life: 'a macabre merry-go-round of scenes from a London council estate' (Hickling 2014: online). In the first, a couple settle down on a threadbare sofa, summoned by the opening theme to the seventies TV game-show *The Golden Shot*; the opening keys of Gareth Fry's soft, melancholy, continuous piano score displace the announcer's upbeat preamble. The lights fade to blackout and back up to reveal the first in a series of frozen tableaux that bear an unsettling resemblance to waxwork installations, in 'a house of horrors … where the family are constantly glimpsed in poses like broken plastic dolls' (Gardner 2014: online). The performer Hannes Langolf,

poised on the periphery of the scene, begins his narration. His commentary, performed as direct address, retains the pauses and ellipses of spontaneous utterance. ‘There was my brother Nicholas … and then Karen, and then Ronald … and then me, John. There was about a year and a half between each … and then Simon. Me younger brother, who … there was eight years between me and him’ (Newson 2014) – but then John halts, distracted by the sound of muted cries and whimpers of distress, and appears to step into the present tense as he turns to his left, crosses the room, and opens the door to a narrow corridor. At his feet, a female figure lies curled up in agony and, as if to explain, John continues: ‘and me father was kicking the hell out of her. She was seven months pregnant … she lost the baby … twice that happened’ (ibid.). He opens another door to reveal a male figure sat watching television, and continues: ‘She lost two children. Me sister, as she was growing up, she was quite big and me father, he sort of … ridiculed her about it’ (ibid.) – he breaks off again, distracted by movement: to his left, his ‘father’ is nailing a plank of wood across the doorframe – ‘he locked her in the bedroom to stop her from eating’ (ibid.). John follows his father through an adjacent doorway as John’s ‘sister’ turns into view, crouched in the shadows, now observed, by him, through an open panel in the wall: ‘We chiselled a hole between the bedroom walls so we could feed her through the hole’ (ibid.).

As the piece continues, scenes of progressively extended narrative content and extreme sexual violence augment the rapid descent into a hopeless cycle of neglect, abuse and abandonment. The action gains momentum, marking out the significant episodes of John’s childhood and adolescence with stark clarity and economy: ‘the brother lashed to his bed and whipped until he

bleeds, the mother assaulted, the babysitter raped; the children lined up like shop dummies to steal school uniforms' (Crompton 2014: online). There is a distinct contrast between John's laconic delivery and the atrocities his testimony recalls. Within the first five minutes he has cited – and we have fleetingly witnessed – his father's sexual abuse of his sister and babysitter; we learn of his imprisonment on charges of rape, John's coercion, by his mother, into petty crime and subsequent integration, at the age of ten, into the care system: 'I was quite pleased, to be honest' (Newson 2014). When his mother's suicide is recounted in the same phlegmatic voice, the impression that he is attempting to make sense of his recent history is tainted by the implication that he feels partly responsible: 'Obviously she had persecuted herself for … all that time. Because of what happened, between my father … and my sister. I felt really, really bad for not understanding what she was going through' (ibid.).

Thus we are swiftly cued into the notion that John is condemned to weave, ghost-like, through the dark vaults of his own memory bank, afforded the power to revisit, but stripped of the power to interact or intervene in his own story: he cannot alter the past. But this conception of the stage as live-action mnemonic is complicated by John's narrative function. Such is the relentless pace and increasingly disturbing content of the imagery that it is impossible to determine the extent to which John's words are conjuring or reacting to each episode. A disorientating temporal trick is achieved by the combination of his past tense, verbatim text and its immediate, 'here-and-now' enactment that populates the stage; John's position oscillates between narrator and participant. The point made here is surely that John had no control over the

sequence of occurrences that make up his story, has limited control over their recollection and no opportunity to escape their consequences: he is always inhabiting a space that is somewhere between detached reportage and embodied, integrated reconstruction of the past. Consistent with the impulse driving Newson's previous practice, his restrained kinetic vocabulary elicits the perception of John 'not just as a dancer trying to present a piece of movement, but as an emotional being, as a 'lived body' rather than a danced one' (Buckland 1995: 372).

Objective detachment is discouraged on the audience's part: the piece tends to foreshadow its most ominous disclosures. Because the revolve enables us to glimpse the next scene before the previous one disappears from view, we become implicated in piecing together narrative fragments: our dependence on John as interlocutor is not absolute, since he is often several steps behind us, anticipating and confirming our interpretation, rather than setting it in motion. For example, we are given time to absorb the image of a young man, splayed face-down and bound to a bed, his buttocks exposed and bleeding, moments before John provides the caption: 'He tied my brother to the bed once … and he beat him with his army belt … those big, green canvas ones with the brass buckle on it' (Newson 2014). Following his father's banishment from John's home, he tells us 'the neighbour came round to baby-sit … it was then that me father broke into the house and …' John pauses. We hear, and then witness a violent crime moments before John seems to clarify tacit questions about its meaning and consequence: 'Yeah, he raped the baby-sitter. He got three years for that' (ibid.).

That we are active in the construction of the narrative prevents the experience from becoming basely voyeuristic. While the episodes have clearly been chosen for maximum impact, leaving very little to the imagination, their unflinching explicitness is justified and authenticated through the singularity of John's testimony. In the example above, the localised detail – he remembers the *belt* exactly – stresses that the source of the narrative is the unique recollection of one individual, and pinpoints the facility of verbatim testimony to evoke specific details with remarkable clarity. That John is able, in these moments, to take possession of his own story is a significant factor in preventing the piece from flatlining into the generalised luridness of poverty porn: its source material bears the unequivocal veracity of private utterance.

Beyond childhood, John slides predictably into drug abuse, failed relationships, petty crime and imprisonment. A crucial factor in the piece's dramaturgical composition, the revolve becomes so perfect a metaphor for his personal and social trajectory that it comes close to cliché; he is, literally, on a treadmill: 'He has to keep moving, because he can't find a foothold on life. Everyone he meets is like him, beset by problems: addicts, prostitutes, a community of shoplifters. They drag each other down. Drugs to depression to crime to jail to depression to drugs. John lives in a tailspin' (Trueman 2014: online).

The live performance of John's testimony provides an outline of his autobiography, and thus a degree of narrative coherence and progression

unusual in verbatim theatre (and unseen in Newson's previous work). Yet the dominant elements of the design elicit a dynamic spatial and temporal confluence, whereby we perceive compression (of plot), expansion (of key episodes), momentum and stasis (in John's story) all at once. In this respect, the piece is consistent with Newson's previous work, wherein 'the set is necessary to place the movement in an environment which helps to create a series of connected visual associations' (Newson in Giannachi and Luckhurst 1999: 110).

While the action outlined above is slickly marshalled, the movement sporadically breaks out from its formalised illustration of John's testimony into a choreographic form closer to 'dance' than 'theatre'. Verbatim text is adaptable, in performance, to expansion into expressive forms of movement because recorded testimony pre-exists its function as a component of any broader dramaturgical framework. Unless the aim is to replicate precisely the moment of utterance (a tendency found within tribunal theatre: see, for instance, Richard Norton-Taylor's *The Colour of Justice* (1999)), it can be manipulated to fit the artists' aesthetic ambitions. In their first iteration as rehearsal stimuli, John's interviews would suggest, rather than demand, narrative coherence; the piece adheres to the chronology suggested because Newson was compelled to privilege those qualities in the text. If the choreographic treatment of the source material is where Newson asserts authorship – it is unmistakably a DV8 piece in that it retains the hallmarks of his methodology – he reportedly applied, in this work, the 'rigorous attitude to meaning that has led him to centre his work on verbatim speech in recent

years' (Montgomery 2014: online). Moreover, Newson claims 'working with ever more dense and naturalistic text has made him a better choreographer' (ibid.), since "it forces you try to find a movement that will match what is being said[…]and of course there are no pirouettes or arabesques because they're absolutely meaningless" (Newson in Montgomery 2014: online).

Newson has, in previous work, sought outcomes that evidenced the collaborative process, the objective having been to discover fresh interpretative strategies and performance vocabularies. The emphasis placed here on 'intimacy' and 'authenticity' presages Newson's encounters with the particular concerns of verbatim practice (see Martin 2012), which has privileged the integrity of individual testimony:

> The use of improvisation in the production process effects the sense of the intimate and individual in performance, and, in movement work based on contact improvisation, risk is central to a process of self-exploration – where a dancer works at getting away from old, familiar patterns of movement to find something new and authentic.
> (Buckland 1995: 376)

As we have seen, Newson's stated priority, in rehearsal, is to encourage his dancers to 'authenticate' work through inscribing upon it their own, unique signature; when Newson refers to the legitimacy of his work, it is with regard to retaining, in performance, tangible traces of rehearsal conditions, and the

discoveries made therein. Not only that, his definition of authenticity pertains to the limitations of the traditional dialects of dance:

> Dance often prevents you from seeing the individual, and it's the person that I'm interested in; what their life story is, what's inside their head, not the reduction of people through (limited) form.[…]It is this approach, I believe, that allows us to see and understand individuals over form.
>
> (Newson in Giannachi and Luckhurst 1999: 110)

Newson's verbatim projects, through their invitation to encounter 'individuals over form', find subtle ways of reflecting a preoccupation with body fascism that has underpinned his career, its most emphatic expression being in *Can We Afford This?* (2000). In this show, 'recontextualisation and positive revaluation of different body types worked also through its acknowledgement that all bodies – not just the putatively disabled – have a different and potentially compelling movement, and are all valuable in different ways' (Harvie 2002: 71). In form and content, *Can We Afford This?* 'remarked on the elitism and distance from the vernacular' (ibid.) in classical dance, and anticipates the shift towards the interpretation of 'lived experience' at the core of Newson's verbatim practice: 'While all the dancers were obviously trained and so *extra*ordinary in their movement abilities, the clear roots of much of the movement in popular forms and objects … linked the dancers more closely to audiences' lived experience of everyday movement' (ibid.).

While Newson's investment in verbatim practice signals a shift in his priorities (from expression of the dancers' 'truths' to those embedded in the (spoken) text), this new emphasis on 'meaning' carries the risk of compromise – of *over*emphasis on the quotidian in movement. Yet the work does not altogether close the beguiling ambiguities that have characterised his previous output; Newson's verbatim trilogy has brought a welcome degree of aesthetic flair to a form that is typically self-effacing about its theatricality. If the 'highly polished versions of reality' (Hughes, 2007: 163) prevalent in verbatim theatre practice have conspired to mask the extent to which they 'are imagined, interpreted, constructed and selective' (Hughes 2007: 152-153), Newson is more inclined to reveal artists' ownership of the process.

This is not to say that the integrity of the testimony thus undermined in *John*: indeed, critics recognised the potential of the choreography to crystallise, rather than distract from crucial details of the text. While movement predominantly operates in service to John's testimony, Newson's choreography expresses an interpretation of it that surpasses mimesis, expanding the performance vocabulary to enable its corporeal expression; these might be moments of extreme physical impediment, emotional distress, hopeless yearning, or sporadic bids for freedom. It is testament to their immediacy and urgency that critics cited those moments with remarkable clarity:

> As John and his brother descend into heroin addiction, the dancers slope, rubber-legged, boneless, falling even as they stand; when John describes the catastrophic death of another friend, he seamlessly folds and unfolds his body in paroxysms of pain; trying to sort out his life, he stands as if rooted to the spot by magnetic feet, describing his dreams of being normal in wafting movements to the air; in prison, his exercise routine shoots him high above the back wall.[…]It is transfixing, both beautiful and shocking and has the effect of making you listen harder.
>
> (Crompton 2014: online)

However, the controversial moment when '[t]he show stumbles into a sauna just as John does' (Trueman 2014: online) takes us, without warning, into a location chosen by Newson 'for its potent ambiguity' (Newson in Montgomery 2014: online). The sequence drew critical consternation as much for its disruption to the show's narrative coherence as its visceral content – 'It's jarring; completely unexpected and, for a second, quite puzzling' (Trueman 2014: online) – but the ensuing presentation of various staged interviews is more typical of verbatim theatre that organises its content around responses to a general theme. While critics alleged an audacious sleight-of-hand in the apparent shift of focus from John's story – 'DV8 have smuggled one show in under the guise of another**'** (ibid.) **–** it is, in fact, an invitation to the location where Newson's research process began, and where John 'eventually came to find sanctuary and a sense of belonging' (Hickling 2014: online). Yet although Newson has described the world of gay saunas as 'the place where

[John] felt most at ease' because 'they offer perfect anonymity', (Newson in Hickling 2014: online) my reading of the sequence actually contradicts the reassurance implied there in Newson's rationale for its inclusion.

Matt Trueman perceives the depiction of the sauna 'as a safe, permissive space, where men are allowed to express themselves as they so choose; a recluse from a punitive, normative mainstream' (Trueman 2014: online), and in this respect it would appear to offer John a subterranean place of refuge. But its distinction from the 'mainstream' is superficial; the collage of several testimonies presents us with a culture that is slyly operated by its own, conversely punitive etiquette, and we come to see that John is no less out of step with the rules of engagement here than he was outside. The line between acceptance and rejection, alienation and assimilation, is not easily traversed, either, albeit that the transactions require possession of unearned currency. Consider this speech from the sauna's owner, explaining the habitual pattern of customers' attendance:

> 'They think 'busy' ups their chance of having good sex. Actually, busy's not always best. My little joke thing is, you know we all rate ourselves on a scale? Well, I put myself on a 7. I'm probably a 5, but I have high self-esteem. And I chase after 9's. But I know that if I go to a very busy sauna that's full of 9's, all the 9's are gonna be fucking each other.'
> (Newson 2014)

The implication here is that John is not guaranteed 'sanctuary' from social hierarchy and classification: his status will be determined by his 'rating'. But

when John speaks to the others in this setting, his frustrated pleas for communication, his implicit longing for a sense of emotional connectedness, supersede the compulsion that binds the various participants' experience of the sauna: their desire for transient encounters. While they actively seek 'invisibility' and appreciate the 'honesty' of a system where, according to one customer, 'as long as you keep your mouth shut, you're just judged by the cover', we rapidly comprehend that John is looking for a meaningful and lasting relationship with another man.

Newson has explored similar territory in previous work concerned with 'issues of repression, loneliness and restriction of freedom' (Newson in Giannachi and Luckhurst 1999: 108). In *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1988) 'DV8 gives us a window on a world in which the body exists *only* as a place of desire, suggesting how in such a context it is impossible to forge a rewarding relationship in terms of the orthodox ideal of intimacy' (Buckland 1995: 375). In *John*, the futility of the protagonist's quest for intimacy in a space set up for brief sexual gratification is made apparent to the audience through his *text*. In *Dead Dreams*, the movement conveys the clash of contradictory impulses:

> Within the context of *Dead Dreams*, contact work, its style and rhythm being based on physical fall and recovery, reveals an inner meaning, that of the human conflict of longing for security and yet desiring risk … the men become more isolated from each other with each interaction, and the ultimate result is loneliness.
> (Buckland 1995: 378)

John's text supplants any generalised impression of the sauna as a place that exists *only* to facilitate casual sex. Any one of the 10,000 customers that pass through it every month might, too, undermine such preconceptions if the piece had room to focus on *their* story. Once he has stepped off the carousel, John's story becomes subsumed into a version of DV8's familiar narratives of desire. Here, as one of the sauna's habitués posits, the search for sex is more compelling than the sex itself; we sense that the yearning for connection is heightened by the near-impossibility of fulfilment. The lack of profound, sustained interaction carves out an absence defined by the longing for unattainable ideals: of masculinity, beauty, virility and, in John's case, love. The connection we, the audience, have established with John qualifies us to see, with a crushing sense of inevitability, that the sauna represents a parallel narrative to his backstory: not an antidote to the instability of his past, but a continuation of it. John's life has been marked by every kind of absence.

In preparation for the piece, Newson had asked customers: 'why do you come here? Is it only about sex? Maybe it's about something else, maybe it's really for love?' (Newson in Montgomery 2014: online). The show's most poignant moment comes in its final part, when the real, recorded voice of John takes over the performer's and provides his answer: 'I'm aching to find someone I can share my life with, or what's left of it … I've got so much love and affection that I've never been able to express for so long' (Newson 2014).

As raw material for performance, the substance gleaned from interviews and vox pops that provide the content for DV8's verbatim trilogy is not predisposed

to suggest structural coherence. Contributors respond, in the research process, to questions with stories drawn from subjective experience. At this stage of the process, Newson's influence over the content would be limited to his preparation of questions arising from thematic concerns apparent, in comparable guises, throughout DV8's oeuvre. His authorial signature emerges in choreography wrought from the spontaneous, improvisational interpretation of individual collaborators. Thus the fragmentary structure of the work dissipates its thematic concerns across loosely connected episodes that, taken as a whole, lack the resounding statement of collective certainty: there are no chorus lines. The survey of critical responses that informs this article suggests detractors of Newson's verbatim practice, whilst applauding its aesthetic innovation, object to the absence of rigorous *analysis* in the work. While Newson's repositioning of verbatim text has proved its potential for underpinning expressive movement with profound emphasis on capturing the meanings inherent in the text, the work lacks a persuasive, overarching meta-narrative to guide the spectator through politically complex discourses.

Implicit, too, is a tension arising from contradictions in Newson's expression of political and methodological concerns. His championing of free speech comes from a position of relative privilege – he operates in contexts free from barriers to the dissemination of his practice; his critique of elitist divisions between the languages of theatre and classical dance is expressed through forms dependent on virtuosity in both. But audiences to the work are given agency to engage with the material in ways that are not influenced by the dogmatic presence of an authoritative, connective thread. Spectators must work to make the connections, and in doing so, question their own attitudes to the

issues raised. Newson's commitment to refining tendencies in his work in service to verbatim testimony has led him towards the vexed issues of 'truth' and 'authenticity' that attend verbatim theatre practice. The redefinition of those terms within DV8's methodology has made an important, politically explicit contribution to the development of verbatim practice.

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Two Sides of the Road: Alecky Blythe's *Little Revolution*

Shane Kinghorn

The recent work of verbatim theatre maker Alecky Blythe is primarily concerned with documenting the ways individuals respond to seismic events in and around their communities, and the possibility of reconciliation and peace building in their wake. Blythe presents her audiences with representations of fractured communities whose identity and sense of cohesion is threatened by such events: in the case of *Little Revolution* (2014), the riots that swept through London in 2011.

This article examines the extent to which the artist holds ultimate 'authority' over the play's political conclusions, and representations of the individuals whose original utterances contribute to its content. I will interrogate the degrees of autonomy negotiated through Blythe's unique methodologies, the staging strategies apparent in the performance of *Little Revolution*, and the consequences of her decision to integrate herself as a 'character' within the play.

Little Revolution (2014) followed Blythe's hit verbatim musical *London Road* (2011) and the lesser-known *Where Have I Been All My Life*? (2012). First performed at the Almeida, Islington, London, Blythe's latest work employs her trademark 'recorded delivery' technique, and follows the stories of residents in the Lower Clapton area of Hackney, as the London riots of 2011 spread to this location, through to their immediate aftermath.

Among several notable practitioners working the field of documentary theatre, Blythe has arguably the highest profile in the UK. *London Road* transferred from the National's then Cottesloe theatre to the Olivier in July 2012; a film version, directed by Rufus Norris, was released in June 2015. Rupert Goold, the Almeida's artistic director, risked programming *Little Revolution* three years after the riots had ceased being newsworthy and despite obvious similarities in Gillian Slovo's acclaimed *The Riots* (2011), also a verbatim play, comprised of interviews with politicians, police, teachers, lawyers, community leaders, victims and on-lookers. The opening of *The Riots* at London's Tricycle Theatre in November 2011 coincided with wide media coverage of the crisis; put in context, Slovo's play offered the more immediate, and thus, arguably, more relevant response. It is doubtful that any playwright other than Blythe would be given a major production in these circumstances. Does Blythe possess a unique selling point?

The notion of 'ghosting', or literally 'speaking for others', has influenced a conception of verbatim practice (see Enright 2011) in which the performer is perceived as a substitute for the absent subjects whose words and voices have been captured through interview, prior to being edited into a performance text. The distinguishing feature of Alecky Blythe's pioneering work, developed with Mark Wing-Davey at the National Theatre studio and first seen in *Come Out Eli* (2003), is in the integration and foregrounding of technology as 'authenticating' presence: the recorded voices of interviewees are fed live, through headphones, to the actors in the moment of performance. Blythe has often referred in interview to the technique that gave her Recorded Delivery company its name (see for instance Hammond and Steward 2008), but the headphone technique is by no means exclusive to her practice.

Caroline Wake refers to the technique as a global genre, tracing its history from an American rehearsal room to Blythe's experiments with it in an English workshop, and the evolution of audio technology in Australia through the work of Roslyn Oades (see Wake 2013). In the UK, however, Alecky Blythe's is the name synonymous with headphone theatre.

Blythe's recent work has been concerned with events of local or national significance and their impact upon communities: the murders of five women in the semi-rural town of Ipswich (*London Road*); the London riots (*Little Revolution*) and, in *Where Have I Been All My Life?,* a local talent show*,* Stoke's Top Talent*. Little Revolution* exposes the techniques Blythe developed with Recorded Delivery: actors attempt transmission of a near-facsimile, in their performance, of the sounds played through their headset, from accent and tone of voice to every pause, stutter, 'um' and 'ah'. Significantly, the recorded voices fed to the actors are always the original, unprocessed voices of individuals captured in the moment they were interviewed by the writer – or editor – Alecky Blythe. In principle, this simulation in performance of the patterns and nuances of everyday speech means to bring audiences into as authentic an encounter with those aural traces of the testifiers as possible. The efficacy of this aim has, of course, been exposed to critical scrutiny (see Taylor 2013, Wake 2013).

In a broader context, academic analysis of verbatim theatre has been primarily concerned with challenging its claims to 'truth' and 'authenticity' (see Martin 2012), exposing the extent to which each of the various forms or 'tendencies' (see Taylor 2011: 227) within verbatim practice have refined or obscured their sources and

materials. Blythe's material intrinsically lacks the 'authenticating' presence of the court transcript or legally encrypted document, and features instead the assemblage of various individual narratives that intend to tell a community's story. Do these infer any less authority than 'factual' sources? Amanda Stuart-Fisher has called for a shift of emphasis in the assessment of verbatim practice, since 'generating a 'technical' or even 'factual' truth is not necessarily [its] function, nor should the question of truth be expected to form the grounds of its critique' (Stuart Fisher 2011: 197). Stuart-Fisher repositions private narratives as being legitimised in their moment of expression by the individual – or verbatim subject – speaking of lived experience:

> Testimony then does not seek to correspond or to 'report' a factual truth; rather it justifies (through the act of testifying) a subjective encounter with an event or situation. It is this act of speaking out in verbatim theatre and the promise that this bears witness to a concrete situation or moment in history that constitutes the truth claims of this practice.
>
> (Stuart-Fisher 2011: 197)

Within pluralist models of twenty-first century verbatim theatre, the presence of individuals speaking about an event proposes a number of competing utterances, often deliberately juxtaposed in the editing so that conflict – one of the essential components of drama – ensues from the clash of opposing points of view. The degree to which the testifiers retain ownership of the material is open to question: Blythe's editing process forces the omission of voices that cannot usefully service the central narrative strands she pulls from the raw material she has gathered. The selection of

some dominant characters requires relative marginalisation of others. Further, reception of the material is inevitably manipulated by the actor's interpretation of it. According to Radosavljevic, verbatim theatre 'allows for the actors' authority to assert itself at least through virtuosity if not through literal authorship' and becomes, in performance, 'ultimately more of a vehicle for an actor's artistry than that of a writer or director' (Radosavljevic 2013: 129). Tomlin concurs that 'the perspective of the artist holds the ultimate authority, both over the political conclusions of the piece itself and over the representations of the individuals involved' (Tomlin 2013: 123). The issue of 'authority' over the text will inform my discussion of Alecky Blythe's verbatim practice, as it interrogates the degrees of autonomy negotiated through Blythe's compositional methodologies and the dramaturgical strategies apparent in the text and performance of *Little Revolution*.

The practitioner is privileged by an unusual degree of control over the creative process, and thus, ultimately, the audience's reception of its outcome. It is Blythe that first encounters the testifiers and selects whose words to include in the final edit. She participates in the rehearsal process, writing and re-writing as a play takes shape, and is therefore 'omnipresent, since interviewees are responding to her questions, her prompts, her encouragements and observations: we are not witnessing the world so much as the world according to Alecky Blythe' (Kinghorn, 2013: 24). Blythe's choice of interviewees can 'tend towards caricature at times, begging the question: is it caricature or is it that these people really do exist but we just can't quite believe it in the context of this show?' (Kinghorn 2013: 30). Taylor's analysis of *London Road* expresses a similar concern:

> The production of the voice in verbatim theatre is always problematic, because the aim to embody the real person can raise the spectre of mimicry akin to comic impersonators, and the actors in Blythe's work recognise this by sometimes using the term 'mimicry' to describe their work.
>
> (Taylor 2013: 13)

If Blythe gravitates towards eccentric or extreme or funny individuals then they become, as characters, potentially misleading representatives of an entire community, a distracting risk apparent in the Almeida production of *Little Revolution*. The innate danger in this treatment of subjects is that their status is immediately undermined in the moment an audience is effectively granted permission to laugh at them. The play's assemblage of voices represents a living community; does it risk reflecting, rather than *challenging*, intrinsic social divisions? Tomlin expresses this view of power-relations in verbatim theatre as 'a conflict between those who already have less [the testifiers], and are held of less value, giving freely to those who have more and are held in more value [the artists]' (Tomlin 2013: 123). Intriguingly, Alecky Blythe performs as herself in her latest piece *Little Revolution*, inviting scrutiny of her own role and status within the process – an important intervention that informs my analyses of the play.

Blythe's corporeal presence is a key device in the framing of its verbatim material that distinguishes *Little Revolution* from her previous works. Taylor has observed that it is 'fidelity to an original that legitimates and gives integrity to [Blythe's] performances, even if the audience [is] unaware of the process by which the performance is realised' (Taylor 2013: 2). In *Little Revolution*, the process is so

emphatically exposed that total submergence in a sustained illusion of verisimilitude is denied. The technology is fully visible, and its function is indicated from the outset, as Blythe, performing as herself, opens the play by demonstrating the device in a reconstruction of a meeting with the cast. How does this meta-theatrical intervention influence our reception of the material?

The following analysis of *Little Revolution* sets up a distinction between the play as live performance text, as I first encountered it in the Almeida production, and the play as written and published text: its transposition into permanence, 'a record to be revisited' (Taylor 2013: 23). My intention in doing so is to suggest that while the flaws in the production of *Little Revolution* may have overwhelmed, and unjustly tainted my initial response to the play, close scrutiny of the published text affords a deeper appreciation of Blythe's dramaturgical strategies. This second critical appraisal examines how the playwright has structured the play's complex series of juxtapositions so that they expose profound inequalities within the community she is representing. Taylor has identified in Blythe's practice the tension between the spontaneity of speaking and permanence of writing, reflected, in my analysis, by imposing a separation between my critical position as spectator/listener and that as reader:

> Blythe's verbatim work re-presents oral interviews, thereby seemingly displacing the authority of the literary writer and aspiring to embody the performativity, aliveness and spontaneity of the act of speaking. […] At the same time, the recorded vocal material in Blythe's work is a kind of

> 'writing' in that it is stored, edited and is published as a record to be revisited.
>
> (Taylor 2013: 23)

In *Little Revolution*, however, the 'authority of the writer' cannot be entirely displaced because Blythe has cast herself as 'Alecky', a character in the play. Blythe (the researcher and writer) and Alecky (the character) operate in subtly different ways. As she becomes increasingly absorbed by the conflicts dividing the community, Alecky Blythe comes to personify the very dichotomies she conveys. Her self-conscious presence as Alecky, the white, middle-class playwright, makes itself felt, in performance, as an exaggerated, comic version of herself; it becomes apparent that Blythe uses Alecky, her comic persona, as a means to undermine and defer Blythe's 'writerly' authority. Functioning as Alecky, Blythe must gain the community's trust and retain her essential neutrality in order to draw material from her participants, but at the same time Blythe is aware that the impression of neutrality is temporary, since her obligation, as a playwright, is to process this material at a later stage. Blythe has ultimate responsibility for the transformation of the community into characters exposed to the scrutiny of spectators; it is essential that 'Alecky' should not assume a superior status.

My first encounter with *Little Revolution*, on 26 August 2014, is its world premiere at the Almeida Theatre, Islington; more accurately, with the programme that accompanies the production. It features an interview with Blythe (reproduced in the play text) and Paul Lewis's report from *The Guardian* that predicated Blythe's 2012 BBC2 series *The Riots: In Their Own Words*. The programme is an instructive

document designed to introduce an Islington audience to the play's demographic and political context. As I absorb the material outlined below, surrounded by the Almeida's predominantly white, middle-class clientele, it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the incongruity of my location; the venue's insulation from the issues foregrounded by the programme could not seem to me more pronounced. Why is the play happening here, and not in Hackney? What relevance could it possibly have to an Almeida audience? How should the subjects of Blythe's play access the production when the ticket price alone would almost certainly preclude their admission? Do those questions actually reveal my own prejudices?

At the heart of *Little Revolution* is the tension between the 'two sides' of the road: 'On the one side of the road you've got a lovely square and on the other side there's a big estate, so there're quite contrasting people living on the two sides' (Lawson 2014:6). This becomes Blythe's central motif, the antithesis through which she conveys the mixed fortunes perceived in a community whose evolution favours the few: 'I think some communities are perhaps fractured and getting more fractured as the divide between rich and poor grows and gentrification continues' (Lawson 2014: 7). Even as Blythe expresses her faith in the 'fantastic initiative' that becomes the galvanising event at the heart of the play, she is aware of the scepticism – resentment, even – that surrounds it: ' … the tea party will still be criticised if people feel that the ideas are not coming from their side of the street' (Lawson 2014: 7). The production of *Little Revolution* attempts to reflect – or perhaps, restore – the area's intrinsic diversity by integrating a 'community chorus' of thirty-one volunteers, predominantly from Hackney and Islington, to perform alongside professional actors where scenes required 'a lot of bodies on stage'. This, according to Blythe, 'is when the play really

comes alive as you've got people from a wide variety of backgrounds coming together which reflects a central theme of the piece' (Lawson 2014: 7).

Expressing this sentiment, is Blythe imposing her own utopian concept upon an irreparably fragmented community? The play's programme also includes an article reprinted from *The Telegraph*, 'A Borough Divided' by Pauline Pearce, in which a Hackney resident speaks candidly about the inequalities sensed by Blythe: the 'social cleansing becoming increasingly evident around here' (Pearce 2014: 18). For Pearce, the advancement of the area into a fashionable destination for so-called 'hipsters' is epitomized by the '£5 for a cappuccino' charged by the 'trendy places that nobody can afford' – the 'retro bars and clubs' whose customers are 'all white' (Pearce 2014: 19). Pearce is clear about the cause of the riots: they 'began because people felt marginalised. […] The shooting of Mark Duggan was the spark that lit the tinderbox. Could it happen again? Never say never' (Pearce 2014: 19).

I should point out at this stage that I am a (white, middle-class) resident of the Lower Clapton area, a relative newcomer to Hackney, and as such could be perceived as one of the beneficiaries of the 'gentrification' resented by Pearce that is stealthily altering the demographic of the area. The overbearing impression is of the steady encroachment of a packaged lifestyle and identity available for consumption by those able to afford it: on those terms, Pearce's resentment is justifiable. Nowhere, however, have I found a single café charging as much as £5 for a cappuccino. Perhaps Pearce's overstatement, while lacking the veracity of *factual* truth, epitomises Stuart-Fisher's defence of the subjective account: its 'truth claim' is legitimised by lived experience of a situation. Nonetheless, the ready categorisation of individuals can be

too convenient, and becomes hazardous if deployed in the service of political discourse.

Pearce's article is significant because it anticipates the binary projected by Blythe: the play relies, for its narrative clarity, upon setting up rigid class divisions between the residents of Clapton Square (middle-class, privileged) and Pembury estate (working-class, marginalised). Even in London – a city that harbours its extremes in close proximity – such absolute polarisation is misrepresentative. I go into the auditorium, then, with the troubling sense that Blythe has not so much reflected or challenged social divisions but, to an extent, constructed them.

Little Revolution exposes in performance the recordings made by Blythe during the London riots of 2011, specifically in the lower Clapton area of Hackney, by reconstructing interviews as they happened: we are taken, through the course of the play, back and forth from the 'riot' (indicated, in performance, by abrupt lighting changes and sound effects) to its aftermath (staged in the central playing area, transformed by plain wooden floors and platforms into various non-descript public meeting spaces). Through the corporeal presence of Blythe and her recording device, the source material – a series of recorded encounters with various local residents – is shown in its original and its processed versions all at once: we witness action replays of the moments Blythe first captured the voices she later selected for inclusion (though as usual, we will never know which encounters were omitted, and why). Thus a spatial and temporal compression is achieved, appearing to close the gaps between collating, editing, rehearsal and transmission.

The Almeida has been stripped of any extraneous signifying elements: brickwork is exposed and the doors into the auditorium opened to reveal glimpses of the foyer beyond it. The simplicity of the staging allows for necessary fluidity in the presentation of a complex structure: the play has seven sections and fifty-one scenes (as indicated in the published text: see Blythe 2014), which ensue in rapid succession. Twelve professional actors and the community chorus populate the stage and portray, between them, close to eighty characters. A degree of confusion is almost inevitable, then, although Blythe, interviewed in a preface to the play text, designates the most decipherable narrative thread: the fund set up for a shopkeeper ('Friends of Siva') whose premises had been vandalised and looted, the success of the campaign and the jubilant re-opening of his grocery shop on Clarence Road (see Blythe 2014: 7).

In common with *London Road* and *Where Have I Been All My Life?* the play takes an event – 'a big talking point that people would have strong opinions on' (Blythe 2014: 6) – and, in recording the community's responses to it, exposes underlying factions that bubble to the surface in moments of heated conflict. In *Little Revolution*, animosity towards the residents of Clapton Square from those of the Penbury estate points towards the steady gentrification causing antipathy in the area. A recurrent theme in Blythe's work is the rebuilding of community spirit and renewal of civic pride through the catalyst of a public function or competition. In *Little Revolution*, a tea party sponsored by Marks and Spencer is redolent of the 'London Road in Bloom' competition that gave the musical its abiding motif: an aerial display of gently swaying hanging baskets.

Ultimately the Almeida production of *Little Revolution* succeeds most acutely in exposing the limitations of the verbatim form and puts a question mark over its credibility as a forum for political discourse. Blythe's laudable intentions (exploring genuinely valid issues through a cross-section of characters) are not in doubt; yet knowing that we are watching depictions of real citizens, it becomes increasingly perplexing that the production's treatment should reduce entire populations to archetypes. It becomes uncomfortably clear, for instance, that the figure of Jane, as portrayed by the comic actor Ronni Ancona, is awarded a centre-stage presence for her ability to heighten her portrayal to a level that raises laughs, but it frequently comes close to ridicule.

In this production, the actors' skill arguably places the integrity of the text in jeopardy, for Blythe undoubtedly possesses an ear for potent dialogue: Ian's heartfelt, spontaneous expression of the qualities that define a community to him (see Blythe 2014: 72-73) sounds out through the chaos with the clarity of a bell. We do not doubt the authenticity of the original utterances; rather, their performance seems more concerned with achieving charismatic projection. Revelation of the mechanism through which the actors speak brings to the piece a degree of reflexivity that ultimately holds the spectator at such a distance from their portrayals of the testifiers that the need for a measure of identification with them – of belief in their corporeal presence – is emphatically exposed.

The pace and frequency of the scene-changes, and sheer quantity of assembled voices (those of participants, bystanders and victims) work against any advantage that distance and retrospection may have brought to our understanding of the context and

causes of the event. Could it be that, being immersed in the production, Blythe denied herself the advantage of a distanced, instructive position? The staging is confused and confusing: there is simply no discernable system apparent in the mixture of direct address and fourth-wall presentation, no indication of place and time (in performance) that the play text indicates.

Only Blythe is enabled the opportunity to play herself, and thus retain autonomy over her portrayal; perhaps it is her own recognition of privilege, the middle-class angst as discussed in Scene 40 (see Blythe 2014: 81) that prompted her to shift her performance into an attempt at comic parody. This is a mistake. So dominant is the impression of a central, controlling figure playing for laughs that the impact of moments intended to replicate the 'riot' is fatally weakened. Surely we had attended not with the expectation of easy laughs, but rather with the collective desire to bear witness to an event and its aftermath, to gain insight through the truths of testimony. Blythe seems not to subject her role and status (as the first witness to the source material) to critical scrutiny; indeed, as she proffers her Dictaphone around scenes of potential dramatic import, her presence seems increasingly opportunistic and lacking in any discernible ideological intention.

In exposing the moments where interviews are captured, the production has somehow lessened their impact; it could be that we need to feel as if we are the first witnesses to testimony, rather than being reminded that we are watching a third-hand reconstruction of Blythe's encounters. Had the strength of Blythe's previous work lain in her ability to conjure the trick of being omnipresent, yet invisible? As soon as her disguise is dropped, her control over the world she commands seems to diminish.

Close inspection of the play text, however, restores balance to the reader's assessment of Blythe's dramaturgical craft, partly because the act of reading the text allows me to 'hear' the characters' unembellished voices. The following extracts, organised below in chronological order, are intended to illustrate Blythe's compositional strategies; the ways in which her editing of various testimonies pinpoints emergent themes and defines narrative outlines. The process is complicated throughout by Blythe's negotiation of her twin roles as 'Alecky', the curious researcher, and Alecky Blythe, the playwright.

It is typical of Blythe's practice to contradict individuals' way of seeing things with opposing views; in scene 13, *Parallel Universe*, Blythe captures an exchange between two anonymous women, whose condemnation of the rioters – 'I think over the years we have excused far too much – behaviour … you cannot ever, in my opinion, // justify this' (Blythe, 2014: 48) – concedes a wider societal division:

> REEVES CORNER WOMAN 1. I think there is a real divide in this country that is vast. It's a parallel universe that we are living in […] Of the workers and the ones that don't.
>
> (Blythe, 2014: 48)

Although the women's scornful conclusion – that unemployment is the inevitable consequence of a 'hand-me-down' culture – echoes the reactionary consensus that participants in the riot were, in fact, feckless opportunists, Blythe answers their

vignette with a scene in which Kate cites police misconduct as the underlying cause of unrest:

> KATE. Race is a hundred per cent a part of it. Because the police are inherently racist, but the stop-and-search thing, has been *so* intolerable you can understand why they all hate them. They *hate* them.
>
> (Blythe, 2014: 49)

As if to confirm Kate's accusations, Blythe hands the baton to the young bystander Kyle, whose disturbing speech suggests the extent to which his experience of police malpractice has disfigured his own development: ' … they've been moulding us for too long […] they moulded into what the guy I am' (Blythe 2014: 49). The scene that follows Kyle's, between Jerome and Tyrone, offers first-hand accounts of their treatment under Section 60 (legislation that allows police to 'stop 'n' search / anybody' (Blythe 2014: 50)). Their stories expose one of the root causes of lasting resentment and mistrust pervading their community:

> TYRONE. … You see-you see this brings up-brings up anger within people cos like I said I know … I know a lot of people that's …
>
> JEROME. I've had my pride – yeah – I felt-I felt like I've had my pride ripped outta me then-that day 'n' ever since I've had a different view to the police.
>
> (Blythe 2014: 50)

Blythe's editing, then, produces the effect of a seamlessly linked debate: the audience is invited to hear one character put their case forward, only to hear the next statement contradict it. For instance, according to Jerome in his scene *Nothing to Do*, the rioters had too much time on their hands: 'kids are *a*ngry because there's no money out there, there's nuffing for them to do […] there's no youth centres' (Blythe 2014: 51). In the scene that immediately follows Jerome's, *Outings*, Pembury estate residents Dot and Steve dismiss Jerome's argument as 'their excuse' – according to Steve 'there is a youth club … there's plenty of things … we run trips from here for holidays … it's just down to the parents whether they wanna take 'em on the trips' (Blythe 2014: 52). This pattern of exchange – of claim and counter-claim – confers perceptible authority to no single voice, so that the 'truth' is hard to pin down; the point seems to be that each voice is granted a fair hearing. Blythe is careful not to take sides, bestowing herself the role of the silent arbiter, never the judge: her objective is to retain neutrality.

It becomes clear that the 'kids' under discussion don't want or need 'initiatives' and 'outings'; where overcrowded living conditions force them onto the street, they have been denied the most basic of freedoms: the right to occupy and affirm ownership of their own territory, a freedom enjoyed by their 'middle-class' counterparts, as Sadie, a resident of the Penbury estate, opines:

> SADIE. On the estate itself is bin a dispersal zone for more than five years which means that kids, they are not allowed to go out and stand around in what is *their* social space because there is no spaces in the flats. […] Now if you're a middle-class kid in Islington, y'know, you can go out, you can

> drink, you can smoke … but if you live on Pembury estate you're gonna get arrested'
>
> (Blythe 2014: 52-53)

Sadie points to 'massive' cuts in the youth service and EMA (the Education Maintenance Allowance, now closed in England); she defines the riots as an inevitable 'cry of pain', calling for a campaign 'to look at the underlying causes of what's happened' (Blythe 2014: 53). In scene 21, *Let's Meet Again*, Blythe records an encounter between herself, Sadie and Kate in which the resentment Kate directs towards the police (she surmises that the riots 'suited [them] so amazingly well' as an incentive for 'blanket arrest') – is shown to be rooted in personal experience: 'I mean my son's been arrested for violent disorder ya know and I've got four years of history of him being half-killed by the police' (Blythe 2014: 53).

Against this background, it seems inevitable that their antipathy should extend to the Clapton Square Users Group. Alecky's timing, in giving notice to the women of the group's preparations for a tea party, is unfortunate; the gesture pre-empts Sadie's own call for 'a parents' campaign' and Kate's affirmation that 'up until now there hasn't been a voice' (Blythe 2014: 54). Kate is convinced that, despite the small geographical distance between the two areas, 'Clapton Square / is such // a far-off cry from Pembury estate /// it really is. They don't have the issues / y'know the issues are not relevant' (Blythe 2014: 55). She is not about to be persuaded that the impact of the riots is equivalent: 'I mean some people talk about it and some people live it. We actually live it' (Blythe 2014: 56).

Blythe has made tactical decisions about where and when her own presence, her various ways of eliciting responses from the speaker, should be visible. In her guise as 'Alecky', Blythe demonstrates her remarkable ability to traverse, like a spy operating in plain sight, the very factions her interviews reveal, fraternising with both sides while divulging no particular allegiance to either. Placing herself in the midst of a developing narrative, Blythe refrains from influencing its trajectory, even when this tactic belies Alecky's apparent fidelity to the causes she documents. Despite having evidenced, in several scenes, her own enthusiastic support for the Clapton Square group, Alecky is present in the moment when Sadie receives and reads out the flyer advertising the street party; notably, while Blythe records Sadie's negative reaction, Alecky abstains from defending the venture:

> SADIE: You can't smooth over inequality. You can't say, let's meet in-in a street party and talk about the fact that, y'know … you're living in quarter-of-a-million-pound houses and, uh, y'know, we're struggling to pay our rents. […] I mean maybe one of the most powerful things we can do is boycott it, ignore it, actually. […] Just completely ignore it and set up our own. […] Nobody'll go anyway.
>
> (Blythe 2014: 65)

Sadie's response raises the matter of ownership: in the process of arbitration that shapes the aftermath of social disintegration, who is qualified to initiate discussion? Does recognition of a 'common cause' merely obscure territorial partitions? Kate later articulates the efforts of the Clapton Square group as an erroneous echo of Victorian philanthropy; interference from those who would be 'seen to be doing a little bit of

good', but whose relatively privileged status affords them protection from the threats they seek to eliminate. Kate's speech, recorded '*on the estate away from the tea party*' (Blythe 2014: 73), is a lacerating expression of the perceived divisions, based in class, race and economic inequality, at the heart of *Little Revolution*:

> KATE. I don't think Clapton Square have *any* i*dea* what life is like, or has been like, for those young people on the estate at all. And-and it's like apartheid. […] What pisses me off more than *any*thing else is when they start quoting 'oh it's so dangerous …' […] How many young, white, middle-class people get shot or stabbed around here? None. […] And how people want to get on that bandwagon and turn it in to their own fucking project. […] It is not. Their. Story. It's all in the abstract for them isn't it? Because it happens around them, not to them.
>
> (Blythe 2014: 73)

As if to confirm Kate's standpoint, Colin expresses a milder, but no less significant, scepticism as he observes the tea party:

> COLIN. … From here I can only see about five local people. (*Pause*). Something wrong here. Isn't it? (*Pause*). They probably want more than just tea and cake innit? They want solutions … they need a youth centre, or they need something else but they don't need a tea party. Eh?
>
> (Blythe 2014: 82)

Even the successful outcome of the play's most coherent narrative strand is problematised by pointing out the broader concerns that surround it. Amid an atmosphere of general support for the 'Friends of Siva' campaign, Colin voices concern that the real issues at stake may be obscured by the celebration of the shop's imminent re-opening:

> COLIN: People worried about the shop, what about young people's futures? Yeah because the shop will come back but the-there's more important things than the shop y'know? Th- People's lives. Some kids are gonna get a conviction that are gonna affect their whole lives … over moments of madness.
>
> (Blythe 2014: 71)

Ultimately, then, Blythe's play yields an admission that the initiatives documented through her central narratives have not succeeded in uniting the two sides of the road; they have failed, in Sadie's words, to 'smooth over inequality'. Rather, the twin campaigns exposed factions that existed before the riots and persist to this day: there are no signs of abatement in the gentrification of Hackney. The 'quarter-of-a-million-pound houses' to which Sadie refers (Blythe 2014: 17) are today worth upwards of one-and-a-quarter *million* pounds. Blythe's play does not claim to resolve the contradictions it explores, but succeeds, as a written text, in constructing its portrait of an extraordinary event with a rigorous criticality that is somehow missing from the experience of the Almeida's production of it. There, the nuance and impact of the voices captured within, the integral divisions they discuss, in race, class and economic advantage, were somehow lost in translation. Played for substantively comic effect to

an audience outside the community it purported to represent, Blythe's verbatim material was not served well by its inaugural performance. Yet Blythe's integrity as a playwright survived it.

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