

Refugee Perspectives: the practice and ethics of verbatim theatre and refugee stories.

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Verbatim theatre has gained both critical and popular attention in the last ten years. Some of its popularity has been seen as a reflection of frustrations with the political process and plays like David Hare's *Stuff Happens* at The National Theatre in 2004 are often cited in this respect (Megson, 2005). Other critics see verbatim theatre as a manifestation of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the media; as playwright David Edgar succinctly puts it "Verbatim theatre fills the hole left by the current inadequacy of TV documentary, perished under the tank tracks of reality TV" (Kellaway, 2004). In the last ten years the term has mostly come to popular attention through the Tribunal Plays for which the Tricycle Theatre in London has become well-known. Tribunal theatre "mobilises extant traditions of documentary performance" (Megson, 2005: 370) by presenting the edited transcripts of trials and tribunals. They began in 1993 with *Half the Picture* by Richard Norton-Taylor, based on the Scott Arms to Iraq enquiry, with the most recent one *Bloody Sunday*, also by Norton-Taylor, being staged in 2005.

The tribunal plays are, however, only one strand of verbatim theatre practice in the UK and it is important to gain some sense of the diversity of approaches and practices that have been assembled under the umbrella of verbatim theatre.

Despite its popularity, little has been published about the form and those who are concerned with analyzing it are thrown onto their own resources in terms of viewing material, speaking with those who practice it and creating it themselves. It will be suggested that, despite its adoption into the British theatre scene, in the words of the organisers of a recent symposium on the subject, “Verbatim theatre practices are current and contentious”¹ Verbatim theatre is a problematic performance methodology, especially in relation to its claims to authenticity and some of these claims will be examined in the first part of the essay. It has further been noted that verbatim theatre is a popular technique in creative projects with groups of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. The remainder of the essay will examine three specific examples of this work to provide examples of some of the questions which arise when the verbatim form is placed under scrutiny.

The term *verbatim theatre* was coined by Derek Paget in 1987. He described how practitioners had seen “a whole new area of documentary opening up – the direct communication...of lived experience through the actor as instrument” (Barker qtd. in Paget, 1987:317) by means of the new technology available to them in the form of the portable tape recorder. The notion of ‘authenticity’ played an important role in the early development of the form due to the emphasis on the taping, transcription and feeding back to the communities who had given their stories. Authenticity can, however, be argued to have developed to the level of fetish in contemporary practice. When director Max Stafford-

¹ Two day symposium ‘Verbatim Practices in Contemporary Theatre’ at Central School of Speech and Drama in London 13-14 July 2006 David Annen, Andy Lavender, Dan Milne

Clark was recently asked for a definition of verbatim theatre he responded that it was based on “a belief that authenticity is inherently dramatic” (Out of Joint, 2000). Writer of verbatim play *A State Affair*, Robin Soans, has subsequently written *The Arab Israeli Cookbook* and *Talking to Terrorists*, both of which are based exclusively on verbatim material. In a similar vein to Stafford Clark, Soans’ definition of verbatim is that “every single thing should have been said by somebody, the bricks you build your house on should have been said by somebody”.² The claim to authenticity is often reinforced by the creators of verbatim theatre through conventions that serve to place it at the centre of their enterprise. Many of these are extraneous to the production itself, in publicity material, for example, or through the use of extensive programme notes. These strategies are unambiguous but there are more subtle ways of reminding an audience that the words they are hearing are based on the authenticity of speech, and these are embedded in the practices that have developed around the performance of verbatim material.

In the performance itself, the acting conventions differ radically in places from those of a traditional piece of naturalistic theatre. The classic proscenium arch convention of the ‘fourth wall’ collapses in verbatim theatre, and the actors speak directly to the audience and acknowledge audience reactions. On occasions they interact with those lucky, or unfortunate enough depending on one’s point of view, to be in the front row: an actor in a performance of *The Arab*

² Interview with Robin Soans, 17th July 2006, conducted by Alison Jeffers and Jenny Hughes

Israeli Cookbook, for example, offered a bowl of olives to the audience.³ In speaking directly to the audience, a different level of truth claim from that of the fictional authored play appears to be created. The fact that British audiences are more familiar with these conventions in pantomime and stand-up comedy sometimes leads to an unhelpfully over-humorous reaction to these audience interventions and can be problematic for the actors in gauging the level of their performance.⁴

Writers of verbatim theatre “are freed...from some of the burdens of conventional playwriting” (Paget, 1987: 318). Verbatim playwrights are looking for what writer Dennis Woolf has called an “emotional arc” rather than the linear narrative of cause and effect which creates the classic dramatic arc.⁵ Soans identifies the need for some kind of narrative in which to hold the action saying “if you don’t have a narrative of some sort, at least a personal narrative among the characters...if you don’t have something as simple as that then the thing will begin to meander rather like a river that will burst its banks and that’s not great”⁶. Jonathan Holmes is the writer and director of *Fallujah*, a verbatim play based on the accounts of those involved with the Fallujah massacre in Iraq. He speaks of structural innovations made possible in verbatim theatre because

³ This production was staged at the Tricycle Theatre in 2006 and gained extra resonance by taking place in the middle of the turmoil surrounding the London bombings on 7th July, 2005

⁴ Conversation with the cast of *Talking to Terrorists*, The Library Theatre, Manchester 18.5.05

⁵ Interview with Dennis Woolf, 15th July 2005, conducted by Alison Jeffers

⁶ Interview with Robin Soans, 17th July 2006, conducted by Alison Jeffers and Jenny Hughes

audience expectations for the form allow the writer to “sidestep certain structural expectations”, one of the main ones being that of narrative closure.⁷

In his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ Roland Barthes challenges the traditional role of the “Author-God” (Barthes 1984: 146), making a case for the text as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (*ibid*). Although Barthes’ essay was discussing the relationship of the single reader to the writer of a novelistic fiction, this seems to provide an accurate description for the text of a verbatim play. The author apparently takes a secondary role, relinquishing to the audience some of the power to create meaning, thus disrupting the classic lexicon of realistic theatre. The audience has the apparent freedom to craft their own narratives from the “tissue of quotations” (Barthes, 1984:146) which is the repeated words of the play’s subjects.

Anna Deavere Smith, an American actor/playwright, interviews all her subjects in much the same way as *Out of Joint* but, instead of then employing a company of actors to retell the stories, Smith performs them all herself. In *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith’s response to the Los Angeles riots of 1991, she presents a range of reactions that remain as “fragmented and partial speeches which...do not pretend to a whole”. (Lyons and Lyons, 1994:46) The apparently ‘unfinished’ nature of the work may give the audience the impression that they are creating

⁷ Jonathan Holmes’ presentation during ‘Verbatim Practices in Contemporary Theatre’ at Central School of Speech and Drama in London 13-14 July 2006

the whole, completing the work through their investment, participation and interpretation. Lyons and Lyons suggest that part of the appeal of Smith's work is that "it plays between the illusion of authenticity and the skilfulness of its artifice" (*ibid*). This complex interplay is, however, hard to grasp in the moment of performance. Watching a verbatim play can feel like being washed over by a great tide of voices, feelings and opinions knowing that the writer has, to use Soans' metaphor, created the banks within which to contain it. This may cause the audience to forget that verbatim theatre is a lesson in suppression; more material is recorded than can ever be used. It is manipulated, crafted and edited to create an effect. The spectator's freedom to meander within this, to create their own patterns, logic and narratives may, ultimately, prove a false one whereby the constructed nature of the playwright's vision is concealed from the audience by the very wash of the voices and the apparent lack of any narrative line.

The verbatim plays which use the words, stories, anecdotes, confessions, secrets and lies given to verbatim theatre researchers are based on personal narratives, and even silences, or refusals to answer a particular question, are indicative of a subject's story, a life retold. The circumstances in which people speak to researchers will vary but in all cases the interviewee will be aware that their words may be used in a play. This may discourage some people but Soans has noticed that this knowledge often has the opposite effect, stating that in his

experience “people are not only willing, they’re absolutely desperate to talk. One of the frustrations in modern life is that nobody ever listens to people”.⁸

For refugees who have experienced violence, the need to be listened to can be imperative. War ethnographer Carolyn Nordstrom writes extensively about the anthropology of listening and suggests that “...it is essential for people to reconstruct their world after violence has deconstructed all that they hold dear”. She emphasizes the importance of being able to, in the words of Veena Das, “talk and talk” in order to do this (Nordstrom, 1997:79). Nordstrom draws attention to Barthes’ writing on the voice and his claim that in the act of listening, the listener can begin to understand the existence of those who speak. “Listening to the voice inaugurates the relation to the Other...it bears an image of their body and, beyond, a whole psychology” (Nordstrom, 1977:80). Listening to the stories of those who have experienced violence puts the listener into a relationship with the person who is speaking. Using verbatim theatre with refugees raises questions about the nature of that relationship, asking who is telling the story, to whom are they telling it and for what reason?

Three examples: Ice and Fire, Banner Theatre and Cardboard Citizens/RSC

Ice and Fire is a company based in London, whose work has been exclusively concerned with questions of exile and asylum in Britain. Founded in 2003 by playwright Sonja Linden, they claim to be a company “that passionately believes

⁸ Interview with Robin Soans , 17th July 2006, conducted by Alison Jeffers and Jenny Hughes

art has a role to play in communicating one of the most pressing contemporary issues – the growing displacement of peoples from conflict zones”⁹ In 2005 the play, *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* was created following interviews with five refugees based in London. An interim script was produced in 2004 which was performed at The Actors’ Centre and The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. The material was then reworked significantly for the second part of the project and transformed by Linden into a traditional single-authored play of the same title. The implications of this decision will be discussed in more detail below. For *Ice and Fire*, the emphasis of the project appears to be education and information. Linden describes how she set up *Ice and Fire* “to communicate some of the individual [refugee] stories I found myself witness to” after being “incensed...at the indignity and suffering they had been forced to undergo.”¹⁰

This close relationship with the subjects on whose words the play was based appears to have placed a strong feeling of responsibility on Linden. She had to not only take into account the physical, psychological and emotional trauma involved in the subjects’ flight, but the fact that all of the subjects were escaping torture appears to have made that burden all the heavier. Some of the refugee subjects wanted to talk, not about the experiences that had driven them to UK, but about their treatment at the hands of the UK immigration system and what

⁹ www.iceandfire.org, accessed. 4th January, 2006

¹⁰ Programme note by Sonja Linden *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* Lyric Studio, London 20th Sept-8th Oct 2005

they saw as its unfair and cruel nature.¹¹ Linden describes herself as “a secondary witness” and also as a “midwife” to the stories, indicating something of the accountability she feels to the process, but suggesting also a personal and emotional link to the stories and, by implication, to their tellers.¹²

The second example, Banner Theatre, is one of Britain’s longest established political theatre companies with over “thirty year’s experience of working with marginalized and disadvantaged communities”.¹³ They have created a hybrid form called the *video-ballad*, which combines video interviews and the live performance of songs and music which they take to small informal venues. Banner’s writer, Dave Rogers, said of the company “We choose our audiences deliberately, on the basis that if you want to push out capitalism, you need to support those who are doing the pushing” (Filewood and Watt, 2001:127). Their most recent piece, *Wild Geese*, uses the video ballad to tell “The stories of Irish nurses, Asian textile workers, Iranian refugees and Chinese cockle pickers”.¹⁴

Rogers refuses to differentiate between refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, demonstrating a belief that all groups are members of an economic underclass, which is increasingly exploited by global inequalities created and perpetuated by capitalism. “People have been migrating to this country for centuries. Why do

¹¹ The crocodile of the title is based on an African story about a crocodile that escaped from a river only to be washed away in a flood and this story was taken to mirror the story of many refugees who think they have escaped only to find themselves in a more precarious position in their so-called place of refuge.

¹² Interview with Sonja Linden 26th October, 2004, conducted by Alison Jeffers and Ananda Breed

¹³ www.bannertheatre.co.uk, accessed 4th January, 2006

¹⁴ www.bannertheatre.co.uk, accessed 4th January, 2006

we have to have the supposedly good migrant who's an asylum *seeker*, therefore he's got some good reason to come here and the rest who we can *dis* because they're not asylum seekers, you know. I really hate that distinction".¹⁵ The performance of *Wild Geese* uses video recordings of migrant stories, as well as slides with information about refugees and migrants. These are accompanied by four live musicians who perform especially composed songs, accompanied live by a range of acoustic instruments. There is no attempt on the performers' part to voice the refugee stories directly and the implications of this will be considered in more detail below. Banner Theatre takes a more overtly political approach and aims to move beyond sympathy for the individual to a deeper understanding of the systems and structures that create refugees.

The final example is Cardboard Citizens, who are based in London and describe themselves as "the UK's only homeless people's professional theatre company".¹⁶ In 2004 they undertook a production of Shakespeare's *Pericles* in an ambitious joint project with The Royal Shakespeare Company. The project took place in two stages, initially traveling to a variety of refugee projects and performing a scaled-down version of *Pericles* (which became known as *mini-Pericles*). This was performed by five actors, three of whom were refugees, and open discussions after the performance allowed audience members to tell stories about their own journeys. Some of these stories found their way into the second stage of the project, the large-scale production of the full play. This was

¹⁵ Interview with Dave Rogers, 13th July, 2006, conducted by Alison Jeffers

¹⁶ www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk accessed 4th January, 2006

performed in a disused warehouse, which had been ‘transformed into a Sangatte-like holding centre’ (Jermyn, 2001:7) and played to large theatre audiences.¹⁷

The first part of Cardboard Citizens’ project was based on a participatory theatre model which placed as much stress on first-hand refugee narratives as on communicating any coherent narrative. Part of their project involved participatory theatre and dance workshops with the aim of bringing refugees together to create their own dance and theatre pieces, as well as providing them with space in which to share their indigenous performance practices. The participatory element continued into the final performance as a dance group of refugee performers was created to perform a wedding dance as part of the large-scale production.

Sometimes, having created an understanding of the full impact of becoming a refugee, the responsibility to bear that message to a wider audience may become too great. This is what appears to have happened in the case of the Ice and Fire’s *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* project. As outlined above, the first stage was to gather the stories of five refugees and to edit these into a verbatim theatre piece for a public audience. These were not easy stories to hear or to tell and included tales of rape, torture and murder. Writer Sonja Linden said after the work-in-progress showing of the piece “I feel this tremendous need to be loyal to them as

¹⁷ Sangatte was a holding centre for refugees in the north of France which became a notorious symbol for both the ‘refugee problem’ especially as perceived by the British tabloid press and for the inequalities of the European immigration system to those who were more sympathetic to the plight of the refugees held there.

individuals and their stories”.¹⁸ This need may have led Linden to produce a more traditionally crafted play for the second stage of the project, placing the fictionalized character of Harriet, a middle-class asylum lawyer, at the centre of the narrative. This had the effect of removing it altogether from the genre of verbatim theatre and placing it back into the realm of realistic acting and its fourth wall convention. It would appear that Linden did not trust the ability of the verbatim theatre form to carry out the task in hand and reverted to the ‘authority’ of the single-authored text.

It may not have been only the terrible content of the stories or Linden’s moral responsibility to the refugees who told them, but a professional conflict that drove Linden’s choice in moving away from a verbatim theatre piece. She found it impossible to perceive of herself as a writer while she was simply, as she saw it, crafting other people’s words. She says “I’m finding this voice issue particularly challenging and I want to be true to them, I want to be true to me”.¹⁹ The need to fulfill what she saw as the traditional role of the playwright may have driven her to alter radically the nature of the play from verbatim theatre to realistic drama, consequently causing a shift in perspective away from refugees and onto the trials of the British middle-class professionals who are trying to help them.

¹⁸ Interview with Sonja Linden 26th October, 2004, conducted by Alison Jeffers and Ananda Breed

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One can also detect a shift in the Cardboard Citizens' project between the first and second stages of the project. The so-called *mini-Pericles* first part of the project, where refugees were encouraged to tell their own stories, gave way to the high production values of the full performance of *Pericles* with all the weight of the professional reputation of the RSC behind it. Although this project can be seen to have been a valuable experience for those refugees who became involved with it, in terms of verbatim theatre it appears that the voice of the individual refugee with a story to tell, may have been compelled to give way to the voice of the playwright and to the literary canon.

Both *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* and *Pericles* might be said to have been placed in a situation where, to use Walter Benjamin's terms, the *cult value* of the pieces has been forced to concede to their *exhibition value* (Benjamin 1999). The early stages of both projects were important only to the people who had been involved in the ritual of making them and the stories that were told were easily understood by those listening because they had had similar experiences; in Benjamin's terms, they had cult value. However, in taking them to a wider audience most of whom will not have had the same experiences, the earlier pieces are removed from their immediate creators and environment and are forced to assume what Benjamin would call, exhibition value. This shift is reinforced by the standards and production values that are expected in theatre venues or of prestigious theatre companies.

Banner Theatre in contrast, by playing to small audiences in venues located in the communities in which they have gathered the stories, can be seen to maintain cult value in both their performance style and in their adherence to the use of verbatim material. Their reluctance to mediate or to retell the refugee narratives in their own words or in venues which demand high production values, allows Banner to stay closer to the roots of the stories that are told and, ultimately, to the tellers of the stories. Their slightly rough-and-ready performance style and the eschewing of any narrative line in favour of a more folk-club style where boundaries between actor and audience are blurred (Filewood and Watt, 2001) are other ways in which their performance could be said to have a stronger cult than exhibition value.

Banner's project does raise questions about the nature of the transaction when refugees give their stories up to any story-telling professionals no matter how sympathetic, and about how much control they actually have in their re-telling. Banner attempts to avoid some of the ethical pitfalls of having an actor re-tell the refugees' stories by using video footage of the refugee subject themselves speaking. This has the effect of presenting the subjects in a less mediated way than they would be in the verbatim theatre model but, although the teller of the story has control of what they choose to say or not say, they appear to have little or no control of the framing narrative. Their stories can be manipulated by juxtaposition and other framing devices to create the message that the company wants to communicate. Moreover, Banner can choose not to use stories that do

not support their particular political agenda and the company themselves are aware of these tensions.

To conclude, verbatim theatre is a common practice in work with refugees. Understanding how the practice operates across a broad range of theatrical operations helps to comprehend how refugee stories are used in performance and to appreciate some of the ethical and political implications of that practice. There is a wide variety of practice in terms of how those narratives are manipulated and presented for re-telling to a wider audience, based on the variety of approaches as to the function of the re-telling and the context within which the stories are presented. The liberal approach of Ice and Fire and their attempt to create a better climate of understanding, stands in sharp contrast to the intentions of Banner Theatre to foster political education among their audiences. The attempt by Cardboard Citizens to create an inclusive politicized reading of refugee stories may have been compromised by their need to revert to the full text of a classic play. Despite the fact that there are signs that the use of verbatim theatre may already be on the wane in mainstream theatre, it looks set to remain a strong feature of theatre work with refugee communities for some time to come.

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