

V is for verbatim theatre

Verbatim theatre, as Will Hammond and Dan Steward point out in their excellent book on the subject, is not a form but a technique: a way of incorporating the words of real people, as spoken in private interview or public record, into drama. What is astonishing is how ubiquitous it has become. *Enquirer*, an investigation into the crisis in the newspaper industry, is currently being staged by the National Theatre of Scotland. Alecky Blythe's *Where Have I Been All My Life*, which dramatises interviews with people from North Staffordshire, has just finished a run at the New Vic, Newcastle-under-Lyme. And I'd be astonished if, right now, someone (ex-Tricycle artistic director Nicholas Kent, perhaps?) is not dreaming of a way of turning the Leveson inquiry into theatre.

What might be surprising is how long this sort of thing has been around. As Hammond and Steward remind us, the quest for some form of documentary truth is an ongoing feature of 20th century theatre. The German director Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) pioneered the idea of the living newspaper. The 50s and 60s saw the emergence of the theatre of fact, typified by Eric Bentley's *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, which dramatised testimony to the United States' House Un-American Activities Committee, which brutally attempted to root out communists from American society. Even the West End in 1958 staged Robert Ardrey's *Shadow of Heroes*, warmly applauded by Kenneth Tynan as "a sort of illustrated lecture on the Hungarian revolt."

Today verbatim, as both process and product, is not merely everywhere. It has proved itself infinitely flexible. The veteran director Max Stafford-Clark long used researched interviews as a rehearsal method, even when working on fictional material such as Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*. Alecky Blythe has pioneered a method by which not only the content but the actual inflections of real people's speech are reproduced on stage: in *London Road*, which focuses on the fallout to the Ipswich murders of 2006, she shows that melodic speech patterns can even be the source of a musical. And London's Tricycle Theatre has famously produced a series of "tribunal plays", starting with *Half the Picture* in 1994, which based on a public enquiry into the sale of arms to Iraq. Verbatim has even acquired sufficient status to be satirised in Dennis Kelly's *Taking Care of Baby*, a caustically funny send-up of the genre, which invented its own form of mockumentary.

But why are we so hooked on verbatim theatre? There are many reasons, but one in particular strikes me. At a time when there is enormous public scepticism not only about politics but about the media, the theatre can offer a source of (relatively) uncontaminated truth. In some cases, as in the tribunal plays, that may be raw information about what was actually said at a public enquiry. In other cases, as in the Tricycle's 2004 play about Guantanamo, *Honour Bound to Defend Freedom*, it may be vital personal testimony as to the circumstances of imprisonment. This is not to deny that those who compile, or direct, verbatim plays may have an agenda. But that is as nothing compared to the interpretative slant placed on the news by the majority of print outlets. And in a world drowning in opinion – of which, naturally, this article is one more example – verbatim theatre offers us the bracing stimulus of fact.

But I also believe verbatim drama, at its best, is aesthetically indistinguishable from high art. The actor and writer Robin Soans, who has frequently used verbatim techniques, has said that "verbatim plays are more like conventional plays than is generally acknowledged." The supreme example was *The Colour of Justice*, based by Guardian journalist Richard Norton-Taylor on the Macpherson inquiry into the Metropolitan police's handling of the Stephen Lawrence case. In the way it peeled off the successive layers of official evasion, lies and incompetence, it showed an Ibsenite formal rigour. It was not merely about an important subject; as David Hare wrote, "it seemed to expose other forms by the sheer seriousness and intensity with which it was able to bring the theatre's special scrutiny to bear."

You can, of course, have rushed or lazy verbatim theatre. But, if we now accept it as a genre, it is not only because it offers necessary information. It is also because it can move and stir us as profoundly as any fiction.