

The Ethics of the Representation of the Real People and Their Stories in Verbatim Theatre

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I have to confess that I am a little confused as to what you are doing. If I understand it right it sounds like you are making an entertainment of the greatest tragedy of my life.

MARTIN, in Dennis Kelly, *Taking Care of Baby* 28



Abstract

This chapter investigates the contested dramaturgical process of adapting or translating the lives of others for the stage. With reference to contemporary British, United States, and New Zealand examples of verbatim theatre, including his own practice, Young examines theatre-makers' responsibilities in collecting, editing, and re-presenting real people's testimony, registering attendant, problematic claims to truth, or authenticity, and objectivity. He considers critiques of verbatim theatre, as inherently exploitative or voyeuristic in presuming to speak for others, alongside claims that verbatim theatre has the power to give voice to the voiceless, that people can and do want their stories to be (re)told.

Because fact-based theatre is primarily derived from the testimony of real people and because of contingent assumptions about that theatre's a priori claims to, and investment in, "truth" and authenticity, its dramaturgical practices raise a wide range of exigent ethical questions. It is not surprising, therefore, that, although scholarship on ethics in theatre and performance generally is in its relative infancy, ethical issues have become central to the discourse around fact-based theatre (Wake 105). Indeed, Patrick Duggan suggests that fact-based, or verbatim, theatre, which has burgeoned during the last two decades, might be "a natural home" for "an examination of the ethics of representation" (157). Fact-based theatre takes a variety of forms, which are known variously as not

only verbatim theatre, but also documentary theatre, theatre of the real, and theatre of testimony (or testimonial theatre). This essay is concerned primarily with theatre that is created wholly or substantially from interviews or conversations with people, hence I use the term “verbatim” as well as “fact-based.” The ethical issues raised by fact-based theatre include: aspects of spectatorship, an area that has begun to inspire considerable academic commentary, and which Suzanne Little discusses in another context in her essay in this volume; the welfare of theatre-makers, especially actors, working with traumatic testimony, something that Hilary Halba and I, among others, address elsewhere (Halba and Young 111-2); what Mary Luckhurst calls the “ethical stress” experienced by actors who perform real people (135); and, in relation to that stress, the responsibilities of directors and writers to actors, who feel a tension between their obligations to their subjects and a production’s demands (Luckhurst 141). Here I focus on issues particularly germane to this book’s specific concern with dramaturgy: theatre-makers’ responsibility to their “subjects,” in collecting, using, and re-presenting real people’s testimony, and attendant, problematic claims to truth, or authenticity, and objectivity. In examining these ethical issues, I proceed from the premise that performance is implicit in, and cannot be separated from dramaturgy. I draw on examples of British, United States, and New Zealand practice, including work by David Hare, Max Stafford-Clark, Robin Soans, Alecky Blythe and Recorded Delivery, BeFrank Theatre Company, Tectonic Theatre Project, Anna Deavere Smith, Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, and my own performance-as-research projects.

One might dismiss ethics altogether as “another illusion that postmodern men and women can well do without” (Bauman 2). This is not simply because we live in an age of exalted individualism that requires only minimal concessions to morality in interactions with others. If, as some postmodernists maintain, the self is an historical and cultural construct, shifting and unstable, then any representation of another is merely one more (re)construction and carries no ethical obligations. However, like Deirdre Heddon and Linda Alcoff, I recognise that “every [theatrical] act of representing an other” participates in the construction of her “subject-position” (Heddon 135; Alcoff 9), and “as such extends beyond the theatrical frame.” Therefore, such an act potentially, even necessarily, has an “impact on the represented subject” (Heddon 135), that is on a real person, no matter how multiple, shifting, and relational her identities may be.

Because, by definition, fact-based theatre is predicated upon the re-presentation of the testimony of real people, consideration for those who provide that testimony and who are represented in performance lies at the heart of ethical concerns about this form of theatre. Although, most emphatically, this

essay does not contain a prescription for a moral or ethical framework or code of practice for creating fact-based theatre, I register verbatim theatre-makers' cardinal responsibility to their real subjects, to the Other. Some commentators and practitioners identify Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy as offering a particularly useful way of thinking about those responsibilities, and indeed the contingent responsibilities of spectators (Salverson 38; Duggan 148, 155). Insisting that a person's responsibility for others is "unlimited," "irreducible," and "infinite" (*Otherwise Than Being* 10, 135; *Basic Philosophical Writings* 18), Levinas advocates an ethics that is premised on our always giving priority to the Other. Therefore, Salverson argues, any "process of knowledge and meaning-making that incorporates the other into itself" is inherently violent (38). Herein lies a major conundrum for fact-based theatre, for, unless the subject plays himself, the theatre-maker necessarily presumes to speak for others. Some regard that "speaking for others" as not only "arrogant" and "vain," but as "unethical, and politically illegitimate" (Alcoff 6). Hammond and Steward ask, is fact-based theatre "inherently exploitative or voyeuristic" (12)? Although, as this essay demonstrates, the ethical pitfalls for the theatre-maker are many, verbatim theatre is an ideal site, not merely for examining the ethics of representation, but for foregrounding and playing out the responsibilities to the Other that are a necessary part of our negotiating our way in this increasingly globalised, interconnected world.

Gathering Testimony from Real People

Sometimes the testimony reproduced in fact-based theatre comes from published or archived documents, such as Richard Norton-Taylor's series of tribunal plays (for London's Tricycle Theatre), which are drawn from court transcripts. In the vast majority of cases, however, this theatre is created from the testimony of people specifically interviewed for a project. Theatre-makers repeatedly testify to the keen sense of responsibility they feel towards those people (Alecky Blythe, in Hammond and Steward 94; Anna Deavere Smith, in Luckhurst and Veltman 135). The British playwright David Hare, for example, says that the writing of *The Permanent Way* (2003), a play about the consequences of the privatisation of British Rail, "involved an infinite amount of ethical worry. I don't think you can do this kind of work without responsibility to the people involved and that will either be in consultation with them . . . or through the artistic balancing of what you're trying to say" (qtd. in Merlin 129).

There is, however, scant evidence of formal ethical procedures for ensuring a proper duty of care. It seems that negotiation between theatre-makers and



FIGURE 1.1 *Cindy Diver as Rose, in Hush, Musgrove Studio, Maidment Theatre, Auckland, November 2010. PHOTOGRAPHER: MARTYN ROBERTS.*

subjects is often verbal, and it is essentially based on trust, which perhaps derives from a sense of the virtue and integrity that a project's perceived social or political merits confer. In the case of the projects in which I have been involved, the research has been carried out according to the strict protocols of the University of Otago's Human Ethics Committee. These protocols require that, first, prospective participants are provided with detailed, authorised information sheets explaining what their contribution will involve, and, second, that those participants consequently give informed, written consent to the recording and theatrical use of their testimony. As James Thompson remarks, the gathering of testimony from people who are "disadvantaged" or "vulnerable"—who may be recounting their experiences of trauma—is "ethically more complex" (25). The terms of the approval for Halba's and my research for *Hush: A Verbatim Play About Family Violence* (2009)—terms which coincided completely with our intentions—stipulated that we could interview only people who were psychologically and emotionally safe with regard to their experience of family violence, and who were referred to us by recognised, qualified experts, and social agencies. We were also obliged to ensure that we could readily arrange access to specialist support for anyone who might become distressed, and to inform participants of this provision.

Notwithstanding the preparatory information provided to them, people may not appreciate exactly what their consent entails. The actor Chipu Chung notes that some “media savvy” people who share their stories “know how to manage their public persona” (Cantrell and Luckhurst 57), but most of the participants in our projects have had little if any idea beforehand what verbatim or documentary theatre actually is, and moreover, we could not predict for them the precise theatrical form that the work would eventually take. Nonetheless, as the writer Robin Soans observes, “people are not only willing, they’re absolutely desperate to talk” (qtd. in Jeffers, “Refugee Perspectives” 7). They may be flattered to be asked to contribute, or, given the social or political significance of the issues that much fact-based theatre explores, they may infer the potential utility of a particular project: they may be keen for a topic to be aired more widely and for others to learn from their experiences. The participants in *Hush*, particularly those directly affected by family violence as victims and/or perpetrators, were strongly motivated by a desire to let others trapped in such violence know that they are not alone and to help to break the patterns of abuse (Halba and Young 105). People may even be grateful for the opportunity to talk about their experiences: A Bereaved Mother in *The Permanent Way* testifies, “I’m grateful to you. You’ve let me come in and talk about something serious” (37).

Such endorsements and expressions of appreciation serve to underline the putative moral value of the theatre-makers’ enterprise: fact-based theatre not only explores worthy causes, but it is also potentially empowering and liberating, for audiences as well as participants. Moreover, those sentiments legitimise the (allegedly unethical) exercise by effectively authorising the theatre-maker to “speak for” the subject. According to Hare, factual theatre is giving “a voice to the voiceless” (“On Factual Theatre” 112); for Alecky Blythe it is “giving a voice to characters that are rarely heard in the theatre” (101). Of course, those endorsements also make it easy for theatre-makers to presume on, and potentially exploit, people’s goodwill.

Often implicit too in the understanding of fact-based theatre as empowering and liberating is the belief that talking—telling one’s story—is intrinsically therapeutic. According to anthropologist Michael Jackson,

In all human societies, recounting one’s experiences in the presence of others is a way of reimagining one’s situation and regaining mastery over it. Stories enable people to renegotiate retrospectively their relation with others, recovering a sense of self and of voice that was momentarily taken from them. (23)

However, Amanda Stuart Fisher remarks, “For the survivors of *trauma* . . . the human desire to provide an account of oneself can become a profoundly troubling process” (“Bearing Witness” 108). This is born out by Karen Brounéus’s research on the post-genocide reconciliation process in Rwanda: contrary to expectations, the exercise of truth-telling served to reinscribe victims’ trauma rather than to heal psychological wounds (“Truth-Telling as Talking Cure?” 57, 71). Therefore, faith in the ability of the documentary project necessarily to empower and liberate those providing testimony may be misplaced. The scope for damage is not only in the survivor’s telling of the story in an interview, but also, and perhaps more so, in the theatrical *retelling* of that story: if a participant feels that his testimony has been misrepresented, or if he feels betrayed, he may be doubly wounded.

The gathering and recording of testimony by theatre-makers takes a variety of forms, but generally involves audio and/or film recording. Because my collaborators and I regard body language as an integral part of the testimony, we film all the interviews for our projects. This creates a degree of formality: an appointment is made, a camera (often two cameras—to film the interviewers as well as the interviewees) must be carefully set up; and sometimes an audio-recorder too is put in place. On the other hand, Blythe, who records speech only, endeavours “to make the microphone as unobtrusive as possible”; she wants people to be “freed” to talk “spontaneously” (102). Meanwhile, in director Max Stafford-Clark’s verbatim work with Soans and Hare, actor-researchers (who may or may not be accompanied by the writer or Stafford-Clark) become “hunter-gatherers”: they interview people and then feed back “the collected information to the assembled company *in character*” (Merlin 125).

Clearly, whatever the method for gathering and recording testimony, the structure of these discursive situations inevitably mediates both the testimony and participants’ subjectivities (see Alcott and Gray 264). Dennis Kelly draws attention to this mediation in his mock-verbatim play *Taking Care of Baby* (2007). Several scenes, in which an unseen, unnamed interviewer—seemingly the writer—talks to characters, allude to the ethics of interviewing and demonstrate how easily interviews can, as Norman Denzin argues, “objectify individuals” and turn “transgressive experience into a consumable commodity” (28). Questioning Donna, who has been convicted for killing her infant son and is suspected of suffocating her daughter, the interviewer-writer appears kindly and suggests that he intends the interview to proceed on her terms: “Are you comfortable?”; “Are you sure you’re ready to talk about this now?; “we can do this any way you want” (Kelly 42, 44, 46). However, instead of allowing her to talk freely, in fact he interrogates Donna more concertedly. Evidently some-

what intimidated, she repeatedly expresses her concern to give the interviewer what he seeks (46, 47, 51).

The role of the interviewer and of the circumstances of the interview in shaping the delivery of testimony are usually obscured from audiences because, in the subsequent performance of that testimony, the frame of the interview tends to be masked. Again, *Taking Care of Baby* draws attention to this strategy: the interviewer-writer explains to Donna and, later, her estranged husband that he constructs his questions to elicit answers that appear like unsolicited statements (52, 97). The editing out of the interviewer's contributions in the subsequent dramatic and theatrical representation of the testimony is deeply problematic: it suggests the subject's autonomy, which, as *Taking Care of Baby* indicates, is far from reality, and it may create the illusion that the testimony comes unmediated and even spontaneously from the source's mouth. Blythe wants this sense of transparency, so that "the audience feel as if the characters are talking to them directly"; therefore, "the relationship I had with the interviewee is that which the audience experiences" (103). In the process, theatre-makers may mask not only their presence and subjectivity, but also the whole exercise of re-presenting testimony in a theatrical mode.

Selecting, Editing, and Arranging the Testimony

Speaking as a verbatim playwright, Hare acknowledges, "The illusion is that I'm not present, but it's an illusion" ("David Hare on *The Permanent Way*"). Although a play's dramaturgy may foster the illusion of the unmediated transmission of testimony, the creation of a fact-based play, like any dramatic work, is a complex dramaturgical exercise, which involves a process of selecting, editing, and "orchestrat[ing]" testimony (Hare, "On Factual Theatre" 111). Both Hare and Blythe talk about "distill[ing]" testimony and characters (qtd. in Merlin 132; Blythe 102), as Blythe says, "for dramatic effect" (102). Although, on the one hand, she claims that "a verbatim writer has little control over where the story might go" (101), on the other she asserts, "you can control the story by being selective over what parts of the interview to present" (102).

As Blythe, Soans, and Stafford-Clark readily acknowledge, creating a play from testimony involves a "tension between being faithful to . . . interviewees and making a good drama" (Hammond and Steward 60; see also 94 and 60). Blythe feels "great responsibility to the people who agree to be recorded" because they are "entrusting" her "with their stories, often very personal," but, at the same time, she has a "responsibility to the audience" (Hammond and Steward 94). Although mindful of his responsibility to the people involved,

Hare nonetheless told the actor Bella Merlin, whenever she raised ethical issues with him during work on *The Permanent Way*, that “he was a writer with a sliver of ice in his heart” (133).

Both Hare and Merlin report the negotiation with interviewees that *The Permanent Way* entailed: interviewees and also actor-researcher Merlin herself were disquieted by some of the writer’s decisions (“David Hare on *The Permanent Way*,” Merlin 134). Janet Gibson advocates that subjects should have the opportunity to “edit out” parts of the proposed text with which they are uncomfortable, and to “approve the final edit” of a play (13). Indeed, for our projects, my collaborators and I give our subjects transcripts of all the edits that we wish to use, and we seek their approval; for *Hush* we sought further signed consent to use the material. Where people requested any changes (deletions or rewording), we obliged. We also invited our subjects to attend a rehearsal of their scenes, so that they could get a sense of the performance of those scenes. Anna Deavere Smith’s participants sign “a release” authorising her to include their testimony in the published play script (Capo and Langellier 67).

In the process of editing and arranging material, and finding voices and statements that sit compatibly with one another, some interviewees and their testimony may not be included at all in the developed play. It is not uncommon for productions and theatre-makers to advertise, almost as a badge of honour, that the material re-presented is but a small portion of what was recorded: Tectonic Theater Project “conducted more than two hundred interviews” for *The Laramie Project* (2000; Kaufman vii), and “[o]nly a fraction” of those interviewed for *The Permanent Way* are “directly represented” in the play (Hare, Author’s Note, *The Permanent Way*). The implication is that the audience is hearing only the very best material from those interviews. Keenly aware of the generosity with which people have contributed to our projects and of the investment—both emotional and in terms of time—that the interviews represent for participants, those of us involved in creating *Hush, Be | Longing* (2012; a play about immigrants’ experiences of settling in Aotearoa/New Zealand), and *The Keys are in the Margarine: A Verbatim Play about Dementia* (2014) felt extremely uncomfortable and even embarrassed at not using any of the testimony of five participants across those three projects. Consider the 26 people “who fled the chaos and violence that befell Iraqi society” and whose testimony was discarded by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen in favour of the nine whose stories are re-presented in *Aftermath* (2009; “*Aftermath*”). Meanwhile, of the 200 people whom Deavere Smith interviewed for *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), just 25 appear in the play (Deavere Smith xvii). Heddon remarks, the jettisoning of such testimony reiterates the speakers’ invisibility, so rendering them “doubly ‘voiceless’” (136).

Of course, there are good, defensible dramaturgical, and logistical reasons for not including all potential voices. In his research for *Like Enemies of the State* (2013), Tommy Lexen interviewed 18 former child soldiers in the Congo, but the play features just three of them. Given the effort, to say nothing of the personal danger, involved in conducting the fieldwork, Lexen could not risk returning to England with insufficient material; he could not easily go back to Africa to carry out further research. The earlier versions of *Like Enemies of the State* did incorporate more characters, but they were considerably longer than the 50-minute, theatrically viable, finished piece. Nevertheless, as Thompson asks, if one has asked to hear another's story, does one have an obligation to retell it (25)? In the case of plays like William Brandt and Miranda Harcourt's *Verbatim* (1993), which comprises solely (six) composite characters, arguably the creation of characters and narrative draws on all the testimony that the writers gathered.

As I alluded to above, also generally cut from a fact-based play and its production are what Alcoff and Laura Gray call the "conditions" or "arrangements of speaking" (287, 264). Not only do verbatim plays largely or entirely remove the interviewer from the frame, but, as Heddon notes, they "do not, typically, provide us with the full contextual information of the interviewing process itself; speech is lifted out of context and used within a different context" (131). So, where an interview took place, who was there, how it was constituted, the questions asked, and responses voiced—details that ethnographers and oral historians are now routinely alert to (see, for example, Perks and Thompson 118, and Sangster 88)—is often unexplained or vaguely evoked. Blythe wants the audience to experience the relationship she had with the interviewee, but how is this actually possible when the interviewer and the circumstances of the interview are removed? Sometimes, the theatre-maker does appear or is addressed in a play: "David" [Hare] is repeatedly acknowledged in *The Permanent Way*, and in *The Laramie Project* and *Be | Longing* the actor-researchers occasionally represent either themselves or one another. Heddon claims that explicit references to theatre-maker(s) merely heighten the illusion of "veracity," rather than elucidate "the interview process and the dynamic that structured it," and they mask the subsequent restructuring of testimony into a play (131). However, at least some of the actor-researchers' appearances in *The Laramie Project* and *Be | Longing* do serve to shed light on the circumstances of interviews.

In making "good drama," verbatim theatre writers deploy a range of strategies when editing and arranging testimony: apart from condensing material, they may change the sequence of elements in a person's testimony, remove contextual information, and create elisions and connexions which did not

exist in the interviews themselves—all things that prove dramaturgically satisfying. Elsewhere Halba and I have discussed the re-presentation of the testimony of Doug, one of the participants in *Hush* (Halba and Young 107): in the play's initial draft we presumptuously reordered parts of his story to identify him first as a perpetrator of violence, before subsequently tracing the abuse that he had suffered as a child. In Denzin's terms, we "objectified" Doug inappropriately and failed to honour both his version of his story and the trauma that he had experienced. We duly reedited Doug's testimony in order to tell his story largely as he did, registering that, as Laura W. Black remarks, stories are important ways in which people "construct and manifest aspects of their identities" (98). Meanwhile, commentators have registered the significance of the excision from *The Laramie Project* of Aaron Kriefels's homophobic comments, which the writers deemed "out of line" with their construction of the narrative and of Kriefels as a sympathetic, even heroic figure (Tigner 145, 144; see also Heddon 134).

Hare notes, "One of the problems with some documentary theatre is that it tends to lack scenes between people" (Hammond and Steward 63); it involves a lot of monologues. Therefore, probably the most significant dramaturgical strategy used in fact-based theatre is to interweave the various speakers and their testimony throughout a play. Richard Norton-Taylor's tribunal plays for the Tricycle are a conspicuous exception to this practice: they faithfully follow the chronological order in which evidence and the examination of witnesses occurred in the original trial or hearing. Apart from creating variety and changes in dramatic rhythm and pace, the juxtaposition of characters and their stories serves to highlight connections—differences as well as similarities—between disparate characters' experiences and perspectives. The effect of this strategy, especially in plays like *The Laramie Project* that deploy multiple voices to narrate the same event, is, as Amy Tigner argues, to construct, from random, incoherent interviews, "cohesive" and "unified narratives that fit together with other narratives" (142, 144). Jay Baglia and Elissa Foster argue that this approach is grounded in empiricist and positivist assumptions (131), which, as ethnographers like Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln maintain, view social life as something to be studied rather than being "constructed interactionally" (353).

Illusions of Objectivity and Truth

Consequently, the juxtaposition of different speakers can create the impression of an objective, polyvocal overview of a particular topic and therefore play into dubious assumptions about "truth" that are fostered by the seemingly

transparent representation of testimony. In his afterword to *Mixed Up North* (2009), a piece also included in Out of Joint's information pack on the play, Jon Bradfield writes,

This is verbatim theatre's great strength—an advantage it perhaps has over its cousin, investigative journalism. It looks at the whole picture, a wide range of view-points, without needing to find a specific “angle”. . . .

[T]heatre turns an ongoing, messy event into a comprehensive overview. It brings the strands together, helping its audience evaluate events that may be too big, too close, too current. . . . Verbatim theatre can bring the key themes, as well as the specific details, into focus. (125-6; see also “*Mixed Up North* Workpack”)

However, Ryan Claycomb remarks that, although on the one hand the voices telling the story in a fact-based play may be “multiple, dialogic, and open,” on the other hand, because of the control exerted by the theatre-maker, they are also “authoritative, singular, and univocal.” This is especially obvious in the case of the work of an artist like Deavere Smith, who both writes and performs all the roles in her plays—“the voice is always hers”—but it is also true when the writing and performance is collective: the theatre-making group “co-opts” the larger community that is being represented (113). *Taking Care of Baby* ridicules the notion of fact-based theatre as a truth-finding exercise, which fashions from inchoate events a coherent “comprehensive overview” without any “angle” on an issue, and it points to the theatre-maker's power. The unseen interviewer-writer tells both Donna and the psychologist Millard that his sole concern is “the truth” (Kelly 56, 76, 78). Millard retorts,

None of this is the truth, it's just people saying things . . .

[I]t all depends on how you slant it, I'm saying there's more than one truth. . . . it's all subjective, there's the truth and there's what people think is the truth . . . (76)

Therefore, if, in representing testimony, theatre-makers disguise their subjective, value-laden interventions and purport merely to “report” events, they may create the illusion of disingenuously representing the truth—not *a* version, but *the* version of what occurred (Paget 39-40). According to Hare, “The very act of writing is an act of judgement” (qtd. in Merlin 129). Consequently, as Jonathan Holmes registers, does ethical practice require explicit judgement on the part of the fact-based theatre-maker? Declaring that his play *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City* (2007) properly “makes no claim to

objectivity" (144), Holmes writes, "it seems to me an evasion of responsibility—even perhaps unethical—not to take a stand on the morality of the event"—in this instance, the United States military's siege of Fallujah in 2004 (144-5).

How Verbatim is "Verbatim"?

Another problematic issue with ethical implications in the creation of fact-based theatre is the looseness, the slipperiness, of the term "verbatim." The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines verbatim as "in exactly the same words as were used originally" (1592). While the scripts of many fact-based plays do comprise *only* words spoken by the people represented, many admit to taking some liberties with the documentary record. In writing *The Permanent Way*, Hare quoted "some" recorded speeches verbatim, "if I felt the direct reportage was very powerful." However, arguing that "[t]he area that a playwright operates in is always the difference between what people say and what they mean," in other instances Hare rephrased the testimony: "by changing everything[,] I could make it into music which I think reflected what they [the characters] wanted to say. But, when I did that, I always made sure they were entirely happy with that." He notes that "by and large people have been pleased to say, 'Yes, this is what I wanted to say, I just didn't put it like that'" ("David Hare on *The Permanent Way*"). Jonathan Kent, director of the Tricycle's tribunal and other documentary plays, regards plays that "combine verbatim text with invented dialogue or . . . scenarios" as "slightly dishonest" (Hammond and Steward 152). However, creators of such plays are evidently satisfied that a text's foundations in real testimony confer authenticity on the whole text: referring to its "part-authored, part-verbatim" *Like Enemies of the State*, BeFrank Theatre Company asserts in the production's programme, "We work from authentic source material."

Perhaps because of this assumption, theatre-makers seldom feel obliged to insert quotation marks in order to distinguish the original testimony from what has been fabricated. *Aftermath*, for example, begins with the projection of a typical prefatory statement: "the vast majority of the words you are about to hear are taken from interviews with Iraqi refugees in Jordan." Holmes, on the other hand, is punctilious in explaining his interventions in *Fallujah*. As well as taking pains to attest the authority of the sources of the play's testimony (142-3), he reports that, although "all the characters are based on real people and use only the words of those people" (141), the character of Sasha is a "composite figure" created from various journalists' testimony and the weblogs of a human

rights activist (143). Holmes also acknowledges that he has “edited testimonies for length” but “not augmented them,” except for “occasional greetings” (141). However, although this information is provided in the Introduction to the published play, it is not conveyed in the script itself; nor was it explained in performance.

Of course, whether or not it is entirely verbatim, a fact-based play is ipso facto a highly mediated construction, and therefore in a sense a fiction. Pol Heyvaert and Dimitri Verhulst make this point eloquently with their self-reflexive play *Aalst* (2005; adapted into English by Duncan McLean, 2007): although deliberately constructed and staged very much in the manner of verbatim theatre, and although two-thirds of the text is taken directly from trial transcriptions and reports, *Aalst* also includes significant authorial invention. It may be merely priggish to require a play either to feature verbatim material only or to display explicit quotation marks; however, what distinguishes fact-based theatre is its investment in the real.

Like Enemies of the State highlights another potentially problematic issue that arises from the mixing of fact and fiction. The play foregrounds the three particular child soldiers' stories that Lexen chose to tell, but it also features twelve smaller adult roles. Mostly played by one actor in BeFrank's production, those adult characters are very much at the service of the children's stories, as the writer-director confirmed in a post-show forum (“Communicating Human Rights”). Whereas, understandably, Lexen privileges the individual integrity of each child soldier and invites sympathy for them, he was content to create a schematic “Major,” a generalised stereotype who echoes simplistic, “familiar colonial and postcolonial” images of African warriors as “brutal vengeful killers and rapists” that sociologists and scholars of Development Studies now question (Baaz and Stern 58). Therefore, although *Like Enemies of the State* may draw attention to the appalling plight of child soldiers, a more complex, “authentic” Major might contribute to a more nuanced insight into the conflict and larger political landscape in the Congo. The sort of reductive scenario that *Like Enemies of the State* represents substantiates the criticism of fact-based theatre as politically lame (see, for example, Stuart Fisher, “Trauma” 113 and 118, regarding Soans' *Talking to Terrorists*, 2005, and Blank and Jensen's *Exonerated*, 2002), and it raises the question of whether this theatre's ethical responsibilities extend to eschewing simplistic representations of complex social and political issues?

Paralinguistic Elements in the Re-presentation of Testimony in Performance

It is perhaps a reflection of the enduring logocentricity of Western—certainly Anglo-Saxon—theatrical tradition that, notwithstanding the increasing valourisation of the physical in theatre performance, there is a widespread assumption that testimony comprises solely the words spoken. Carol Martin asserts that the physical score accompanying verbatim testimony—“glances, gestures, body language”—not to mention vocal inflexions and intonation, is “outside the archive” and therefore is “created by actors and directors according to their own rules of admissibility” (11). However, do makers of fact-based theatre have a responsibility to acknowledge the paralinguistic elements of the testimony? Indeed, many practitioners consider at least some of those elements to be integral to the testimony, and so endeavour to replicate or approximate them in performance.

At the very least, as Mary Luckhurst observes, “The embodiment of a real person” onstage usually calls for a much greater physical specificity from an actor” (148). Kent requires his actors to “research extensively into their subject” and, where possible, to use film footage to reproduce physical mannerisms as closely as possible (140). Stafford-Clark is not interested in “impersonation” or “mimicry” per se (Hammond and Steward 65; Bradfield 126; see also Chung, in Cantrell and Luckhurst 56), but he wants actors to “capture” their subjects’ “spirit in some way” (Hammond and Steward 65). His practice of requiring the actor-researchers to reenact interview(ee)s before the rest of the company is intended to establish a stronger sense of character than the testimony alone conveys (Chung, in Cantrell and Luckhurst 55; Merlin 125) and to preclude the actor’s inclination to “twinkle,” as Stafford-Clark puts it (Chung, in Cantrell and Luckhurst 58). It is perhaps not surprising that an actor’s sense of responsibility to her subject is particularly acute if the person is likely to see the play or is someone well known, whom audiences will recognise. The skillful mimicry of public figures in fact-based theatre productions possibly creates another problematic issue. Chipu Chung and Lloyd Hutchinson, for example, were greatly praised for their portrayals, respectively, of Condoleezza Rice in *Fallujah* and John Prescott in the Out of Joint Stock and National Theatre production of *The Permanent Way*. Although, of course, it is only the media(ted) personae of these figures that audiences recognise, such precise impersonation may foster the illusion that the other subjects (re)presented alongside them are similarly precisely observed, when this may be far from the case.

Reflecting on their experiences performing in fact-based theatre, Chung and Diane Fletcher both remark on the need to curb their “acting instincts”

(Fletcher, in Cantrell and Luckhurst 72). According to Chung, “documentary calls for more restraint in one’s acting; the less outward theatricality you display, the more you serve the representation of the person you are playing” (Cantrell and Luckhurst 58). On the other hand, greater distance from their subjects evidently allows actors greater license in their performances of real people. The performers in BeFrank’s production of *Like Enemies of the State* did not meet the child soldiers whom they played, and there is scant likelihood that those soldiers will ever see the play. Evidently empathising strongly with those characters, the actors clearly sought to encourage audiences in turn to empathise with the children (Bhai). In Lexen’s theatrically busy *mise en scène*, this sometimes involved vigorous action and games, and generalised stencils of early adolescent male behaviour and emotional expression. Perhaps the bouts of boisterous activity by adult bodies—more especially of the two male actors playing children—in a very confined performance space was intended to convey something of the social impact of adolescent males, rather like the prescribed playing of four-year-old Cathy, in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*, by an adult male? However, the actors’ generally winsome manner suggested guilelessness, sincerity, and even innocence, and, consequently, worked to mitigate the young soldiers’ responsibility for the atrocities they may have committed. As I have found in other performances of fact-based plays, the evident element of physical approximation and license in the performances led me to speculate as to where the invention and the reality of the characterisation began and ended. When the actor playing fourteen-year-old Pierre delivered the following lines with pronounced sentiment, even self-pity, I could only wonder whether this derived from the original interview or was it entirely an actor’s dubious choice to enlist our sympathy?

Maybe I have. It was so hard to see anything. Maybe I did shoot someone, I don’t know. People might have died, I don’t know. It was. Chaos. I might have missed all the bullets I fired. Maybe I did. Really. (“*Like Enemies of the State*”)

These words can just as easily be read to suggest nonchalance and callous indifference.

Some fact-based theatre-makers seek to avoid the scope for actors’ in(ter)ventions by purposefully endeavouring to replicate faithfully in performance elements of the paralinguistic text accompanying the original testimony. For example, in preparing her performances of her solo plays—most notably *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*—Deavere Smith learnt her characters’ speeches “by listening to a Walkman and repeating the words . . .



FIGURE 1.2 *Erica Newlands as Amanda (left) and Nadya Shaw Bennett as Amanda's daughter Jessie, in Hush, Musgrove Studio, Maidment Theatre, Auckland, November 2010.*
 PHOTOGRAPHER: MARTYN ROBERTS.

over and over again,” and then working with a vocal coach to get “the exact nuances, down to the pauses and the ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’” (Luckhurst and Veltman 134). She also paid close attention to gesture: she insists, “speaking is a physical activity” that “dictate[s] how the rest of the body moves” (in Capo and Langelier 72). Meanwhile, Blythe and her London-based company Recorded Delivery and Australian theatre-maker Roslyn Oades use earphones (or headphones) in their productions to ensure that, like Deavere Smith, the actors not only repeat precisely the words of their subjects, but reproduce the original speakers’ accents, inflexions, and hesitations as closely as possible.

The practice that Halba and I have developed with other collaborators draws on the techniques of both Deavere Smith and Blythe. Registering Albert Mehrabian’s findings on the significance of “our actions and ways of saying things, rather than our words” in communication (iii), we seek to re-present as fully as possible all aspects of the original testimony, including both vocal and gestural delivery. In performance, each actor recites his subjects’ testimony while playing the edits on an mp3 player or iPod.

In addition, in rehearsal the performers work intently with the film clips of the edits they are to reenact. Therefore, in performance, they replicate as



FIGURE 1.3 *Danny Still as Doug, in Hush, Musgrove Studio, Maidment Theatre, Auckland, November 2010. PHOTOGRAPHER: MARTYN ROBERTS.*

accurately as possible not only the speech and its delivery, but also each gesture and involuntary movement of the interviewee.

Although the spectator might read the physical score less consciously than the verbal, both scores combine to generate meaning, and very specific physical actions add potency or poignancy to the oral testimony. Sometimes a person's body language and tone of voice are at odds—subtly or jarringly—with the words she speaks; an actor licensed to create her own physical score would be highly unlikely ever to produce such a counter-intuitive action. Needless to say, the theatrical re-presentation of our subjects' testimony requires a degree of dilation—verbal articulation or projection, and clear physical definition—in order to help audiences to discern words and actions. However, the discipline of strict imitation, which this technique requires, otherwise serves to prevent actors from interpreting the role and embellishing their performances. The nature of the mediation produces a curiously haunting effect, in which traces of the subject are uncannily both present and absent. Even as the actor purports to re-present the Other, the visible audio technology reminds the audience that she is in fact not the Other. Therefore, the actor endeavours to *show* the Other, but she does not presume to know the Other or, in Levinasian terms, to reduce the Other “to the same” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 43).

Of course, whether productions attempt to replicate vocal and/or physical mannerisms precisely or to capture the subject's spirit more impressionistically, the idea of conveying something of the original speaker of the testimony is premised on the performer's having access to the speaker or the actual recordings of the testimony. Subsequent productions of fact-based plays by other companies likely have access only to the literal testimony—a literary text—and not the “*body-text*” (Capo, in Capo and Langellier 67). Comparing the original Tectonic Theater Project production of *The Laramie Project* with a subsequent amateur production, Baglia and Foster were troubled by disparities in the representation or interpretation of particular characters. This led them to wonder whether “there are ethical boundaries related to the artistic license” of this endeavour of representing real people (135)?

Conclusion

Theatre-makers' attention to embodying their real subjects sensitively and with integrity is generally part of a pronounced tendency in fact-based theatre to employ realist mimetic modes of staging. Because such modes may serve to emphasise the illusion of the transparent reproduction of testimony, it has become almost axiomatic for commentators to advocate both non-realist modes of theatrical representation and a conspicuous self-reflexivity, which Alison Jeffers, for instance, asserts is “present in all good participatory theatre practice” (“Dirty Truth” 220). The increasing recognition, noted by Nicholas Ridout, that the relationship between theatre and ethics pertains to not only dramatic content but also theatrical form and process seems to give the prescription for non-realist modes and self-reflexivity ethical force (49). However, like those metatheatrical moments in a play that allude to the original interview, the foregrounding of the mediation involved in the documentary exercise does not of itself signify or engender an ethical approach to making verbatim theatre. Nonetheless, drawing attention to the devices of documentation and representation, together with other strategies for breaking the realist frame, at least explicitly acknowledges theatre-makers' presence and agency. Moreover, it alerts the spectator to the contingent scope for manipulation of subjects and their stories, and so may facilitate the spectator's taking some ethical responsibility in engaging with the performance and representation of the Other.

As Holmes registers, the exercise of creating fact-based theatre is intrinsically “flawed: as soon as you remove testimony from its human source and substitute an actor's voice, authenticity is compromised” (141). Therefore, theatre-makers might apprise audiences of the necessary partiality of their efforts

to uncover and reproduce “truth” and, so, as Baglia and Foster argue, “loosen” fact-based theatre’s “grasp on objectivity, and its implied political neutrality” (140). Instead of truth, they might take as their “guide . . . a sense of ethical responsibility to the[ir] sources” (Holmes 142), a responsibility perhaps anchored in (a Levinasian) respect for the Other. Thereby, as an exemplary locus for examining the ethics of representation, verbatim, and fact-based theatre might not only convincingly rebut the charge that it is necessarily exploitative and even violent in its approach to the Other; it may also prove to be truly politically effective.

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