



TaPS MASTER CLASS RESOURCE PACK: Master Class: Exploring Verbatim Theatre

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October 2012, London

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that Derek Paget first coined the term 'verbatim theatre' in an article entitled: '*Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques*' published in the *New Theatre Quarterly* journal in 1987. In this article Paget defines verbatim theatre as:

"A form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. The primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place." (Paget 1987: 317).

The early forms of verbatim theatre that Paget speaks of in this article was rooted in the documentary theatre work of Peter Cheeseman who created community theatre with the people of Stoke-on-Trent, England in the mid-sixties. Cheeseman would record local people telling their stories, transcribe these interviews and knit them together to form a performance text. The result was a drama that very much reflected the sounds, expressions and the locality in which the participants were based.

In the late seventies and early eighties this technique was developed further and used to illuminate national and political issues such as the Falkland's War and the Miner's Strike (see Paget 1987). Verbatim theatre techniques then became less about capturing and preserving a locality or a community identity and more about investigating and researching complex national political situations.

The last ten years or so has seen a resurgence of the use of verbatim theatre techniques in contemporary theatre making both within the UK and beyond. Adopting terms such as 'documentary theatre' (more common in the United States) or 'verbatim theatre' (more common in the UK), today's theatre practitioners seem intractably drawn towards dramaturgical strategies that reference the actual and the true, leading New York academic Carol Martin to propose the term 'dramaturgy of the real' to define these kinds of approaches (see Martin 2010).

In contemporary verbatim and documentary theatre, dramatists are likely to adopt a wide range of different research strategies. For example, some political documentary plays owe a lot to the documentary techniques of Piscator and Brecht (see the 'Inquiry Plays' of Richard Norton-Taylor at the Tricycle London such as 'The Colour of Justice' 1999 and 'Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Enquiry' 2005), others have retained some of the 'pure' verbatim traditions inaugurated by Cheeseman (for example, the verbatim plays of Recorded Delivery by Alecky Blythe such as 'London Road' 2011, 'Come Out Eli' 2002). These plays are all very different in style and content but in each case the dramatist asserts the text's 'truthfulness' by grounding the construction of the text in verbatim or documentary theatre

strategies. These texts would seem then to offer a new unmediated account of the issues they explore.

Carole Martin defines six 'functions' of documentary (or verbatim theatre), these are:

1. To reopen trials in order to critique justice
2. To create additional historical accounts
3. To reconstruct an event
4. To intermingle autobiography with history
5. To critique the operations of both documentary and fiction
6. To elaborate the oral culture of theatre
(Martin 2006: 12-13)

One of the key issues that we need to think about when performing, directing or creating these kinds of texts are the political and ethical questions of truth these approaches implicitly raise. Because these contemporary dramaturgies of the real assert a claim of actuality and truth (i.e. these are the words that were actually spoken by this person, this is a transcript of a trial that actually took place) important questions have to be asked about whose truth is being represented here? Whose stories are being told? And what is lost or gained when transcribed interviews or documentary 'evidence' are edited by a dramatist and woven together into a play? Underpinning this is a 'promise' that the dramatist is making not only to the audience but to the people who are represented within the playtext itself. For in the words of Carol Martin: '...what is real and what is true are not necessarily the same'. (Martin 2006:15)

Master Class overview

The Master Class will begin by establishing some of the basic tenets of 'verbatim theatre'. Through a series of practical activities the participants will generate their own 'mini' verbatim theatre texts. Drawing on these practical examples we will consider and debate some of the ethical questions around 'truth' these approaches raise. The workshop will conclude by exploring some examples of verbatim theatre texts and how these might be staged.

Exercises

- The workshop will begin by reading two or three short extracts from scripts and asking the participants to guess which texts are 'verbatim', which are fictional and which might be defined as a mixture of the two

(this will involve a discussion about definitions of verbatim, documentary and testimonial theatre).

- The participants will then work in pairs to create their own 'verbatim' texts. These will be constructed around a story they will each tell about their journey to the TAPS workshops.
- These stories will then be re-formed in different ways drawing attention to the ethics of re-presenting someone else's story.
- There will then be a discussion reflecting on these performances in which we will consider the ethics and politics of verbatim theatre and how different dramatists have responded to the question of 'truth' in their creative approaches.
- We will then return to the texts from the first part of the workshop and explore how these might be represented taking account of the ethics implicit in this kind of work.

Bibliography

Books, Articles and Plays

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Practitioner's pathway

At school I was always passionate about drama, playwriting and performing. My mother was (and still is!) a strong socialist and a local Labour Party councillor. Because of this perhaps, from very early on in my life, politics and the plight of those who were less fortunate than me or who suffered injustice have played an important part in how I live my life and what I believe in.

After taking my A-levels I went on to study performing arts at Middlesex University. I then trained to be a drama teacher before starting work in a drama department at a comprehensive school in North London where I taught dance and drama to young people aged 11 to 18. In 1996, I decided to make a career change and left teaching to work as an education coordinator at The Royal Court Theatre, London.

This was an exciting time for me and I began to recognise the importance playwriting can make in our lives. During this time I saw my very first verbatim play called 'Waiting Room Germany' by Klaus Pohl, 1996 (trans. David Tushingham). This play made a strong impact on me because it made me look at the re-unification of Germany (and the politics and ethics of this event) in an entirely new way. As a result of this renewed interest in playwriting I decided to take an MA in Playwriting at Goldsmiths College, University of London. I then was encouraged by some of the people I had worked with in theatre and education to apply for a job at Central School of Speech and Drama where I have worked as a lecturer in Applied Theatre ever since. Applied Theatre is a term used to describe theatre that does not take place in traditional theatre buildings. Instead, our students work in prisons, hospitals, community and school settings, and also in refugee camps and other international contexts. My job is very rewarding because I get to work with students involved in a number of interesting projects which are genuinely making a difference to people's lives.

In addition to my teaching work I also undertake research. In 2007 I wrote my own verbatim play called 'From the Mouths of Mothers' and later that year I made contact with an amazing South African playwright and director called Yael Farber who sent me three testimonial plays she had written in collaboration with individuals who had lived through the apartheid regime in South Africa. The texts were beautiful, moving, political and very inspiring. This was the start of a very productive collaboration between us. In 2008 the plays were published with an introduction written by myself, in 2011 I wrote an article about one of Farber's play 'He Left Quietly' which was published in 'Performance Research' and another article about the verbatim play I created for Studies in Theatre and Performance. I'm currently working on a film project in collaboration with Tony Fisher (Central School of Speech and Drama), which is based on an interview with an amazing woman who survived the holocaust.

I am also an examiner for the International Baccalaureate for the TPPP component.