

A Voice for the Voiceless: How effective is Verbatim Theatre in providing a platform for previously unheard or oppressed voices, and in prompting positive socio-political transformation?

Theatre has always, since as far back as Ancient Greece, been utilised as a “forum in which political and moral issues can be debated and explored” (Derbyshire and Hodson, 2008, p.9), and a “platform for public conversation about eternal human issues.” (Blank and Jensen, 2010) It has always been political, and it has always been available as a tool of subversion against a sometimes unfair political system. However as corporate capitalism spread (Kershaw, 1999, p.5), Western Theatre became a “playground for the newly privileged” (Ibid.) and ceased to align with these idealist expectations. Even as late as Thatcher’s Britain, new writing that was about any form of underclass or moral struggle “smacked of cultural tourism, making art out of other people's misery” (Sierz, 2005, p.55); the lives of the ‘huddled masses’, the oppressed and the voiceless were exaggerated and put on display for “the culturally curious.” (Kershaw, 1999, p.5) It was this lack of diverse, authentic voices in British Theatre (Anderson and Linden, 2007, p.2) and an increasingly volatile, “spin-obsessed” official media (Ralph, 2011) that perhaps has spawned the current popularity of Verbatim Theatre, as “for the first time in ages, [British Theatre is] engaged with the wider world beyond flatshare dramas and council estate swear-fests” (Sierz, 2005, p.58). Billington (2001) explains that “if political theatre is to survive, it has to constantly reinvent itself. One way, in an age top-heavy with opinion, is by establishing the importance of fact.” In this essay I will explore the way in which factual theatre, specifically theatre labelled as ‘Verbatim’ (whether correctly or not) can provide a politically motivated dialogue between those who are continually overlooked and the authorities of state. Can this form of theatre prove effective in social and political transformation in the way it presents already established facts? What are the ethical risks of perceived factuality and, more importantly, what are the potential rewards of this kind of theatre?

The first emergence of verbatim in any form was of the ‘Living Newspapers’ – first performed in Britain in 1935 (Casson, 2000, p.113), with performances intended to communicate the “truth behind the headlines” (Chambers, 1989 cited in Casson, 2000, p.113). By the early 1960s, this had developed into regional Documentary Theatre and Documentary Musicals. Peter Cheeseman, one of the directors who helped popularise the form, pioneered several other requisites: to maintain objectivity and to be dedicated to primary source material (Elvgren, 1974). Finally, these early works of factual theatre were designed to “bridge the cultural gap between theatre and community.” (Ibid.) It is from these roots that contemporary Verbatim Theatre sprang, however it is an unwieldy concept to pin down. “The categorisation is irksome”, according to Soans (2008, p.18), and Soans (2008, p.43) also observes that the genre is one of the least static and formulaic around. “What does *The Crucible* have in common with *Black Watch*?” ask Hammond and Steward (2008, p.9). Across the years though, the purpose of Verbatim Theatre has been the same: in

the 1960s it “provided a platform for the silent or marginalised in those communities” (Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007, p.4), and today it has been described as “giving voice to the point of view of the dispossessed” (Derbyshire and Hodson, 2008, p.13). “Underlying these differences of approach, however, are similar if not identical intentions: to inform, to inspire compassion and to raise consciousness.” (Ibid.) It is this unofficial manifesto that is a common factor across Verbatim Theatre’s many variations and branches. But does Verbatim Theatre succeed in its sometimes lofty intentions of attributing the previously unheard a voice? “Surely, if we want real insight into any situation, we shouldn’t listen only to those with an academic overview.” (Soans, 2008, p.31) Soans (Ibid.) suggests, however that Verbatim Theatre doesn’t necessarily ‘give’ a voice to the voiceless, “[they have] a voice already - but it does provide...listening ears.”

To provide a setting, the stage, where his voice can be heard is to provide an amplification of an otherwise lost voice - and is the reason why I think Verbatim Theatre is so important. (Ibid.)

So then, as a platform for these (already existing) voices to be heard by a wider audience, how effective is this kind of theatre? Although subjectively dependant on production popularity, it could be argued that verbatim is very successful at getting people’s attention. As one example in support of this, The Tricycle Theatre’s play *Half the Picture* resonated so strongly with the general public that it was subsequently performed in the House of Commons (Norton-Taylor, 2011), and their following production *Guantanamo* played at Capitol Hill (Kent, 2008, p.151). *The Colour of Justice*, the story of Stephen Lawrence’s racially aggravated murder is now on the required reading list at Police Training facilities (Norton-Taylor, 2011) – and many other verbatim plays have been hugely effective in rocketing unfairly overlooked stories into public attention. It might be argued that these plays were only far-reaching because of the media’s interest – and that most verbatim plays reach a much smaller audience, especially due to the expensive and occasionally exclusive nature of the theatre (Kershaw, 1999, p.5). Nevertheless it is the scope, and not the size of the audience that matters, argues director Nicholas Kent (2008, p.145). Steward (2008, p.145) asks Kent, “Do you sense that you’re preaching to the converted at times?”

If you preach to the converted what you’re often doing is strengthening the converted...I like the fact that we attract opinion formers because after all they’re the people in power, so if you can change one or two of their opinions, that’s very useful. (Kent, 2008, p.145-161)

And it is here that the power of Verbatim Theatre really lies. It allows “the words of those people - people whose voices would never normally be heard in the theatre” (Soans, 2008, p.29), people who can speak with “great authority on matters of urban deprivation, drug misuse and anti-social behaviour” (Ibid. p.32) to reach the people in a position to make a change. Des James, father of British soldier Cheryl James (a debated suicide victim), says of

the play *Black Watch* (investigating the truth behind these suppositions) "If this moves us one millimetre closer to a public enquiry it will have been worthwhile." (Higgins, 2008)

Despite these rewards, without careful ethical consideration the verbatim form can sometimes be abused: people's words are misused and their opinions misrepresented. It is important to recognise the dangers of "titillating an audience at someone's expense" (Soans, 2008, p.36). Hammond and Steward (2008, p.12) raise "the question of whether verbatim is inherently exploitive or voyeuristic". Soans describes an interview in which the warden of a hostel thought that he was "a cynical southern intellectual peddling northern angst and using these...stories to make money or gain some kudos among the intelligentsia." (2008, p.36) It is imperative that a creator of a verbatim drama remembers that "these are real lives" (Ibid.) and that without a purpose, verbatim plays could potentially wreak of unimaginative laziness, or cheap taste on the part of the author. A lack of purpose in the work inhibits "the tailoring of material to make it political, emotional or even theatrical." (Ibid.) Any "claim to veracity...however hazy or implicit" immediately provides the dramatist some sort of ethical code by which to abide (Hammond and Steward, 2008, p.10). In order for a work to be worthy of using 'real words', it must serve a greater purpose other than simple entertainment.

The vast majority of verbatim plays are political in nature, but this political impetus must be tempered. This is because audiences are often "led to feel (possibly erroneously) that what [they] are hearing is...the truth....We are fascinated by [its] apparent incontrovertibility" (Kellaway, 2005). Verbatim Theatre could abuse its audience's "unflinching trust" (Comnas, Fritz and Martin 2011) and be used to disguise fundamentalist political bias because, understandably, "the audience for a verbatim play will enter the theatre with the understanding that they're not going to be lied to." (Soans, 2008, p.19) Because of the way it affects audiences, presenting personal testimony is only fair and effective if the resulting piece is not agitprop. Providing a 'voice for the voiceless' is a noble cause but what is to stop Verbatim Theatre from becoming polemic disguised as fact, or indeed "polemic as art"? (Preston, 2004) Kellaway (2005) effectively summarizes these occupational perils:

Verbatim Theatre is not journalism. Nor is it art. It makes use of recorded interviews but edits, splices, plaits. Context may be changed. Names are suppressed. It is a powerful but potentially misleading form, to put it mildly.

Bias undermines the very purpose of Verbatim Theatre. Authors of *The Exonerated* explain:

It sometimes helps, instead of ranting on and on about your own personal political beliefs, to simply tell stories that encapsulate and embody those ideas. (Blank and Jensen, 2005)

For this form of theatre to be truly effective and pragmatic, audiences must be aware of its highly subjective nature - "the problematic nature of the documentary play stretches beyond

accusations of selective editing" (Comnas, Fritz and Martin 2011). How does one avoid misleading an audience? Alecky Blythe, who has been likened to a verbatim purist (Costa, 2011) works hard to avoid exploiting the medium and describes editing material into a balanced portrayal as a huge struggle (Woolman, 2012). Blythe avoids accusations of stylistic yet 'empty' material and laziness by ensuring that she tells only 'important stories' (Costa, 2011). Other writers are not so faithful and "have mixed verbatim material from speeches or reports with original writing" (Ralph, 2011). There is a sharp divide in opinion regarding selective editing of verbatim pieces. Some do not regard it as an issue. Kent (2008, p.152) observes that "the strength of Verbatim Theatre is that it's absolutely truthful," and that any over-zealous editing and imagined scenes would be misleading and dishonest. Hare (2008, p.59) counters this by claiming "it's a total misunderstanding of documentary theatre to think that it's all about just presenting a load of facts on the stage". Hare (Ibid.) firmly believes that a dramatist must be equally as creative when producing a verbatim play, as he is when writing a standard fictional drama. The challenge is to find a balance between creating theatre that is entertaining and imaginative, without being misleading. "Maybe pure Verbatim Theatre is less creative, but it lets people speak for themselves...in illuminating ways, and in ways they sometimes did not intend" (Norton-Taylor, 2011).

I can empathise with both sides of this argument, and agree with Sierz (2005, p.58) that Verbatim Theatre may be occasionally "held back by...naturalism." Yes, the text must be handled carefully, but "is there an embargo on editing creatively?" (Soans, 2008, p.35) In fact, is there an embargo on creativity in general? *Can We Talk About This?* by DV8 is a piece that combined both dance/physical theatre and verbatim techniques – an excellent example that one can be creative and true to life in equal measures.

Despite the veritable minefield of ethical considerations attached to Verbatim Theatre, it manages to provide a captive audience to those that need it, which surely grants it the chance to try and change its society in a positive way. Is this a likely goal? This is, according to Sierz (2005, p.59) the problem with Verbatim Theatre. He argues that "it merely reflects reality, when the point, surely, is to change it." Contrary to his opinion, there have been countless success stories where a verbatim play has provided the impetus for action. Horin (cited in Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007, p.14) describes reactions to *Through the Wire*:

People are coming out saying 'I am going to do something'...it has been able to change people from a theoretical interest to a gut and heart response, absolutely engaged...groups of schoolkids are writing to refugees...it has reaffirmed my belief in the possibility of theatre as an agent for social change.

As another example, *The Exonerated* was performed in front of the Governor of Illinois in 2003 – and he subsequently commuted the sentences of all the prisoners of death row to lifetime sentences (Blank and Jensen, 2005, p.301). How does this kind of theatre provoke

such gargantuan responses? The authors of *The Exonerated* (Ibid, p.92.) manage to sum the answer up excellently:

It's much more manageable to go through the world when the injustices that don't affect you directly are an abstraction. The world becomes a more emotionally overwhelming place when you look at those injustices...and see the human face.

When the story we are watching is based on truth...we are implicated. This, we believe, is why verbatim theatre can bring about social change...because if you tell a story in the theatre...the audience will empathise; and if the audience empathises, they are implicated and involved.

In summary, Verbatim Theatre is a very effective way to promote the views of the oppressed and unheard and it is an excellent platform from which to inform social transformation. It is a unique and difficult form of theatre, in that although it does provide 'a voice', it does not necessarily always provide it for 'the voiceless': sometimes the argument presented can be one-sided, it can be misleading and it can also be completely untrue. "In terms of aesthetics, the trend towards verbatim theatre, where most or all of what is spoken on stage is based on true statements, also seems to put the imagination on the back burner" according to Sierz (2005, p.59). "It can also have problems reaching its intended audience. Arguably, Verbatim Theatre "would only have real currency if the very people who will avoid it, or haven't even heard of it, came to see it" (Gardner, 2007). When used appropriately though, it can also be a very powerful tool for good. This kind of theatre is significantly more 'real' than most fictional plays and the successes related to verbatim plays are incredibly moving. This is in no small part because Verbatim Theatre does not shout political opinion from the rooftops. Its job is to present the facts, present a balanced argument and "provide fuel for discussion on complex and differing perspectives" (Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007, p.3). It is perhaps unsurprising that "in an era ruled by theatricality, the theatre is rediscovering its true role...: exposing the truth." (Hughes, 2007, p.5)

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Additional Research

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