



## **For a verbatim ethnography**

**LSE Research Online URL for this paper:** <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101678/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

### **Book Section:**

Long, Nicholas J. ORCID: 0000-0002-4088-1661 (2015) For a verbatim ethnography. In: Flynn, Alex and Tinius, Jonas, (eds.) Anthropology, theatre and development: the transformative potential of performance. Anthropology, change and development. Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK, pp. 305-333. ISBN 9781137350596

---

### **Reuse**

Items deposited in LSE Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the LSE Research Online record for the item.

# For a verbatim ethnography

*Nicholas J. Long*

*London School of Economics and Political Science*

## **Abstract**

In recent years, documentary theatre – a category of staged performance in which the actual words of real people are edited into a script and performed on-stage by actors – has burgeoned in popularity. Although such productions are rarely driven by concerns that are primarily scholarly or ‘anthropological’, their recent proliferation serves as a timely reminder that theatre can be a powerful and popular medium through which to present ethnographic materials to a public audience. In particular, the ‘verbatim technique’ pioneered by Anna Deveare Smith and subsequently adopted (and adapted) by playwrights such as Alecky Blythe and Dan Canham represents an exciting new possibility for ethnographic representation, perfectly suited to the intellectual needs of an anthropology currently undergoing the ‘affective turn’. Its potential resides in the way it inculcates an *ethnographic sociality* by instantiating affectively charged relations between and among both audience members and those on stage, allowing anthropological insights to not just be known, but also felt. However, as I show through a discussion of a production that sought to encourage community reflections on their own situation of chronic underemployment, the ‘verbatim theatre’ format carries limitations as well as potential. Deploying a more strictly anthropological sensibility might reap rich rewards in crafting works that are artistically, intellectually, and ethically satisfying.

## **Keywords**

acting, affect, Alecky Blythe, ethnographic sociality, Stoke-on-Trent, verbatim theatre

## **Published in:**

Alex Flynn and Jonas Tinius (eds). 2015. *Anthropology, Theatre and Development: The Transformative Power of Performance*, pp. 305-333. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

In recent years, documentary theatre – a category of staged performance in which the actual words of real people are edited into a script and performed on-stage by actors – has burgeoned in popularity, gracing ever-increasing numbers of playhouses across Europe and North America. Although such productions are rarely driven by concerns that are primarily scholarly or ‘anthropological’, their recent proliferation serves as a timely reminder that theatre can be a powerful and popular medium through which to present ethnographic materials to a public audience. For professional anthropologists, this may hardly seem like news: excellent handbooks on the techniques of ‘performance ethnography’ have long been available, and several scholars have developed full length documentary plays on the basis of their research. Most notably, perhaps, E. Patrick Johnson’s *Sweet Tea*, a one-man show based on Johnson’s ethnographic work with Black gay men in the American South, toured the U.S. to critical acclaim in 2010-11. Despite this, however, the pressures of limited resources, together with the desire to create an ethnography that can be consulted at a moment’s notice (rather than a finite theatrical event, bounded in time and space), have led most anthropologists to focus on producing texts and films as their primary outputs. Understandable though this may be, recent methodological developments within the theatrical world serve not only to remind us of documentary theatre’s radical potential as a means of communicating anthropological knowledge, but also push that potential in exciting new directions. In particular, the ‘verbatim technique’<sup>i</sup> pioneered by Anna Deveare Smith and subsequently adopted (and adapted) by playwrights such as Alecky Blythe and Dan Canham, represents an exciting new possibility for ethnographic representation, perfectly suited to the intellectual needs of an anthropology currently undergoing the ‘affective turn’ (see Long 2013: 4). As is increasingly recognised, it also carries considerable potential as a means of informing debates in fields such as development and social policy, both because of its capacities to reveal the experiences and stories of real people and because of the therapeutic benefits that people may experience from watching (or performing) their lives and memories on stage (see for example Hazou 2012; Nicholson 2009; Paget 2010; Stuart Fisher 2011). However, as I will show through a discussion of a production that sought to encourage community reflections on their own situation of chronic underemployment, the ‘verbatim theatre’ format carries limitations as well as potential. It is here that the deployment of a more strictly anthropological sensibility

might reap rich rewards in crafting works that are artistically, intellectually, and ethically satisfying.

This chapter therefore stands to be of interest to a variety of audiences and for different reasons. It is firstly written for anthropologists who, like me, are sometimes frustrated by the difficulties one can face in communicating the atmospheres and complex characters that we met in our fieldwork via either of the established genres of ethnographic dissemination: text or film. For such readers, this article seeks to introduce a new possibility for communicating knowledge, but also one which is grounded in a theoretical model of how different forms of understanding might be achieved through different methods of knowledge transmission. To that end, I develop in the chapter a theory of *ethnographic sociality*. The unique ability of theatre as means of education, I contend, lies in its capacity to create actual (if temporary) and affectively charged relations between and among both audience members and those on stage. This unique capacity of the theatrical medium offers distinct possibilities for changing audience members' conceptions, and thereby facilitating a 'deep' understanding of the ethnographic materials presented.<sup>ii</sup> My hope is that such a theoretical model will also be of interest to readers located in the discipline of performance studies, and for theatrical practitioners. here I include those already interested in verbatim theatre, and the practitioners of theatre for development at whom this volume is in part aimed. While none of the material that I discuss was explicitly branded as 'theatre for development', it did serve to encourage a greater degree of self-reflexivity (on the part of performers but most significantly on the part of audiences) regarding the broader environmental, economic and social challenges facing the areas that were documented. Understanding how, why and to what effect that reflexivity was elicited thus offers an opportunity to appraise the promise and limits of the genre as a tool for social change.

### **Stoking interest**

Based in the North Staffordshire municipality of Newcastle-under-Lyme (now virtually fused into a single conurbation with the pottery town of Stoke-on-Trent), the New Vic theatre has a longstanding reputation for staging documentary plays. Indeed, Paget (1987: 318) suggests that it was Peter Cheeseman's pioneering work at Stoke-on-Trent's Victoria Theatre – as it was then called – that established the very concept

of verbatim documentary work as a vibrant part of British theatre. Cheeseman's approach, sometimes referred to as the 'Stoke method', was to ground his work in 'painstaking use of primary source material' (Cheeseman, quoted in Paget 1987: 318) that would then be transcribed and performed by actors in the same way as a classic scripted play. Phonetic annotations were even provided to ensure the actor's rendition came as close as possible to the original speaker's intonation, leading the method to be famed for its 'puritanism'. Subsequent practitioners of British documentary theatre held to a similarly 'puritan' aesthetic, staging their plays with minimal use of props, costumes or lighting, and allowing the audience to fill in the gaps with their own imagination (Paget 1987: 321). Given the historic role that the New Vic had played in establishing the genre of documentary theatre, its artistic director, Teresa Heskins, chose to commission a new work by the Olivier-award nominated documentary playwright Alecky Blythe for the theatre's fiftieth anniversary.

Blythe's work has typically involved identifying major events or issues within the life of a particular community – such as the serial murders of prostitutes in Ipswich (in *London Road*) or a siege in Hackney (in *Come Out Eli*)– and conducting research with those involved in or affected by the story. Although not a trained anthropologist, it is notable how much Blythe's methodology evokes that of a Malinowskian participant observation. In an essay on her technique, she describes how she 'always tr[ies] to understand the interviewee's point of view':

Someone could tell me they are a murderer, to which my response would be: 'Oh right, tell me about that then.' ... In order to get people to talk freely, it is important that they do not feel judged....

It is a transaction of sorts: they are giving me their stories, it is only fair that I give them something in return, or at least be relatively fun to be around. While I am conscious of not interfering with the action or altering the mood too much, I am not just a voyeur, I am also a participant. (Blythe 2008: 86-87)

For *Where Have I Been All My Life*, Blythe was explicitly asked by the New Vic to, in the words of one of the theatre's staff (who I will call John<sup>iii</sup>), 'come to North Staffordshire [and] do a play about ambition and aspiration'. The region currently suffers from severe economic deprivation and alleged 'low levels of skills'

amongst its population (Work Foundation 2008: 6-7, 41), rendering such themes extremely timely.

Blythe eventually chose to explore the topic by researching people involved with a local variety competition, *Stoke's Top Talent*. John was quick to stress the differences between Blythe's work and the early plays associated with the 'Stoke method', which had typically documented (and advocated the continued survival of) Staffordshire's coal, steel and ceramics industries. 'Here in our post-modern world,' he explained, 'we don't talk about ceramics and steel, and really [this play] asks lots of uncomfortable questions such as "What do you do? How do you follow your dreams in a world without work? What is there to look forward to?"' The play (if not from its inception, then certainly at the point of its marketing) was thus simultaneously a celebration of the New Vic's international reputation (which John emphasised 'really meant something... [a theatre from] this town, small, brand new... [was] known around the world'), and a timely socio-political comment on the status quo in Stoke.

Staged in the round (as are all plays at the New Vic), and performed by a cast of nine actors, who transitioned between multiple roles (each of which was indicated by a distinctive item of costume and accompanying posture and gait), the play focused on a variety of townspeople for whom taking part in *Stoke's Top Talent* offered compelling opportunities for recognition and achievement, both now and in the future. The actors were initially seated amongst the audience, but as they began to speak their lines, they stepped down onto the central stage, where various Stoke environments were recreated as settings for action: such as a pub, where 'larger-than-life' local 'characters' anticipated their participation in the contest; a charity shop, in which the cashier dreams of rebuilding a performance career that was shattered by a nervous breakdown, and a garage where a competitive father rehearses for the contest as a means to do something with his rather less enthusiastic son. Monitors around the stage juxtaposed the on-stage action with historical footage of Stoke's industrial heyday at moments where characters were disposed to reminisce. For the most part, though, the performance focused on the how its characters engaged with the talent show. While some lacked the skill or the nerve to get through the initial auditions, others delivered performances of excellent quality (originals of many of the performances are available to view on YouTube), with the talented schoolboy 'Sam' eventually being crowned victor and winning the first prize of £2000 in cash and a

role in the Christmas pantomime alongside local celebrity Jonathan Wilkes. Placing its emphasis on what the contest came to mean to each of the performers and their families (the ways in which it ‘spawned a worlding’, to echo Kathleen Stewart’s (2013) vocabulary), the question of whether or not the material should be interpreted as a celebration or a lamentation of Stoke’s contemporary talent was left for the audience to decide. Thus, while the content of the production was thus starkly different to that which had interested the theatre’s previous generations of documentary playwrights, it retained their commitment to provoking – as a local journalist described it – ‘a fascinating contemporary insight into North Staffordshire residents’ hearts and minds’ (Ashdown 2013).

However, the play was not just seen as an honouring of the New Vic’s long-term interest in documentary theatre. It was also drawing on cutting-edge technology and a distinctive verbatim technique to present the very latest in documentary theatre approaches. The method employed had its origins in Anna Deveare Smith’s rehearsal process, during which she would listen to recordings of her interviewees and through this learn the text of the interviews word-for-word, appropriating their cadences and patterns of speech as exactly as possible (Blythe 2008: 80). Impressed by this attention to detail, but feeling that the delivery in rehearsal (when the headphones were still on) was ‘all the more extraordinary’, Mark Wing-Davey – who taught Blythe at the Actors Centre in London – began to advocate for the value of keeping the headphones on in performance (ibid.: 80). Blythe was impressed by the promise of this approach, and has since honed a distinctive technique in which the snippets of speech to be performed on stage are not written down as a script to be performed by the actors, but rather spooled through earpieces to the actors on stage, who have to imitate them as precisely as possible, a beat behind the original recording. Every mumble, hesitation or splutter is incorporated into the rendition, so as to create as faithful a portrayal of the original respondent’s account as possible.

Smith developed her approach through a commitment to examining the moments in which language ‘fails’ her respondents ‘in the very moment that they have to be more creative than they would have imagined in order to communicate. It’s the very moment when they have to dig deeper than the surface to find words, and at the same time, it’s a moment when they want to communicate very badly’ (Smith 2000: 53). Given this potential significance for revealing important elements of character, however, Smith felt it important to pay attention to the very precise ways in

which her interviewees' affective and cognitive processes were revealed in their language, their hesitations and their slip-ups – a commitment that also underpins Blythe's work. Writing about her approach, Blythe (2008: 97) explains how 'every "um", "er", stutter and non-sequitur' is 'lovingly preserved, because it is these that reveal the person's thought process: there is always a specific reason why a person stutters on a certain word, and it is this detail that gives the characters such startling verisimilitude.'<sup>iv</sup> As a means of ethnographic representation, the promise of this approach lies in its attention to draw our attention to these mercurial yet powerful windows into subjectivity: elements of social life that elude easy documentation in textual transcription and which may be too submerged in the noisy hustle and bustle of the context in which speech is deployed to be readily appreciated via film or radio.<sup>v</sup> The actor thus serves as a filtering device, honing in on the subjectivity of the 'character' s/he is depicting through a processes of attentive listening, and then embodying and representing that subjectivity to the audience through his or her own body. While not without its limitations, this represents a highly novel ethnographic technique with the potential to make a substantial contribution to how anthropological materials are presented and engaged with.

At the performance of *Where Have I Been All My Life?*, however, a slightly different set of concerns were at stake. As John was at pains to point out in the post-show talkback, which on the night I attended featured the director, about half the cast, and the senior management of two local universities as 'special guests':

every single word that you have heard here today was spoken by a real person, not made up, nothing made up, nothing added. A real person spoke it. And as you can see, transmitted directly into the lugholes of the actors and repeated by them a beat behind the tape.

As John's remark suggests, the particular realist commitments, ethics of authenticity, and forms of truth-telling associated with the verbatim technique were considered to be a distinctive element of its power, both relative to fictional plays and to other subgenres of documentary theatre. The visiting speakers were also quick to tap into the 'documentary' realism of the play in order to elaborate their own concerns about human development and skills quality within North Staffordshire. Thus Marie, one of the 'special guests' at the talkback, told us that:



I just want to say how wonderful it was that it really is Stoke, I mean, it is Stoke, there's no getting away from it, it's a true Stoke story, um, and for me what I was struck with most was the fact that in a town, a city where there's been, um, great lots of work and it's been declining and declining and declining, you tend to get a population that doesn't leave, so either the ones that stay have been here forever, so, the lack of aspiration and the lack of skills across the generations to feed into the creative aspirations of um, the, the characters that we saw was staggering in terms of the lack of, how inequipped they were, and I think that that's probably rep-, replicated in some other similar areas, but that is very particular for Stoke.

Here, Marie draws on the 'reality' of the verbatim format to add weight to a series of ideas that attempt to diagnose a 'very particular' problem for Stoke-on-Trent: a 'trapped' population, a lack of aspiration, and a limited cross-generational transfer of skills. How thoroughly such ideas were grounded in the substance of Blythe's play is debatable. Although the material did show us instances of individuals who had lived in Stoke forever, or who lacked aspiration, or whose parents served to stifle their ambitions, it also gave us a case of a parent working hard to inspire musicality and competitive spirit in his son, and several performers who gave tremendous performances despite disadvantaged backgrounds.

Given this, how should be interpret Marie's remark? Since her colleague would, some twenty minutes later, go on to emphasise how their HEI is promoting entrepreneurial and creative business skills, one could simply read her comments as a cynical manoeuvre in order to heighten the appeal of the educational products her campus was offering. Yet one could also argue that Marie's response represented the disproportionately affecting stories of those characters whose lack of skills thwarted their ambitions, and whose personal tragedies had been laid out starkly on the stage in front of us. In the first interpretation, the documentary play's realism has simply been hijacked by a powerful social actor with a pre-determined and self-interested agenda in the field of human development. In the second, the contents of the play and its specific effect upon the audience help to highlight (or even set) a particular human

development agenda – even if the response to its contents was mediated by pre-existing ideological assumptions.

My argument in this paper is that despite its apparent optimism, and despite the fact that there will always be those who wilfully interpret documentary material in a self-interested fashion, this second possibility is worth taking seriously – and warrants anthropologists who traditionally eschew interests in such themes as language, the self, and subjectivity in order to focus on more ‘applied’ outcomes also thinking seriously about the opportunities that the verbatim technique offers. At the core of my argument is a conviction that the technique does not only offer novel opportunities for representation (which in and of itself renders it of interest to the discipline), but also for engaging an audience in ways that might assist understanding (and, for those working in the ‘applied’ subfields, policy). In order to support that claim, I wish to examine the distinctive forms of audience engagement that are engendered by presenting an ethnography in theatrical form (as opposed to a film or text), and then the distinctive ways in which the material presented in a verbatim play and the appearance of ‘authenticity’ that saturates the performance inflect the audience experience. Claims to ‘authenticity’, of course, elicit suspicion and anxiety in any anthropologist who has read *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and indeed, the only academic work to have devoted any sustained attention to Blythe’s method – Tom Cantrell’s (2013) *Acting in Documentary Theatre* – calls into serious question the ‘realism’ of what audiences hear and see in a verbatim play. While Cantrell’s misgivings are well-founded, I will suggest that a large number of them stem from the mixing of ethnographic techniques with dramatic convention that – of necessity – characterises much contemporary ‘verbatim theatre’ and that such problems should not warn social scientists off the medium but rather encourage them to embrace it on their own terms.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Play Time**

The most distinctive feature of documentary theatre, and one which is repeatedly observed in the performance ethnography literature, is its nature as a live medium presented directly to an audience. The precise advantage that this arrangement confers, relative to other means of transmitting ethnographic knowledge, may be emphasised differently by distinct commentators. For example, Teresa Heskins, who

not only commissioned *Where Have I Been All My Life?* but also directed it, stressed in a post-show talkback that the collective enterprise of viewing a show offered opportunities for both focused engagement with the narrative and deliberative discussion that other media might struggle to achieve:

In the age where we get so much of our leisure activity digitally and so many might be tailored to us very, very personally, we might absorb it on our own rather than in groups, theatre remains a live medium that requires a community of people to come together to watch it and be part of an experience together, and then hopefully some nights, to stay in the bar and talk about it, and I think that's what we might not get from listening to it on radio, which personally I tend not to do even when it's on, because I'm catching up at midnight or on a Sunday afternoon or something, whereas here we are, having a conversation about it.

Heskins' arguments carry some force – and her emphasis on the opportunities for discussion makes sense given her role as Artistic Director of a theatre in a severely economically depressed area, in which the themes raised by the play – of ambition and 'wanting to make it big', but often struggling to find the opportunities to do so – might warrant critical discussion. Indeed, much of the second half of the talkback session was devoted precisely to the question of whether there was any future for the potteries and the role that the two local universities might play in supporting an economic renaissance. Nevertheless, the ability to focus on a piece's themes and discuss them afterwards are not unique to theatre as a medium – a film viewed in the cinema could have exactly the same effect. It thus warrants unpacking some of the implicit assumptions upon which Heskins' argument rests – namely that there is something significant about the live character of theatre as a medium, as well as of being part of that experience with other people.

Ethnographer and communication theorist Norman Denzin has advanced a powerful case for the value of performance ethnography by arguing that in performance, the texts it creates 'have the potential to overcome the biases of a positivist, ocular, visual epistemology. They undo the gazing eye of the modernist ethnographer, bringing audiences and performers into a *jointly felt and shared field of experience*' (2003: 37, emphasis mine). He further adds that such works 'unsettle the

writer's place in the text, freeing the text and the writer to become interactional and existential productions' (ibid.: 37). Thus performance ethnography 'answers Trinh's (1991: 162) call for works that seek the truth of life's fictions and in which experiences are evoked not explained.... As dramatic theater... [the] texts turn tales of suffering, loss, pain, and victory into evocative performances that have the ability to move audiences to reflective, critical action, not just emotional catharsis' (Denzin 2003: 36-37; see also Reinelt 2009: 12). For Denzin, then, the deliberative disposition that Heskins seeks to achieve through documentary theatre is explicitly linked to the 'interactional' and 'jointly felt and shared' field of experience that is distinct to live theatre performance.

In order to better understand how and why this occurs, I think it is helpful to reconceptualise this 'field of experience' as a distinct form of sociality. As Henrietta Moore and I have recently argued (see Long 2015 forthcoming; Long and Moore 2013), sociality is a foundational concept for the discipline of anthropology (and indeed the social sciences in general), because human beings are of necessity always cast in a dynamic matrix of relations with others. However, the forms these matrices of relations take are perpetually emergent and, as such, constantly subject to the possibility of refashioning through acts of cultural invention, and mediated by an ethically imaginative human subject. The notion of 'ethical imagination', coined by Moore (2011: 16-17), reflects the growing attention to the salience of ethical life and practice in the human sciences (see e.g. Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2002, 2013) but has the virtue of combining the Foucauldian interest in conscious reflection and asceticism with the affective, unconscious, fantasmatic and – in Lauren Berlant's (2007) words – 'lateral' agencies that propel subjects towards a vision of how one should live.

This property of human sociality is one that has long been recognised and engaged with by professional artists. Vergunst and Vermehren (2013) give the example of *Slow Down* – a socially engaged art project that sought to 'slow down' the Aberdeenshire town of Huntly; the result was that participants in the events, forced to cycle with each other at a much slower pace than they would normally, interacted with each other in totally different ways to how they would when cycling at a regular pace. Analysing this case we can see that on the one hand, the artistic outcome is shaped by the artist's manipulation of the scenario in order to create interesting effects and to raise awareness of environmental issues – forms of ethical imagination that appear largely based in conscious reason. Yet the outcome of the event also depended

on the ways in which participants interacted with each other – which was partly linked to their reflections on participating in a ‘fun’ art event, but also to the ways in which their bodies were moving in new ways and at new speeds relative to each other. Similarly, Jane Plastow’s work on Theatre for Development in Ethiopia indicates how participation in forms of theatrical and dance performance has enabled a wide variety of citizens – the disabled, the young, the elderly, the unemployed - to adopt novel forms of relation-to-self, and through that engage in new, ‘empowered’, relations with others. ‘Dancing helps me to get rid of the old person in me,’ one Ethiopian tells her (Plastow 2004: 126). A street dweller says that he feels dancing has given him ‘all the necessary skills to work and express himself to the community’ (ibid.: 144). And in turn, the performers’ capacity to entertain has changed how they are perceived and related to off-stage: Plastow cites a UNICEF employee whose attitude to the urban poor was transformed by witnessing a production of *Carmina Burana* staged by street dwellers. ‘Before I saw this show I always thought, OK, yeah, we need to help street children.... But this has changed my whole attitude. because I see something deeper within the beings of street children. They’re just like us. They can learn and they can move on. And actually, you know, they can entertain us’ (ibid.: 130, see also Plastow, this volume).

Any live theatre production presents a situation in which audience members exist in a web of relations with each other and with live actors on stage. The precise nature of these relations can be many and varied both across and within individual productions, ranging from relations of extreme detachment to fantasmatic identifications with the performance on the part of the audience, to active audience participation in the show. How the matrix of relations is manipulated, and to what effect, is thus a decision to be made by the playwright, company, and director. Many productions, of course, seek to elicit audience engagement, breaking down the ‘fourth wall’ to allow audience members to feel they are in some kind of intersubjective or affectively engaged relationship with the characters: they are ‘invested in’ them; they empathise with them; they care about them. They might also, in a documentary piece, reflect on what their usual relations would be with the ‘real people’ that lie behind the performance. Such dimensions of ethical imagination (many of which, I suggest, operate at the affective and unconscious level), are elicited by various theatrical stratagems of *interesement*, to borrow a term from actor-network theory (Callon 1986), although the success of these can never be guaranteed. Hence, while

*interesement* may simply follow from the contours of the plot, or the conventions of theatre watching, directors can use a range of devices to heighten or accelerate certain ways in which audience members hold themselves in a matrix of relations with the characters.

In the case of *Where Have I Been All My Life?*, this was partly achieved by staging the production in the round, with characters initially scattered amongst the audience, as if they were regular theatre-goers, only to step down to the stage at points throughout the opening scenes. The fact that the production was depicting events that were very familiar to the (largely local) audience also contributed to this effect. However, there are distinct and powerful opportunities for *interesement* that are unique to the verbatim format, given that the material is based on conversations with the unseen playwright. The tenor of that relationship inflects the lines that actors imitate and address not to the author but to the audience. Throughout the production in Newcastle-under-Lyme, one could hear the tones of warmth and affection as characters spoke to Blythe; it was evident that many of them were genuinely happy that she was showing an interest in their life stories, and/or were using forms of what Antonius Robben (1995) has termed ‘ethnographic seduction’ to build and maintain her interest. The verbatim technique’s insistence on emulating as precisely as possible the affective qualities of the original recording allows for audiences to be charmed and drawn into a sense of intimacy with previously unknown characters through the use of speech patterns and tones that bespeak trust, comfort, and familiarity. Blythe herself commented during an interview with BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme that, when using the verbatim technique, ‘I think [the audience is more on edge.] You get a lot of, kind of, nodding and, from the audience. Each of the audience members sort of becomes like me, they take on my role, as if I’m doing the interview. So like you’re nodding at me now, the audience often nods back. To the actors! As if it’s a two-way thing.’<sup>vii</sup>

While some might argue that Blythe’s decision to script herself out of the play represents a problematic concealment of how her own research process might have contributed to making the story she documents,<sup>viii</sup> her decision to let the audience members take on ‘her’ role reaps rewards – forcing them not merely to watch a set of a relationships ‘on stage’, but actively confronting them with relations in which ‘they’ are, and are addressed as, a participant, but the character and emotional tenor of which they have to divine from engaging with the performance – a state that I will

henceforth term an *ethnographic sociality*. Needless to say, one of the emancipatory dimensions of this element of verbatim theatre is that it also allows audiences to experience forms of intimate relationality with individuals whose stories they would never otherwise get to hear.

As a consequence of this ethnographic sociality, emotionally charged moments in the play can be much more affecting and powerful than they might be in other mediums. Indeed, the focus on talent shows in *Where Have I Been All My Life?* is a powerful testament to this. The ‘talent show’ format has become so widespread in the United Kingdom on mainstream television that seeing people whoop and cry at the pleasure of their own performances or successes is something to which audience members of the show would have become accustomed. Indeed, on television, there is often something slightly uncomfortable about these scenes – the participants can appear delusional or self-involved. While those reactions are not entirely absent when watching *Where Have I Been All My Life?*, the relationships we have developed with the characters over the course of the play, coupled with our direct physical co-presence with the emoting actors, makes it much harder not to be affected by the sprightly prances of Norman, a former miner, who is so moved by reaching the semi-finals and the applause that his performance receives that he skips about the stage and asks out loud the question that Blythe chose as the title of her work: ‘Where have I been all my life?’ Likewise, the cries of delight expressed by a young single mother, Kerry, after her performance in the finals of the show – body-buckling squeals that last for what seems like well over a minute – not only drive home what a powerful and meaningful opportunity the variety competition is for her, they also foreshadow a poignant sadness on the audience’s part when her schoolboy competitor Sam is crowned the victor, and Kerry is not seen again.

Following anthropology’s ‘affective turn’, there is an increasing awareness that the affective charges of seemingly inconsequential or ordinary events can be the pivots upon which many aspects of people’s everyday lives turn, these charged moments, presented in their visceral power, offer powerful reminders that, even in a world saturated with the neoliberal desire to ‘make it big’, or the structural violence of persistent poverty, ‘ordinary affects can be more compelling than ideologies.... picking up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds... [and] catching people up in something that feels like *something*’ (Stewart 2007: 2-3). Performance ethnographies using a verbatim

technique offer powerful possibilities for showing how that is done, affording fine-grained insights into how the affective tenor of individual subjectivities are transformed by events and relationships in ways that many would struggle to evoke through prose and to which one might become distanced when viewing on screen, where respondents speak to the camera, and not to a live audience member, being looked at in the eye.

Indeed, one of the distinctive advantages that the theatrical medium presents is the ability to isolate individuals from their contexts and put them centre-stage, their subjectivities in focus. Norman's prancing and Kerry's whooping would have originally occurred back-stage at the auditorium used for the *Stoke's Top Talent* out-rounds: in amongst clutter, and other contestants, and technicians, and noise from the ongoing performance. The verbatim technique challenges its actors to isolate their character's behaviours from the recording (members of the *Where Have I Been All My Life?* cast reported that the audio material they had to work with were 'terrible... half of it sounds like it's recorded in a wind tunnel'), to strip away any background noise or dialogue, and to embody the subjectivity that the voice they hear depicts. Thus while Fritz et al. (2011) suggest that the technique 'risks nullifying an actor's art and skill' and that one 'might as well be... watching a documentary on the telly', this argument overlooks the significance of theatre's capacity to bracket out unwanted material that may creep into the cinematic or televisual frame, let alone the complex technical challenges that come in communicating a recorded voice, both in terms of interpreting it physically and in adapting and delivering what is often conspiratorial or mumbled language so that it can be heard clearly in an auditorium without losing a sense of its initial character. Such moments can afford an experience that is both artistically powerful and intellectually provocative – precisely what a good performance ethnography aims to achieve. However, what makes the ethnographic sociality of verbatim performance so very distinctively powerful is not simply its capacity to build up a relationship with audience members – something that other forms of documentary theatre might also aspire to achieve but the way in which that relationship is mediated by a powerful and distinctive 'reality effect'.

## **The Reality Effect**



The questions of to what extent, and in what ways, any documentary plays, films, or texts are 'true' has long been a vexed question within performance studies, and verbatim theatre is not exempt from these concerns. Nevertheless, there was a widespread view amongst members of the company that their method had led to a distinctive kind of truth-telling in the documentary. On one level this simply reflected the material that the format gave them the license to engage with. One member of the company contrasted a strictly documentary approach with the approach that might have been taken by a devised or fictional account of contemporary Stoke, highlighting that it afforded an opportunity to confront audiences with truth and characters that seemed too extreme to be true:

I mean, some of them are surprisingly stereotypical, aren't they? If we were writing it as a play we'd probably come off it a little bit and we wouldn't load all those problems on one person, you know, so that suddenly you're laughing at 'God, how awful can this poor boy's life actually be?' And we wouldn't allow people to perhaps be quite so bold or extreme as, as they are. But to a certain extent it's kinda there, you've kinda gotta go with it, so those pub people are larger than life....

What was a more striking aspect of this commitment to truth-telling, however, was the commitment to aural accuracy demanded by the verbatim technique. Sarah, an actress in the play, explained that, although she had found it took some time to get used to the verbatim technique of acting (with which she was unfamiliar and had found 'slightly strange' at first), she was able to adapt fairly quickly. Having done so, she felt it was 'brilliant':

What happens is that it cuts out.... because of the speed at which it comes and you're already a beat behind it but you're trying to follow it as closely, and the concentration should be on being as faithful and as truthful, hesitation for hesitation, stumble for stumble, as your subject, and it cuts out any kind of, uh, temptation to embellish or kind of, 'check this out, this is... I'm just going to...' It just comes straight from them, we're like, kind of mediums, if you like... 'And through, and out,' just... We, you know, attempt to let it come out as close to what

we're hearing as possible and so it keeps you very much on your toes.... and **you don't have time to think up clever funny tricky things to do with it**, it's just... And, uh, I think even when you've learned it, there's probably a little margin of error in terms of timing whereas with us, you've probably heard there are some characters who just speak *so* quickly, like the reporter, you know, it was hilarious in rehearsals, they just speak *so* quickly that all you've got time to do is just say those words and *nothing* else, so it does keep you very much... Well, we try and be as truthful to what we're hearing.

Sarah's comments brought up several themes that were echoed by other members of the cast. Perhaps the most significant of these was the suppression of any tendency to 'embellish', a trait of the performance that assured them they could make a more 'truthful' representation of what they were hearing. This speaks to the heart of one of the most pressing controversies surrounding the ethics of documentary theatre – that despite its claims to 'authenticity' and 'realism', the play has been constructed with a particular agenda in mind. Here objections can be broken down into two categories – concerns about the selective nature of the editing process, and fears that distortions are introduced by the actor's craft.

The question of the truthfulness of ethnographic and documentary representations has already given rise to long and tired debates, which Nichols summarises effectively in his observations that, whilst documentaries 'remain texts, and share all of the attendant implications of fiction's constructed, formal, ideologically inflected status' they differ from fiction in asking us to consider them as 'representation[s] of the historical world rather than a likeness or imitation of it' (Nichols 1991: 109-110). Significant in Nichols' phrasing is the emphasis on the *appeals* and *claims* that a piece is able to make to us via its being categorised as documentary, rather than any assumption that its facticity necessarily makes it true. As he writes, 'documentaries do not present *the* truth but *a* truth (or, better, a view or way of seeing), even if the evidence they recruit bears the authenticating trace of the historical world itself' (ibid.: 118). Thus, following Trinh's (1993) argument that that 'there is no such thing as documentary' and that documentary film makers and audiences should be more attentive to how the 'truths' they uncover are the artefacts of their own interventions (namely, in the theatrical context, dramaturgy) rather than

naturally occurring events that are simply being ‘documented’,<sup>ix</sup> the claimed facticity of documentary theatre invites a sceptical assessment of both the production of those facts and the arguments to which they are put to bear in a production which must be – almost of necessity – selectively edited.

This is an important point, and one to which playwrights have been increasingly attentive. As Forsyth and Megson (2009: 3) remark, recent theatrical works in the documentary genre have developed ‘a battery of reflexive performance techniques’ which they believe ‘indicates a self-conscious acknowledgement of the complexity of ‘reality’ at the expense of propounding a mono-dimensional truth claim that is constituted by means of selective editing and tendentious narrative construction’. Many also seek to engage the topics and events under study by preventing diverse views and perspectives, destabilising any authoritative narrative: a move reminiscent of anthropology’s earlier turn to polyvocality. Techniques of this kind will be essential for the project of a successful ‘verbatim’ ethnography, bearing in mind also that they should not simply draw attention to the narratives status as a construct, but also the process why which it was constructed (cf. Reinelt 2009: 22). If one can be confident that an event depicted in a documentary play really happened, then the question becomes how to interpret it (given, amongst other considerations, the conditions of its capture) – not that the broader argument of which it has become evidence is by default itself also ‘factual’ or ‘true’.

Where non-verbatim forms of documentary plays in particular present concerns is that, as Fritz et al. (2011) suggest, ‘it [is] impossible to remain completely faithful to the play's original subjects. Acting sometimes gets in the way. Testimony given in complete sincerity can be breezed over or funnied up, while simple off-the-cuff remarks can be lent an underserved gravitas’. This is precisely the ‘embellishment’ of which Sarah was speaking, and which Blythe has elsewhere claimed reflects an actor’s ‘instinct to perform: to heighten, to try to make their lines “more interesting” in an effort to ... make the person they are playing seem real’ (Blythe 2008: 81-82). But with a verbatim approach, both company and audiences work on the basis that what was portrayed was substantively, tonally, and affectively equivalent of the original utterance it is seeking to repeat. This, indeed, is a crucial means by which the format makes claims to authenticity and authority (Taylor 2013). As two of the cast explained:

**Daniel:** It feeds, the characters feed... It sounds a bit airy-fairy, but it really does, it's really true that the characters are so in your head that they take over your body. And I can't explain how that happens but it's happened to all of us to such an extent, and as [Sarah] was saying, you don't, you can't embellish, because how can you do something different to what you're hearing? You can't. You can only do what you're doing, and it informs what you do.

**Sarah:** You can't argue with the fact that people actually said those things, so that's always in the back of my mind as well, that, somebody actually said that and yeah, probably people do disappear down odd blind alleys with what they're talking about, or say things quite shocking, or revealing, but that's... was actually, actually what they said...

Another added that one of the great advantages of the verbatim technique was its capacity to achieve the naturalistic representation that one might otherwise struggle to effect in alternative forms of (documentary) theatre:

**James:** For me, I think it's erm, one of the, I can't speak for myself obviously, but when you take, in rehearsal when you take out your earphones and you listen to another actor, you watch another actor, and one of the things you're often striving to do with standard script-based plays is to come up with the effect that these thoughts are your own and they're immediate and happening in the moment, and I don't know how you guys feel but when I've watched other chaps in the cast, these are unquestionably their own thoughts because they're not thinking what line comes next, they're just waiting to hear it and it just pops out of nowhere and that's kind of what happens in everyday life and it's quite extraordinary to watch, I think.

The idea that the thoughts his co-stars were expressing were 'unquestionably' the characters' own was flagged by James as a perfection of technique – but his remarks subtly point to the need for an actor working from a script, even in a documentary play, to characterise her or his role – and specifically that person's language – in a

way that will achieve the effect of spontaneous naturalism. The risk inherent in this is that such characterisation work, essential to a coherent performance, will result in an actor relying on patterns of inflection, hesitation and stumbling that reflect their own speech patterns, or those of people and roles with which they are familiar, preventing the material from offering the insights into subjectivity that justify such a relatively expensive and inefficient way of disseminating dramatic material. The verbatim technique helps prevent such impositions, although the question of how to characterise a role physically remains largely open to the company's invention (see below). In terms of vocals, however, the director was quick to defend her decision to take only the lightest of touches in amending what was heard on the original recording. 'You know, there are some great lines and you kind of just have to accept that they get lost in the void of somebody else speaking over them or them being thrown away, and although we might underline a word a little more than the person speaking it actually does, you kind of want to resist the attempt to do that too much, to impose too much on it, because you'll lose the throwawayness of it, and the naturalism of it.'

Building on this point, I would argue that the greatest advantage of verbatim theatre lies not in its capacity to avoid embellishment or false characterisations, but rather the act that the audience is put in a position where they are forced to think that what they hear (although to a lesser extent what they see) *could not* have been embellished or derived from the actor's own imagination, but is indeed an actually recorded sentiment, honed in and reproduced in a setting where one is forced to engage with it. Many verbatim make a point of highlighting the use of earpieces, sometimes even playing snippets of original audio at the start of or during the performance, to drive this home to the audience (Innes 2007: 443; Wake 2013). The artistic consequences can be very significant. In *Where Have I Been All My Life?*, for example, it would have been easy to dismiss the protracted period of delighted squealing by Kerry as an over-exaggerated performance were no microphone and claim to faithful aural replication involved. The verbatim format forces an audience to confront, with every inflection of the squeal, how profoundly affecting her performance was, and how much her life – as with that of others in the show – could be transformed by acts of recognition and discoveries of her own self-worth.

Some, however, are sceptical about the possibilities that the verbatim technique offers to capture the significance of affectively charged events. In his

analysis of Blythe's play *The Girlfriend Experience*, which depicted life in a brothel, Tom Cantrell challenges the 'authenticity' of a performance based around trailing a headphone-disseminated recording. He notes that the cast all told him that they felt they relied on it and that it stopped them falling into their own patterns of intonation (Cantrell 2013: 152), but suggests that this may be a 'party-line' (ibid.: 154) rather than a completely honest account of the experience of performance. 'Rhetoric surrounding the working processes on the production,' he argues, 'was designed to support and further Blythe's claims of authenticity' (ibid.: 156). This suspicion towards Blythe's claims came from evidence that over time actors began to become familiar with the play and so inflect their performances, hoping to keep the performance fresh and to 'play little moments' (ibid.: 156).

Clearly, the verbatim technique cannot fully eliminate the prospect of an unwelcome intervention on the part of an actor. However, it is crucial to remember that, as Cantrell himself acknowledges, the pacing of the recordings and the need to keep up with them means that such inflection can only ever represent 'slight deviations' (ibid.: 165) and is substantially diminished compared to the risks of exaggeration in other forms of theatrical performance. Moreover, the risk can be mitigated still further by instilling the cast with an ethnographic sensibility that emphasises faithful representation – an ethic that, despite occasional moments being 'played', appears to have animated many of Blythe's casts, filling them with a sense of creative release, and a unique feeling of achievement that came from having their performances ratified as authentic. As Daniel explained:

The other night, and over the course of the last week or so, we've been lucky enough that a lot of these real people have come to see the show, and when we meet them, our jaws hit the floor because it's so often the case everybody comes and says, 'you're exactly like her! You're exactly like her! How did you...?' and they come up to you and say 'How did you do that? You've never met me. Did you see videos of me?' and you say 'No'. It's just that voice and you can hear pain in a voice if somebody's... you can hear joy in a voice, you can hear sadness in a voice, and if it's really in your ear to the exclusion of all other, then... to all other influences...it takes you over and if that sounds airy-fairy, I apologise but that's exactly what happens.

While such claims of being ‘exactly like’ the figure portrayed and ‘taken over’ by their voice should not cause us to forget that the character’s portrayal is necessarily mediated by the actor, both the practicalities of the approach and its ethics (both on the part of the actors themselves, and any director with a strong ethnographic sensibility) serve to mitigate this unduly interfering with the most startling contribution that verbatim ethnography could make, namely to put subjectivities under the spotlight in a way that has a radical potential to affect an audience. As Wake notes, this can often have a powerful emancipatory effect, providing a voice that would otherwise be marginalised with ‘listening ears’ (Wake 2013: 332). Here, the distinctive constraints the format places upon mediation do make a difference, and the rhetorics that surround these constraints (from the overt display of headphones to talkback sessions discussing the headphone method) – while often overstating the ‘authenticity’ of the production – serve an important function in facilitating ethnographic sociality.

### **Verbatim’s Limits?**

In a recent review of documentary theatre productions, Caroline Wake (2013: 332) has advanced an argument not dissimilar to that which I propose above. She notes the lack of attention to the act of listening within scholarly literature on headphone documentary theatre and proposes that audience listening is in fact ‘central to efforts to conceive and theorize it as a form’. While I very much agree that audio recordings allow an insight into someone’s subjectivity through language, it leaves open the question of the physicality of the performance, another crucial dimension of the ethnographic sociality that is established in the auditorium. How someone moves and holds themselves on stage can have a tremendous bearing on how the character is engaged with by the audience, and documentary companies have developed a range of techniques through which to engage with this issue in ways that still retain a sense of ‘accuracy’ in the performance. In some cases, the audio recording can give clues – one can hear the shuffles of movement, or the tone of the voice indicates that the head is being held in a particular way and affecting the qualities of the sound (Cantrell 2013: 159-161). In others, the play is deliberately cast against type to ‘denaturalise’ the physicality of the performance. Here, attention is devoted to the realism of the

vocal inflection, and the physical performance is instead seen as an interpretive medium that comments upon, but is ultimately detached from, the character that the actor is ‘reaching towards’.<sup>x</sup> Dan Canham’s *Ours Was The Fen Country*, a play produced using a similar verbatim technique to Blythe’s own, was notable for its creative use of physicality. This production, which lacked the strong narrative thrust of *Where Have I Been All My Life*, comprised a montage of testimonies acquired from British Fenland residents regarding their long-standing way of life and their feelings towards the rapid erosion of the peat upon which this lifestyle depended. At times the cast of four would directly re-enact the testimonies, using the verbatim method. At other times, a laptop would be brought on stage and the original interview played back, accompany by physical theatre or dance on the stage and with images of the Fenlands projected onto the screens. Whereas Heskins’ production at the New Vic had tried to faithfully adopt a ‘natural’ physicality to the performances which matched the way of holding the body that would have produced the recorded speech, Canham’s production drew on a wider and more experimental ways of representing testimonies through the body.

This strategy allowed Canham to surmount some dramaturgical challenges that could otherwise have bedevilled his production. Since he was primarily using one-to-one interview material, his respondents tended to produce more self-consciously coherent and polished accounts of themselves and their lives than Blythe’s method of participant observation is prone to capture. In this regard the testimonies, staged naturalistically, did not readily allow access into the complex subjectivities of their speakers. One approach Canham developed in response to this challenge was to stage scenes in which an actor imitated the interview recording naturalistically; the same speech was then repeated, with audio transmitted via speakers, whilst the company performed forms of interpretive dance that could draw attention to small inflections in the original text and challenging the audience to listen to the material in a new way.

In *Ours Was the Fen Country* this technique proved especially effective for presenting the testimony of a man whose family had long lived in the Fens and who suspected he might have a genealogical connection to Oliver Cromwell. As Jeanette Edwards (2012) has argued, the practices of ‘suspecting’ and discovering connections to historic local figures, catalysed by the recent interest in ‘family treeing’ amongst British citizens, can often be a powerful response to contemporary conditions of



marginalisation. For the metropolitan audience watching *Ours Was the Fen Country* at the National Theatre's temporary pop-up space, *The Shed*, however, the Fenlander asserting unsubstantiated ties to a major historical figure was initially engaged with as a point of comedy within an otherwise rather bleak account of environmental degradation and rural poverty. The claims seemed to bespeak delusion, self-importance, rendering the character a figure of fun. Canham's production counterbalanced that response by re-playing the testimony, this time accompanied by a majestic dance, timed to the rhythms of the respondent's speech, and which commandeered the physical space of the stage. Rather than being heard as an instance of grandiloquence, the man's testimony was now presented to us in a way that highlighted his pride not in being a descendant of Cromwell but in coming from a 'Fenland family', and the distinctive relationship to the Fenland space surrounding him that might result.

As well as being exemplary of how creative use of the body can help to promote multiple modes of understanding complex personalities and testimonies, Canham's innovation also identifies a challenge that has bedevilled many documentary productions, namely situation in which an audience, rather than empathising with or being moved by what they are seeing on stage, laugh at it. Cantrell (2013: 146-147) notes that audience laughter at often tragic situations in *The Girlfriend Experience* – such as the problems beleaguering the clients visiting the brothel – was a source of frustration both to the actors and critics watching the show (e.g. Billington 2008) and places the blame with Blythe's own editing process, and the inclusion of deliberately 'comic' staging alongside non-comic dialogue (see also Wake 2013: 329). Blythe herself has defended her artistic choices in *The Girlfriend Experience*, arguing that it 'is not a documentary and does not pretend to be one' because the words have been so heavily 'processed' by the time they reach the stage; she also notes that she has found herself moving away from a total commitment to portraying 'what really happened' in her efforts to fulfil her perceived 'responsibility to the audience to give them a good evening's theatre.... An audience wants to be entertained, and this means being gripped by a story which... "pure" verbatim may not be able to provide' (Blythe 2008: 94, 97, 101-102).

The fact that Blythe has experienced such a drift points to several challenges that will confront anthropologists hoping to make serious use of verbatim techniques as a means of ethnographic representation. While most anthropologists hoping to

employ the device will no doubt feel that they have enough material at their disposal to craft a gripping narrative without resorting to fabrication, and would also believe that humour and ‘entertainment’ need not be the hallmarks of ‘a good evening’s theatre’, the fact that this has become such a trenchant audience expectation presents serious challenges to the fostering of the forms of ethnographic sociality outlined above.

*Where Have I Been All My Life?* features a character called Mark, a young man in his late teens who was unemployed and looking towards *Stoke’s Top Talent* as his chance to ‘make it big’. Over the course of the play we discover that Mark has a difficult relationship with his mother, whose home he eventually leaves in order to live with his father, a man has been convicted of sexually abusing Mark’s sisters. Watching his audition for the talent show, we quickly realise that Mark has an unrealistic sense of his own musical abilities. Yet these tragic dimensions of the story are offset by the fact that Mark himself appears a rather unsympathetic character – at one point his pregnant girlfriend tells Blythe how much she is looking forward to having her baby, so that she will have something to keep her busy. Mark replies with a snarl that he will ‘kick it out of her, if she wants’, to which the girlfriend just shrugs and smiles. It is difficult to know how to read the scene: it appears to have a tender intimacy to it, but features brutal language that many audience members could have found uncomfortable. On the night I attended, this scene, as with others featuring Mark, met with laughter.

Mindful of Hemmings’ (2005) arguments that affect has a ‘structured precision’ that leads it to be differentially associated with different types of body (she writes with particular regard to the disgust associated with race in the U.S.), I wondered whether Mark’s status as a white working-class young man – or simply his more reticent personality – was obstructing us from filling Blythe’s role in establishing a rapport with him, in contrast to some of the more bubbly and uncontroversially ‘likeable’ characters. Of course, it is not clear how strong a rapport with him Blythe herself would actually have had – but she could certainly not have participated in an act of collective laughter, something that ruptured the matrix of ethnographic sociality and instead placed audience members into a compact of complicity with each other *against* Mark. At the talkback session, I raised this point with the company and asked how they felt about the prospect that they were embodying a real person who, through their portrayal, might be laughed at.

Daniel gave an interesting response which presented an optimistic take on the situation, linking it back to the question of the distinctive merits of staging the material in theatrical form:

It's what theatre does, isn't it? It sends you down one way and you think you're going one way and then it suddenly stops you and makes you go back another way, and think again, and I think that probably is relevant to your first question, in that why do it in the theatre? To make you take more notice. If it was a television documentary and you just saw these people, and you were sitting watching it on your own on a sofa, you'd have a different reaction to it, I think. I think it's when you're watching something together with a load of people, particularly in the round like that, you all take a view on something. That view may not be correct, because you're about to learn something else about them, and I think it's that that adds to the experience so that you come away having had a full experience of these people. And so you might go away thinking 'I shouldn't have laughed at them there, because I didn't know him. I shouldn't have laughed at her there, because I didn't know their circumstances. But that's what theatre does, it keeps... it should keep an audience guessing, on their toes, and make it live.

While the analysis Daniel gives here certainly applied to some of the other characters who seemed to undergo a narrative arc in which they became redeemed in the audience's eyes, it was unclear how much this applied in the case of Mark, to whom I felt the audience had been responding fairly consistently throughout. Here, then, we see a potential disconnect between Daniel's own theory of theatre (one which shares the conception of ethnographic sociality), and the potential folk-theories of theatre going amongst the audience, for whom a trip out to see a play comes with particular associations – especially those of wanting to be entertained by comic cameos – that conspire with class, gender and stereotype-laden hierarchies of affect to occlude particular identifications within the distinctive matrix of social relations that are being offered during a show. Indeed, concern about how the show was presenting some of its characters had been shared by audiences that had attended talk-backs earlier in the run, who the director described as being 'nearly in tears: ... very upset with what we'd

done, thought it was patronising, thought it didn't work, that it was class tourism, felt very, very uncomfortable with it and very depressed by it'.

To the extent that affective identifications with characters in situations of difficulty reflects the verbatim format's potential to contribute to policy making, it becomes imperative to ensure that such engagement is not unduly mediated by the very audience preconceptions and stereotypes that the piece seeks to challenge. This situation actually points to the limits of Denzin's suggestions that performance ethnography can and should 'undo the gazing eye of the modernist ethnographer' (Denzin 2003: 37), and suggests the potential value of forms of explicitly anthropological and interpretive intervention that open the audience to new ways of seeing the characters with whom they are presented on stage. This could be through clever twists in the dramaturgy; it could be through Canham-style dance, or musical accompaniment – but it could also be through straight-up interpretive commentary provided within the context of the performance. Audiences can be asked why they laugh; their expectations regarding an evening of theatre challenged, rather than upheld, as part of encountering unknown others through performance – an activity which in itself could and should be enough to count as 'a good evening's theatre'. Such interventions might seem crude or positivist to some, but it is precisely because of the richness of insights into psychology and subjectivity that a verbatim performance and its distinctive mode of ethnographic sociality provides that such claims can be made, the audience always-already empowered to hold them up to scrutiny and either adopt them, reject them, or modify them, as an interpretive framework through which to make sense of what they see.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I thank the editors and an anonymous reviewer for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this text.

## **NOTES**

---

<sup>i</sup> 'Verbatim' theatre is sometimes used to describe any play in which respondents' original words are used in the performance – as opposed to, say, forming the basis for

---

a devised piece (e.g. Jeffers 2009: 92). Throughout this essay I use the term in the narrower sense proposed by Blythe.

<sup>ii</sup> Readers may here recognise my use of terminology from the literature on constructivist pedagogy, in which it is now generally agreed that learning situations which encourage a learner to ‘change their conceptions’ lead to a deeper and longer-lasting grasp of the material (see e.g. Ellis et al. 2008). My argument here, of course, is in no way to denigrate the capacities of text, film, or lectures / talks to change audiences’ conceptions: each medium carries its own advantages and limitations.

<sup>iii</sup> In the interests of providing at least a modicum of confidentiality, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for all the actors, theatre workers, and ‘talk-back’ guests discussed in this paper – with the exception of Teresa Heskins who is identifiable by dint of being the show’s director.

<sup>iv</sup> As Little (2009) notes, this technique presumes – and thus may be most or wholly appropriate for – a certain kind of communicative subject who is able to express its inner experience: a capacity some subjects, such as trauma sufferers, may not share.

<sup>v</sup> This is particularly apt given Blythe’s interest in capturing people’s thoughts as they are preoccupied with other situations and activities (Blythe 2008: 92) but is not to deny that in some situations, cinematic methods could also achieve excellent results.

<sup>vi</sup> Although I focus here on the possibilities that verbatim methods offer for staging ethnographic plays, the technique could also be profitably adopted in other performative dimensions of anthropologists’ professional lives – such as in lectures or when presenting conference papers.

<sup>vii</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9710000/9710402.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9710000/9710402.stm) [accessed 4 August 2013].

<sup>viii</sup> In her most recent work, *Little Revolution*, which premiered at Islington’s Almeida Theatre in August 2014, and used the verbatim technique to explore the aftermath of the 2011 London riots, Blythe included the character of ‘Alecky’ (which she herself played) and structured the play’s narrative around her own research process. The play began with a sense of chaos, as each interview yielded incomplete fragments of experience, but as the piece went on, and Blythe herself became better incorporated into a set of social relations, themes and issues began to crystallise. This artistic decision also allowed Blythe to raise questions about the ethics of her own research process, shown both in awkward moments of interaction, and through the juxtaposition of her own practices of interview and documentation with those of other journalists and commentators. However, these not insubstantial benefits came at the

---

expense of the ethnographic sociality evident in *Where Have I Been All My Life?* Despite *Little Revolution*'s best efforts to ensure that, as the Almedia's publicity campaign put it, 'the audience [were] placed at the heart of the action', including the re-structuring of the theatre space that the show could be performed in the round, and direction that frequently had actors standing very close to members of the (seated) audience, the sense remained that one was an observer, not an interlocutor.

<sup>ix</sup> A point that Teresa Heskins was at pains to emphasise to us after the show was that 'one of the things we have to keep reminding ourselves of is that they [with reference to a particular group of characters] were performing a little bit for Alecky, you know, they were showing off, they didn't want to get the cutting room floor, they did want to make an impression, they wanted to meet you tonight, in some version, through these, through these actors.'

<sup>x</sup> This approach has characterised much of the performance work by Anna Deveare Smith herself, who asserts that 'I don't believe that when I play someone in my work, that I 'am' the character. I want the audience to experience the gap, because I know if they experience the gap, they will appreciate my reach for the other' (Kondo 2000: 96).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashdown, K. 2013. *Where Have I Been All My Life?*, New Vic Theatre. *Staffordshire Newsletter*, 13th April 2013, <http://www.staffordshirenewsletter.co.uk/Life-New-Vic-Theatre/story-20164055-detail/story.html>.
- Berlant, L. 2007. Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obseity, Lateral Agency). *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4: 754-780.
- Billington, M. 2008. The Girlfriend Experience: Royal Court, London. *The Guardian*, 25 September 2008.
- Blythe, A. 2008. Alecky Blythe. In *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, (eds) W. Hammond and D. Steward, 77-102. London: Oberon.

- Callon, M. 1986. Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. In *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, (ed.) J. Law, London & New York: Routledge.
- Cantrell, T. 2013. *Acting in Documentary Theatre*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clifford, J., and G. E. Marcus. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Denzin, N. K. 2003. *Performance Ethnography: Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Edwards, J. 2012. Ancestors, Class, and Contingency. *Focaal* 62: 70-80.
- Ellis, R. A., P. Goodyear, R. A. Calvo, and M. Prosser. 2008. Engineering Students' Conceptions of and Approaches to Learning through Discussions in Face-to-Face and Online Contexts. *Learning and Instruction* 18, no. 3: 267-282.
- Faubion, J. 2011. *An Anthropology of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forsyth, A., and C. Megson. 2009. Introduction. In *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, (eds) A. Forsyth and C. Megson, 1-5. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fritz, J., S. Plouviez Comnas, and T. Martin. 2011. Does Documentary Theatre Get Away with Murder?  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2011/apr/21/verbatim-theatre-misleading-audiences>> (accessed 4 August 2013).
- Hazou, R. T. 2012. Staging Hidden Stories: Australian Theatre and Asylum Seekers. *In/Steadd* no. 3:  
[http://www.doubledialogues.com/in\\_stead/in\\_stead\\_iss03/Hazou.html](http://www.doubledialogues.com/in_stead/in_stead_iss03/Hazou.html).
- Hemmings, C. 2005. Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn. *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5: 548-567.
- Innes, C. D. 2007. Towards a Post-Millennial Mainstream? Documents of the Times. *Modern Drama* 50, no. 3: 435-452.
- Jeffers, A. 2009. Looking for Esrafil: Witnessing 'Refugitive' Bodies in *I've Got Something to Show You*. In *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, (eds) A. Forsyth and C. Megson, 91-106. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Kondo, D. K. 2000. (Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre. *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1: 81-107.
- Laidlaw, J. 2002. For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8, no. 2: 311-322.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. *The Subject of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Little, S. 2009. In and out of Tune with Reality: Opposed Strategies of Documentary Theatre. *Double Dialogues* 14: [http://www.doubledialogues.com/issue\\_fourteen/Little.html](http://www.doubledialogues.com/issue_fourteen/Little.html) (accessed 11 October 2013).
- Long, N. J. 2013. *Being Malay in Indonesia: Histories, Hopes and Citizenship in the Riau Archipelago*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2015 forthcoming. Sociality, in Anthropology. In *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, Second Edition*, (ed.) J. D. Wright, Oxford: Elsevier.
- Long, N. J., and H. L. Moore. 2013. Introduction: Sociality's New Directions. In *Sociality: New Directions*, (eds) N. J. Long and H. L. Moore, 1-24. Oxford & New York: Berghahn.
- Moore, H. L. 2011. *Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfactions*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Nichols, B. 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concept Sin Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nicholson, H. 2009. Intergenerational Reminiscence Theatre. In *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice*, (eds) M. Prendergast and J. Saxton, 174-178. Bristol: Intellect.
- Paget, D. 1987. 'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentray Techniques. *New Theatre Quarterly* 3, no. 12: 317-336.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. Acts of Commitment: Activist Arts, the Rehearsed Reading, and Documentary Theatre. *New Theatre Quarterly* 26, no. 2: 173-193.
- Plastow, J. 2004. Dance and Transformation: The Adugna Community Dance Theatre, Ethiopia. In *Theatre and Empowerment: Community Drama on the World Stage*, (eds) R. Boon and J. Plastow, 125-154. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Reinelt, J. 2009. The Promise of Documentary. In *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, (eds) A. Forsyth and C. Megson, 6-23. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robben, A. C. G. M. 1995. The Politics of Truth and Emotion among Victims and Perpetrators of Violence. In *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, (eds) C. Nordstrom and A. Robben, C.G.M., Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, A. D. 2000. *Talk to Me: Listening between the Lines*. New York: Random House.
- Stewart, K. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. The Achievement of a Life, a List, a Line. In *The Social Life of Achievement*, (eds) N. J. Long and H. L. Moore, 31-42. Oxford & New York: Berghahn.
- Stuart Fisher, A. 2011. That's Who I'd Be, If I Could Sing!: Reflections on a Verbatim Project with Mothers of Sexually Abused Children. *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31, no. 2: 193-208.
- Taylor, L. 2013. Voice, Body and the Transmission of the Real in Documentary Theatre. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23, no. 3: 368-379.
- Trinh, T. M.-h. 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London & New York: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. The Totalizing Quest of Meaning. In *Theorizing Documentary*, (ed.) M. Renov, 90-107. New York & London: Routledge.
- Vergunst, J., and A. Vermehren. 2013. The Art of Slow Sociality: Movement, Aesthetics and Shared Understanding. In *Sociality: New Directions*, (eds) N. J. Long and H. L. Moore, 191-207. Oxford & New York: Berghahn.
- Wake, C. 2013. Headphone Verbatim Theatre: Methods, Histories, Genres, Theories. *New Theatre Quarterly* 29, no. 4: 329-335.
- Work Foundation. 2008. Transforming North Staffordshire Evidence Paper B: Key Issues for North Staffordshire.  
[http://www.stokestaffslep.org.uk/files/5713/0641/1965/Transforming\\_North\\_Staffordshire\\_Evidence\\_Paper\\_B.pdf](http://www.stokestaffslep.org.uk/files/5713/0641/1965/Transforming_North_Staffordshire_Evidence_Paper_B.pdf) (accessed 14 October 2013).