

## *Tribunal Plays and Verbatim Theatre*

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**Abstract:** The paper's aim is to offer an overview on a diverse and dynamic phenomenon, as documentary theatre in Britain, with accents on two of the most visible directions, that it follows on the last decades: verbatim and tribunal theatre. Since the mid '90s, a period dominated by apathy and detachment, these formulas have been proving their efficiency, on the one hand, by investigating and researching some current, urgent, national and international topics, and on the other hand by calling new strategies for addressing and engaging the audience. Meanwhile these practices based on "the truth" that comes from documents and interviews generate particular questions about the relationship between ethic and esthetic, between objective and subjective, between real and fictional. Documentary theatre, and particularly verbatim theatre deals with a dilemma: how to create a theatrical viable experience, without distorting the documentary source?

**Keywords:** documentary theatre, verbatim, tribunal plays, ethic, public inquiry, Peter Cheeseman, Tricycle Theatre, David Hare, Max Stafford-Clark.

In the arsenal of political theatre, the documentary has become in recent decades, a formula increasingly frequented by playwrights and directors, when they survey events or topical issues, national or local histories, aspects of communities or marginalized groups. Documentary theatre (also known as "dramaturgy of the real", "fact-based theatre", "non-fiction theatre", "theatre of testimony", "docudrama") is, according to Patrice Pavis, "the theatre that only uses as texts, documents and authentic sources selected and 'edited' according to the playwright's socio-political thesis. [...] Instead of fabula and fiction, there are used sources organized according to their contrastive and explanatory

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value".<sup>2</sup> The first manifestations on this direction take place in the 20s, in Brecht's and Piscator's works, and also in Russia, through theatrical productions of workers' groups known as "sinaiaia bluza" ("blue blouse"). Documentary material, taken usually from press, is dramatized in the form of short scenes, interspersed with musical interludes, pantomime, dance or movement, together with sound effects, puppetry and shadow theatre, projections of images or movies. Used, mainly with propaganda purposes, but also to educate and inform, this kind of shows is spreading in the early 30s in western Europe and the US, where, as the "living newspaper", are produced on a large wide program of arts funding, called the Federal Theatre Project.

In Britain, documentary theatre begins with "living newspaper" kind of performances, made under the influence of the American model, by Unity Theatre and Theatre Union companies, both made up mainly of amateur actors, tributary (at least in a first phase) to communist ideology, but innovative in their aesthetics. The presence of a commentator/ narrator, the episodic structure of scenes, simultaneous setting, visible setting changes, are some of the innovations brought by these companies. Unity Theatre, during the four decades of its activity, deals with the topics of the moment (strikes, Suez crisis, revolution in Hungary), inserting in the screenplays press articles, or contributions from witnesses. Theatre Union has a short existence, but most of the members of the company and the leader Joan Littlewood will establish, after the World War, Theatre Workshop, whose name is related to the show *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), a crucial moment in the history of British theatre. The success of production will be part of the increasing interest for documentary, and also for collective works, the first examples being *US* (1966), directed by Peter Brook and *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) produced by John McGrath and Theatre 7:84.

But the most faithful disciple of Littlewood will be Peter Cheeseman, an innovative director, concerned to find a theatrical language through which he can put the artist close to the community. At the beginning of the 60s, Cheeseman works with Stephen Joseph and with the company managed by him, Studio Theatre, that for a while, runs its activity in a public library in Scarborough, where from their performances turn into long tours through the industrial areas where there were no theatres. The two artists promoted a unique formula for that moment, arena or "theatre in the round", placing

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2. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, trans. Nicoleta Popa-Blanariu and Florinela Floria (Iași, Fides, 2012), 397.

the audience all around and as close to the stage as possible. In 1962, the team locates in Stoke-on-Trent<sup>3</sup>, transforming a former cinema into the first theatre in Britain with an arena stage. This stage architecture was the most suitable for Cheeseman for a natural and truthful and also dynamic acting, the first step for a real connection with the audience. It is also a setting that offers a great freedom for being highly creative: “in the proscenium theatre one spends a lot of time organizing movement, whereas in the theatre in the round there is virtually a limitless possibility for the actor to move at equal access to each other. In the circle everybody is equal and everybody has equal access to each other”.<sup>4</sup>

In more than three decades of work for the Stoke-on-Trent, Cheeseman manages to have a devoted team, composed of multidisciplinary performers, able to perform a diversified repertory, from classical plays to contemporary playwrights, mainly local writers, Peter Terson and Alan Ayckbourn. The second step was to look for topics in the history of the community and that way were created documentaries, but also a completely new method of writing dramatic text. Like archaeologists discovering the past, the director, the playwright and the actors explore oral histories in the area, record them (at the beginning with equipment from BBC), then put them into lines and lyrics for songs, following a self-imposed rule: “the material used on stage must be primary source material... If there is no primary source material available on a particular topic, no scene can be made about it [...] You can't write a documentary - it's a contradiction in terms. You can only edit documentary material”<sup>5</sup>. It is a collective creation, both in terms of primary sources, and in the selection and editing. Documentaries ensure that “a multiplicity of voices are heard”, and the collective work “tends to preserve the contradiction of viewpoint inherent in every historical event”<sup>6</sup>. The shows in the first years, *The Jolly Potters* (1964) or *The Knotty* (1966), focus on economic and cultural decline of some areas of the UK and offer “a somewhat romantic vision of a kind of ‘green’, pre-industrial, past in which local communities really had been communities”.<sup>7</sup> Being accessible and attractive for a large

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3. Town in Staffordshire County, a mainly industrial area located in the West of England.

4. Gabriella Giannachi (ed.), and Mary Luckhurst (ed.), *On Directing: Interviews with Directors* (New York, St.Martin Press, 2014), 31.

5. Attilio Favorini, *Memory in Play: From Aeschylus to Sam Shepard* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 82-83.

6. *Ibid.*, 83.

7. Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (Manchester: M. University Press, 1990), 71.

audience, songs have a key role giving a distinctive style, and also make the connection between scenes and the passing from a narrative moment to another. The shows performed at Stoke-on-Trent will become, in a while, a distinctive genre, also taken by other regional theatres, as an alternative to Londoner centralism and as a way of positioning on the cultural map. From 1964 to 1973, *New Theatre Magazine* identified nearly seventy documentaries on local issues in different theatres outside the capital city<sup>8</sup>. It was ultimately what Peter Cheeseman wished: “what is interesting to me is the specificity of each culture, of each ethnic group: what interests me in documentary theatre is the celebration of difference”.<sup>9</sup>

Derek Paget analyzes in an article, in 1987, Peter Cheeseman’s productions and introduces the term “verbatim”, a term which defines a method for writing a text, “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. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place. As often as not, such plays are then fed back into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance in those communities”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, verbatim is not a form, but a technique through which documentary record is written “word by word” in a play or in a performance. The term is specific to the British culture, being less used by practitioners or theorists in other countries.

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In the '90s, documentary theatre returns in a completely new formula at Tricycle Theatre in London, through tribunal-plays that reassemble controversial investigations. The productions take the form of real trials, with actors playing the roles of witnesses or those serving justice and rely exclusively on witness, statements and other information recorded during the investigations. Most productions are the result of a collaboration between Richard Norton-Taylor, a journalist at *The Guardian*, the author of studies that investigate abuses, corruption or cover-up of public institutions, and Nicolas Kent, the

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8. *Ibid.*, 72.

9. Gabriella Giannachi (ed.), and Mary Luckhurst (ed.), *On Directing: Interviews with Directors*, 34.

10. Derek Paget, “Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques,” *New Theatre Quarterly* III (12/1987): 334.

director of these shows and the artistic director at Tricycle Theatre. Relying on the theatricality of justice and on topics with “weight”, they revive a formula launched in the sixties by Piscator, who puts on stage *In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer*, written by Heinar Kipphardt based on the investigations related to possible anti-American actions of the famous physicist and *Die Ermittlung*, written by Peter Weiss, about the Nazis’ trial involved in crimes of Auschwitz. For Nicolas Kent, “the tribunal” from Tricycle “restores theatre’s ancient role as part of the democratic process”.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike his predecessors who use the documentaries only as a source of inspiration, Norton-Taylor keeps strictly the details of the official documents, (including grammar mistakes), respects the chronology of the procedures, operating only selection and editing, as he mentions in the introductory note of the play *Colour of Justice*: “the transcripts of the inquiry amount to more than eleven thousand pages, which I have distilled into about a hundred – less than one per cent. Inevitably I have had to make brutal choices about which witnesses and which exchanges to include”.<sup>12</sup> The text is, therefore, the result of some strategic decisions and drama comes without distorting the truth, through a narrative that must be logical and coherent, as there is a vast documentary evidence and sinuous procedures. Such productions may have a much greater impact than fragmented information, difficult to follow, provided generally by the media, and the structure and the form close to that of television programs, allowed that the majority of these shows to be broadcasted on TV and achieve impressive audience.

*Half the Picture* (1994), the first play in a series of tribunal-plays is a dramatization of a public inquiry that investigates the involvement of the members of government in the illegal export of weapon components for factories in Iraq and is based on the testimonies of 87 politicians and civil servants. The performance, powerful and intense, shows a mechanism with broad ramifications that the official investigation had failed to dispel, but at the same time, shows the force that documentary theatre can have. It was the first play performed at the Parliament of Great Britain. *The Colour of Justice* (1999), considered by *The Guardian* as “the most vital piece of theatre on the London

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11. Dominic Cavendish, “Theatre: And nothing but the truth,” January 26, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-and-nothing-but-the-truth-1045299.html>.

12. Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Colour of Justice: Based on the Transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, (London, Oberon Books, 2012), 6.

stage"<sup>13</sup>, deals with the issue of racism in British society and especially in state institutions. In 1993, a black student is killed by six white men, the police fail in proving their guilt, and eventually the two investigations end without any result. The suspicions about the way how investigations were made, determine another inquiry led by the Ministry of Justice, whose final report highlights major deficiencies in the activity of police, racism, incompetence and corruption.<sup>14</sup> The whole story is presented in two and a half hours of performance, a plea for truth, which proves itself that it was not just a polemic intervention, but turned the whole case "from being a black family tragedy to being a British tragedy".<sup>15</sup> The next performances also had a great impact: *Justifying War* (2003) analyzes the suspicious death of a military expert, who suggested the involvement of the premier's advisers in "manufacturing" documents to legitimize the war against Iraq; *Bloody Sunday* (2005) is based on the longest investigation in the history of British justice, a research that examines the events in 1972, when thirteen protesters in Northern Ireland were killed by security forces<sup>16</sup>; *Tactical Questioning* (2011) investigates the circumstances of the death of a prisoner from Iraq, during the interrogation led by British soldiers.

But the great merit of this kind of tribunal drama is that it takes us behind closed doors and exposes the way in which a cataclysmic event like *Bloody Sunday* occurred. It also shows that in theatre nothing is as hypnotic as fact.<sup>17</sup>

The course of action is minimal, but few details carefully directed, make the whole process to be alive and natural. Evasive answers, emotions, contradictory claims and everything related to the "ritual" of the courtroom is restored in a cinematic realistic register and this authenticity blurs the boundaries between real life and theatre. In the end, there aren't any conclusions,

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13. Susannah, Clapp, "Here is racism in all of its subtle shades", January 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/jan/17/race.world>

14. The trial will be completed only in 2011, when two of the original suspects are found guilty and sentenced.

15. Nadine Holdsworth (ed.) and Mary, Luckhurst (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 160.

16. The investigation started in 1998, was completed in 2010 and contains over 900 testimonies. The final report established the guilt of British troops, that used firearms unnecessarily.

17. Michael Billington, "Bloody Sunday", January, 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/apr/12/theatre>

the audience, as the jury, evaluate or have to complete what is said and what is hidden in these testimonies and evidences. Not coincidentally the light in the room remains permanently on. "To a certain extent, it's interactive," says Kent. "The audience can't be as passive as they would normally be. They can't say, 'Sit back and entertain me.' They have to listen, they have to bring an inquiring mind".<sup>18</sup>

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Documentary theatre is redefined in the early 2000s, a period dominated by *in-yer-face* theatre and, surprisingly, this happens precisely in its epicenter at the Royal Court. A first example is the play *A State Affair* by Robin Soans, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, about the events in a small town, where, during two decades, a community of workers is replaced by one of unemployed and drug addicted. The new documentary theatre departs from the formulas applied by Tricycle Theatre, as the pre-existing material is replaced in most cases by interviews, surveys or information taken directly from the source, using largely Peter Cheeseman's methods from the 60s. The selection and the montage are preceded by a journalistic phase, of investigating the subject, and the playwright has a major freedom in creating the performance.

The second collaboration between Stafford-Clark and Robin Soans is *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), the result of a process that lasts for about one year and is based on the interviews of 29 people who have some connections with the phenomenon of terrorism, current or former members of paramilitary groups from Ireland, Africa and Middle East, victims of terrorist attacks, experts and mediators in conflicts, politicians, diplomats and a psychologist specialized in this matter. In the text their identities remained anonymous, but some characters are identifiable with real people. For example, in the play, there "meet" a former member of the IRA, the author of the 1984 terrorist attack on a hotel in Brighton and one of its victims.

The interviews had two stages, each meeting between the actors and the interviewed people took place with the presence of the playwright and were based on the questions created by him and by the director, the actor having the freedom to ask about other aspects that he considers necessary.

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18. Liz Hoggard, "Out of crises, a drama", January, 26, 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/mar/27/theatre>

Note that, in most cases, the interviews were not recorded, but written, which relativize the idea of verbatim, of reproducing “word with word” the original. At the end of this period of research, the structure of the play was set and the 29 roles were given, each of the eight players getting at least three. Then came the writing phase itself (ten weeks), the playwright wrote a first draft of the text from the records and the observations of each member of the team.

During rehearsals the actors reconstituted answers using information get during the interviews, the director’s requirement being “to render as accurate a recreation as possible”.<sup>19</sup> Mainly, it is an improvisation exercise as Stafford-Clark says: “it makes you dependent on the actors’ imagination”<sup>20</sup> and “the script would be filtered through their memory in a rather curious way”.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the playwright “constantly adapting, adding and subtracting”<sup>22</sup>, suggesting a contribution from the actors, even if the initial research prevails. Also, in some cases, the “original” was considered lacking of “theatrical viability”, and the actor made his role in another direction. As the actors testify, in shaping the characters, besides information provided in interviews, matter a lot the direct observation, the empathy with real “characters” and other aspects of their lives noted through informal talks. Therefore, we can say that both the text and the characters are the result of selection and choices, of a negotiation between accuracy and theatricality. “About 70% of the script stayed as it was at the beginning of rehearsals, and 30% was added or changed depending upon what we had discovered and the conversations we’d had”.<sup>23</sup> The ultimate goal is not an imitation, a faithful copy of the original, but a “filter” rather subjective that aims to obtain a psychological truth rather than the accuracy of content as even Stafford-Clark mentions: “I make no claim to the absolute authenticity of it, but it is true to the spirit of it.”<sup>24</sup>

The approach to the verbatim theatre of David Hare, one of the most important contemporary playwrights, is not accidental, if we consider the constant concern of his work since the early 70s - searching for ways and means, in order to engage the theatre in the realities of the public or political

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19. Tom Cantrell, *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 31.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 41.

22. Ibid., 31.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 54.

areas. In the play *The Permanent Way* (2003), he brings into question the privatization of the British Railways, a process spread over a period of more than ten years, which has proved to be a failure with catastrophic consequences: a series of rail accidents with dozens of dead people and hundreds of injured. The text consists of interviews with survivors, railway workers, investigators, engineers, but there are also the voices of those who took advantage of the change, bankers, politicians or businessmen. The play is an acid critic to the hypocrisy and incompetence of politics, to the giant bureaucracy behind this privatization, but also an evidence about the collapse of a myth, almost two centuries old, which led to the construction of the modern British state. "This is a drama that stirs indignation and pity in equal measure, political theatre that transcends the old conflicts between Right and Left to condemn the whole mindset and attitudes of those allegedly running our nation's affairs. It is, by a mile, the most significant and revealing new play of the year. If you want to understand why Britain isn't working, you need to see *The Permanent Way*".<sup>25</sup>

In the next play, David Hare went further in experiencing the verbatim theatre, presenting one of the most disputed topics of the recent history. In *Stuff Happens*, he creates a detailed reenactment of epical dimensions (over forty characters and almost three hours length), of the events that led to the American-British military intervention in Iraq (2003), using both materials taken from television shows, speeches, press conferences or public debates and fictionalized lines, from "behind closed doors" of the meetings between various officials of the two countries - heads of state, diplomats, ministers and military commanders. The approach is intended to be an objective one and it even appears formulated at the beginning of the play, where it is stated that it is a "historical play" and that "the events within it have been authenticated from multiple sources, both private and public. What happened happened. Nothing in the narrative is knowingly untrue".<sup>26</sup> This intention is reflected in the construction of the text, a constant debate between the pros and the cons of the war, between the visible face of politics and the dark one, between the public interest and the personal ambitions, the last being often the catalysts of decisions. The play is not an analysis or an aesthetical comment about the international politics, but rather an austere, unsentimental revisit of a moment

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25. Charles Spencer, "Why Britain isn't working", January 24, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3606779/Why-Britain-isnt-working.html>

26. David Hare, *Stuff Happens* (London, Faber and Faber, 2013) 5.

considered to be the most important in the history of Britain since the Suez crisis. It avoids giving answers or drawing conclusions, but it suggests, on the one hand, the lack of solutions to terrorism and on the other hand, the degeneracy of the British politics dominated by “second-class leaders of a second-league nation”.<sup>27</sup> Although it is relatively equidistant, the play draw the most virulent reactions such as those expressed by a member of the Conservative Party: “*Stuff Happens* is the most blatant subverting of art for the purposes of crude propaganda since that of Leni Riefenstahl”.<sup>28</sup> Many critics noted that there was an unclear border between reality and fiction, but Hare’s answer was blunt: “We had to change a certain amount that people had said. The area that a playwright operates in is always the difference between what people say and what they mean. So some of the speeches are direct reportage, if I felt the direct reportage was very powerful. Others are speeches that effectively I have written but which I feel represent what the person wanted to say, and by and large people have been pleased to say. The illusion is that I’m not present, but it’s an illusion. I work like an artist, not like a journalist”.<sup>29</sup>

If David Hare’s way of working, as Max Stafford-Clark’s, involves a negotiation with the original material and with the verbatim technique, opposite, Alecky Blythe, the artistic director of the company Recorded Delivery, uses a different method. She creates the plays starting from interviews that are edited but are not written. The show is rehearsed and played with the actors wearing headphones through which they hear the edited material and reproduce not only the words, but also the voices footprint, including pauses, hesitations, coughing.<sup>30</sup> The use of these devices is announced early in the show, it is integrated into the stage action, and when there is dialogue, the actors connect their headphones to the same device. This is ultimately a Brechtian way of distancing, determining the audience to understand that the actors rather transmit a message, than they identify with it. The debut play, *Come Out Eli*, presents an event that happened in 2002, when Eli Hall, a young man chased by the police, takes a hostage and closes himself in a flat. It comes then the longest siege in the history of the British crime, completed

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27. Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation. British Theatre Today* (London, Methuen, 2011), 74.

28. Ann Widdecombe, “For or against”, January, 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/sep/03/theatre.iraq>

29. Michael Mangan, *The Drama, Theatre and Performance Companion*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 202.

30. See <http://www.recordeddelivery.net/about.html>.

after 16 days, when the victim manages to escape and the attacker commits suicide. Blythe uses a collage of interviews, some taken even during the siege, others soon after, from those who watched the event from the street, to show how a divided community becomes united in a common goal, summed up in the words: "Eli, come out!." With his show from 2008, *The Girlfriend Experience*, Blythe proves that the verbatim theatre can also be very funny, even if it deals with a "serious" theme, as prostitution. It provides a complex, "up to date" image, surprisingly far from the usual stereotypes. There isn't illegal immigration, weird and violent employers, sexual slavery or drug addiction. Sometimes, the atmosphere "was almost Beckettian with its real-time waiting for the phone to ring, and bleak cycles of boredom and silence punctuated with paid-for sex".<sup>31</sup>

The verbatim theatre proliferated both in the mainstream area, and on the fringe stage, occupying a more visible place, and comparing it to the 60's it is a movement from the local in the national. This expansion is directly related to the high skepticism expressed by the society towards the political class, the public institutions and the media, the desire to find the truth on some issues that seem to be hidden and a growing interest, even an obsession, for the "real" proved by the proliferation of reality-show productions. As the playwright Robin Soans was mentioning, the credibility is one of the main arguments: "the audience for a verbatim play will enter the theatre with the understanding that they're not going to be lied to".<sup>32</sup> These plays, beyond the purpose they have in informing and educating, should not be seen as an extension of journalism or a substitute for the media: "verbatim drama, at its best, is aesthetically indistinguishable from high art [...] it can move and stir us as profoundly as any fiction".<sup>33</sup>

The verbatim theatre which includes a diversity of approaches and practices, is "among the most innovative experimental dramaturgies of the turn of the millennium"<sup>34</sup> and "now occupies the territory once claimed by

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31. Andrew Haydon, "Theatre in the 2000s," in *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009* (London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 48.

32. Richard Norton-Taylor, "Verbatim plays pack more punch than the papers", January, 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/oct/22/richard-norton-taylor-verbatim-tribunal-plays-stephen-lawrence>

33. Michael Billington, "V is for Verbatim Theatre", January, 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/08/michael-billington-verbatim-theatre>

34. Elisabeth Angel-Perez, "Language Games and Literary Constraints," *Contemporary British Theatre – Breaking New Ground* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 79.

works of the imagination".<sup>35</sup> Some important playwrights were oriented towards the documentary territory with varying degrees of involvement. Mark Ravenhill, for example, in *A Life in Three Acts* (2009) makes explicit clarification from the very beginning: "Hello, I'm Mark Ravenhill. I'm a playwright. In the past few weeks, I've been talking to the performer Bette Bourne about his life. We've divided our conversation into three parts. A life in three acts. Tonight is part one. We'd like to read you edited transcripts of our conversations".<sup>36</sup> David Hare continues the series of experiments based on interviews with the play from 2009, *The Power of Yes*, whose subtitle is enlightening: "a playwright trying to understand the financial crisis." "The Author" appears as a character, commentator and interviewer, in this "verbatim meta-play, a reflection upon the technique mediated through that very technique".<sup>37</sup> The same theme is also approached by Lucy Prebble in the multiple-awarded play, *Enron* (2009), based on numerous documents related to the scandal that surrounded the collapse of a giant corporation from the energy area.

Unlike, Davery Anderson, the author of the play *Blackout*, first acted at the National Theatre in 2008, refuses the association with verbatim theatre suggested by a part of the media: "I wrote this play, but the story isn't mine. It belongs to a young man from the east end of Glasgow who allowed me to interview him about his life... I went away with several hours of audio recordings from our conversations, which I then edited into a short narrative. This is not to say that the following text is a verbatim transcript - although most of the words are his rather than mine. The play that emerged is a fictionalized account of the events surrounding the crime this young man committed, told with a fair amount of creative license and, crucially, with certain key details left out".<sup>38</sup>

In the 2000s, the documentary appears in the whole British stage and can be found both in small studios, but also at the National Theatre or in West End, in traditional places or in unconventional ones, in physical theatre companies or at the Royal Court. The debated themes are the most various, from urgent ones, disputed and of national interest, to personal or

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35. Michael Billington, "The best shows of 2011", January, 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/dec/04/best-theatre-2011-michael-billington>

36. Mark Ravenhill and Bette Bourne, *A life in Three Acts* (London: Methuen, 2011), 3.

37. Marie Hologa, *Cases of Intervention. The Great Variety of British Cultural Studies* (Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 212.

38. Davey Anderson, *Blackout* (London, Samuel French, 2009), vii.

local ones, generally neglected by television or press. The texts are made by one person or collaboratively, and are produced with minimal resources or in the shape of musicals with impressive scenography. The documentary material appears on stage in the most various formulas, from juxtapositions of interviews, to combination of real and fictional, from simple editing through cuts and permutations, to collages, where alongside the spoken text, appear recorded voices, sounds, images. The production of the company DV8, *To Be Straight With You* (2008), brings together the dance-theatre, the film, the animation and the text in order to explore the issue of homophobia. Alecky Blythe has conducted hundreds of hours of interviews on the streets of Ipswich, where, in 2006, five prostitutes were killed, then, together with the musician Adam Cork, has turned them into a musical story, both tragic and filled with humor. *London Road* which premiered at the National Theatre became, in 2011, one of the most successful shows, subsequently turned into a film.

Documentary plays become the prevalent form for important topics offered by external politics: *Guantanamo – Honor Bound to Defend* (2004) by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo, a play made of letters and interviews with prisoners and their relatives, along with public speeches of politicians; *Fallujah* (2007) by Jonathan Holmes, consists of testimonies of atrocities committed during the military intervention in Iraq; *Motherland* (2008), where Steve Gilroy gathers stories told by mothers, daughters, sisters or girlfriends of soldiers who attended, some of them died or were injured, in the wars in Northern Ireland, Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan; *Black Watch*, one of the most awarded plays in 2006, where Gregory Burke tells the story of a famous Scottish regiment involved in almost all armed conflicts in the last decades. Related to the conflict in Iraq, the team at Tricycle Theatre produced in 2007, surprising play *Called to Account*, a fictional trial for war crimes against Tony Blair, at that time still premier. The “investigation” was led by superior magistrates, while personalities from politics, journalism and academia were called to testify for or against, these interventions was recorded and then turned by Richard Norton-Taylor in text.

We find innovative formula in the work of small companies, as Cardboard Citizens, working with the Royal Shakespeare Company for the show *Pericles*, which includes, along with the classic text, personal stories told by a group of immigrants. In the show *The Caravan*, performed by the company Look Left Look Right, eight spectators are invited in a caravan and listen the experiences of those who were left homeless after floods in

2007.<sup>39</sup> Banner Theatre Company, with three musician-actors, perform hybrid-performances at the junction between theatre, video-art and concert. These are performances in which the text interacts constantly with songs, recorded voices or digital collages, composed of interviews, testimonies, graphics, animations. Called “video balades”, they are brought to live from meetings with small communities, from which they extract stories and experiences, and background music, rhythms and sounds. Music is central, a mixture of influences, styles and registers of the most diverse, a natural extension of interest in topics such as: exile, migration, ethnic dislocations. *Wild Geese* (2004), for example, tells “the stories of Irish nurses, Asian textile workers, Iranian refugees and Chinese cockle-pickers”<sup>40</sup>.

The term has become more flexible in the last years, having very often a confusing usage and tending to cover a wider range of theatrical productions. In some particular cases “the label” verbatim seems to be just a marketing strategy. Strictly, verbatim “is understood as a theatre whose practitioners, if called to account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue, in the manner that a journalist must, according to the code of ethics, have sources for a story”.<sup>41</sup> As more and more performances are based on “truth” transferred directly into the scene, the ethics of creative process for verbatim theatre is a frequent topic under discussion, especially in a contemporary society faced with instability and lack of authority of the document itself. What is real and what is true are not synonyms. The veracity of sources may raise questions, and then the way interviews were conducted, the editing process, “distillation” or “filtering” allow shadings of “reality” and can ultimately produce accents and even manipulation. In each case, the testimonies that come before viewers go through a process that can distort: from the original recording to the written text, then in rehearsals and in the performance. Problematic nature of these products extends beyond the allegations of selective editing, often mentioned, to the very nature of theater. Text undergoes constant revision from a rehearsal to another, from one show to the next, and the actor can not be twice the same, so it is impossible to remain completely faithful to the original.

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39. See <http://lookleftlookright.com/site/thecaravan/>

40. See <http://bannertheatre.co.uk/portfolio/wild-geese-20042006/>

41. Nadine, Holdsworth (ed.) and Mary, Luckhurst (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*. (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 154.

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