

**'He's Talking, My Mouth Moving': A Critical Analysis of the Role,  
Value, and Experience of a Contributor to Verbatim Theatre**

Clare Summerskill

Royal Holloway University of London

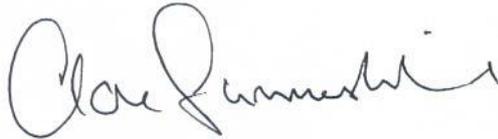
**Submitted for the Award of  
PhD Drama and Theatre Studies**

Supervisor: Dr Chris Megson

Advisor: Professor Lynette Goddard

## Declaration of Ownership

I, Clare Summerskill, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clare Summerskill', written in a cursive style.

Signed:

Date: 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

CLARE SUMMERSKILL

## ABSTRACT

**‘He’s Talking, My Mouth Moving’: A Critical Analysis of the Role, Value and Experience of a Contributor to Verbatim Theatre.**

Verbatim theatre processes which draw on interview content from living people are inherently open to accusations of appropriation, if not exploitation. However, scholarship addressing the experience of those who are interviewed for such productions, particularly those from marginalised communities, is sparse. This thesis asks what key issues need to be addressed by theatre makers when interview material from contributors is sought and employed within a verbatim script. Can an ‘insider’ positioning of theatre makers in relation to those they interview (where the playwright is from the same community and has shared experiences) produce a richer level of disclosure, a deeper level of trust in the project and a sense of co-creation on the part of the contributors?

As a theatre maker of many years’ standing, I wanted to explore whether a shift from a ‘mining’ or extractive relationship to one of reciprocity and co-production within professionally produced verbatim theatre can be facilitated by addressing the practices of theatre makers. To examine this question, I have discussed the working processes of several practitioners (including Christine Bacon and Della Pollock, who I interviewed) and have also reflected upon some of my own plays, analysing follow-up interviews with contributors.

My research demonstrated how risks can be mitigated and it also identified ways in which contributors can benefit from their involvement. It revealed that follow-up interviews with contributors provide much-needed documentation about their experience of verbatim theatre processes. Crucial to this enquiry, this thesis showed how existing debates and practice within oral history can inform and enhance ethical practice in plays created from interviews with living people.

This thesis has demonstrated that contributors’ narratives cannot simply be regarded as source material for playwrights, but that the experience of contributors in verbatim theatre processes must now be foregrounded in verbatim theatre practice and scholarship.

## Table of contents

Introduction .....	7
Ethical challenges in verbatim theatre processes .....	8
Power dynamics between playwrights and contributors .....	12
Risks and benefits for contributors .....	15
Turning to oral history scholarship and practice .....	17
Research questions addressed in this thesis .....	19
Methodology 1: Parameters of this research .....	21
Methodology 2: Interdisciplinary research .....	26
Methodology 3: Use of interview content in this thesis .....	28
Definition of ‘contributor’ as employed in this research .....	35
Thesis structure .....	36
Chapter One. Literature survey .....	43
Chapter Two. The significance of oral history debates to verbatim theatre processes .....	53
Introduction .....	53
An overview of oral history theory and practice in the US and the UK .....	58
Connections between the emergence of oral history and verbatim theatre in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s .....	61
Feminist Oral History .....	63
Power dynamics in the interview situation .....	65
Subjectivity and positionality of the interviewer and playwright .....	67
Feeding back and reciprocity .....	68
Seeking contributors’ consent and the interview as a co-construction .....	71
Does verbatim theatre work need the kind of ethical guidelines that exist in oral history? .....	76
Conclusion .....	78
Chapter Three. Analysing the experience of contributors in verbatim theatre work through the lens of oral history: Two case studies .....	80
Introduction .....	80
Case Study: <i>Like a Family</i> .....	81
<i>Like a Family</i> : the book and the tour .....	83
Reciprocity .....	85
Dialogic Possibilities .....	87
Addressing power imbalances between theatre makers and contributors .....	88
Conclusion to <i>Like a Family</i> Case Study .....	90
Case Study – <i>The Laramie Project</i> .....	92
Introduction .....	92
The production .....	93
<i>The Laramie Project</i> and community oral history projects .....	94
Multivocality .....	96
Reciprocity .....	98
Dialogic Possibilities resulting from <i>The Laramie Project</i> .....	101
Conclusion .....	102

Chapter Four. The positionality of the writer in verbatim theatre: Critiquing insider and outsider perspectives .....	105
Introduction .....	105
Insider/Outsider positioning and power imbalances.....	107
The search for objectivity within verbatim theatre work .....	108
Speaking for others: Representation and partiality within feminist discourse.....	115
Oral History discussions about the positioning of an interviewer.....	118
Discussions in applied theatre about insider/outsider positioning .....	121
<i>Bare Mountains</i> .....	125
Conclusion.....	128
 Chapter Five. An examination of beneficial opportunities that arise for contributors who share a similar identity with the playwright.....	132
Introduction .....	132
<i>Gateway to Heaven</i> : the production and Eileen’s scene .....	133
Identifying my own positionality as the playwright.....	136
Interviewing older lesbians and gay men.....	140
Historical shaming of lesbians and gay men.....	143
A path from shame to pride .....	145
Conclusion.....	146
 Chapter Six. Ethical challenges in creating theatre from interviews with vulnerable contributors .....	150
Introduction .....	150
<i>Hearing Voices</i> – the production, the tour and the contributors.....	151
Theatrical portrayals of the mentally ill and the psychiatric system .....	155
The playwright’s agenda and the contributors’ agency in <i>Hearing Voices</i> .....	157
Implications of the playwright’s positioning in theatre created from interviews with contributors who are mentally ill.....	161
Ethical considerations in employing interview content from contributors who are mentally ill .....	164
Seeking permissions .....	167
Naming of contributors in scripts .....	168
Debates within oral history on working with vulnerable populations .....	170
Conclusion.....	172
 Chapter Seven. Reflective and reflexive opportunities afforded to contributors in verbatim theatre processes.....	174
Introduction .....	174
Attaining feedback from the patient-contributors to <i>Hearing Voices</i> .....	175
An exploration of potential benefits for mentally ill contributors to verbatim theatre processes .....	179
‘It did shudder me’: Possibilities of reflection and reflexivity for a contributor .....	182
Conclusion.....	189

Chapter Eight. Ethical concerns and production challenges in the creation of theatre from interviews with asylum seekers and refugees.....	192
Introduction .....	192
Section 1: An exploration of production possibilities in theatre created from stories provided by asylum seekers and refugees .....	195
1.1 Asylum seekers and refugees within a global context .....	195
1.2 <i>Rights of Passage</i> .....	198
1.3 Contributors' involvement and agency within verbatim theatre productions .....	203
1.3.1 Theatre in Australia .....	203
1.3.2 Theatre in the UK.....	205
1.3.3 Theatre in Germany .....	207
Section 2: 'Risky stories' .....	209
2.1 Asylum interview procedures .....	210
2.2 Ethical concerns about the interviewing process in verbatim theatre .....	213
Section 3: Identifying benefits for contributors and mitigating risks from their involvement .....	221
3:1 'This is my opportunity to get my story out' .....	221
3.2 Possibilities of co-creation .....	223
3.3 Identifying the time when contributors are interviewed in relation to their asylum process.....	228
Section 4: Positionality: Interviewing lesbian and gay asylum seekers and refugees for verbatim theatre projects.....	230
Conclusion.....	238
Conclusion .....	242
Positionality .....	243
Duty of Care .....	244
Risks and benefits for contributors .....	245
Self-reflexivity by theatre makers and documentation of contributors' experience .....	247
Relevance of oral history to this research.....	248
A final word.....	250
Appendix 1. 'Eileen's' scene from <i>Gateway to Heaven</i> (2019). .....	252
Works Cited .....	254

## Introduction

Debbie suffers from bipolar and has been sectioned several times under the 1983 Mental Health Act. She was a contributor to my play *Hearing Voices*, created from interviews with a group of friends who met as patients on a locked psychiatric ward. The piece highlights the poor standard of treatment provided by the psychiatric services to those who are mentally ill. Following the rehearsed play-reading at the Cochrane Theatre in London in 2009, to which Debbie had been invited and after which, she took part in a facilitated discussion with an audience of two hundred in attendance, she emailed me what she termed a 'Review' of the piece which included these excerpts:

I was a character in this play and it was really good watching the actress play my bits. Because the play was written from recorded interviews, it was my words being said and I was very pleased with what I had said and the way the actress portrayed me. It was really funny and it made me shake.

Clare Summerskill's play has opened my eyes because the treatment Clare perceived as wrong, inhumane, unjust, uncalled for, I had been accepting that as the norm because I was a bad naughty bipolar person, I felt I deserved it, because I was hyper-manic. After watching the play, seeing just how it was for all of us showed me and the rest of the audience that there is a big problem in the nut house with the NHS, that could be changed, should be changed. (Debbie, 2009)

At the time I received this email, I had been working with verbatim theatre processes for many years with my own theatre company and other companies that create plays from interviews. I had always been particularly interested in the experience of those who share their stories with theatre makers and who then see 'themselves' portrayed on stage and hear their own words spoken in a dramatic context. These comments from Debbie were the first time that I had received unsolicited written feedback from someone who had been interviewed for a play on which I had worked. They give me a glimpse of just how powerful it can be for contributors to see themselves performed on stage and demonstrated that, in Debbie's case, such an experience afforded her opportunities for deep personal reflection, as well as allowing her to participate in a wider discussion about the treatment of those

suffering from mental health problems and the efficacy (or otherwise) of the psychiatric profession.

The popularity of verbatim theatre – where plays are created from interviews with living people – shows no sign of abating and the increasing quantity of scholarship about productions based on personal narratives reflects a recognition of the form as a prominent feature on the current theatrical landscape. Various publications have addressed verbatim theatre and documentary theatre's claims to truth and authenticity (Martin, 2010; Bottoms, 2006), the experience of actors who appear in such shows (Cantrell, 2013), and the theatrical representation of the 'real' people (Canton, 2011), but there has been far less focus specifically on the experience of those who are approached by a playwright for an interview about a particular subject or theme. The principal aim of this research is to give this matter a more prominent position in theatre scholarship, taking full account of its importance and implications.

Professional verbatim theatre work, where plays are written from interview material and then performed by actors, varies greatly in style and content, but there will usually be several points of critical involvement for contributors within the production process: the moment when they are approached for an interview; the interview situation, where their stories are recorded; and when consent is sought for their interview excerpts to be employed in a script. Further interaction with the theatre makers can occur if the contributors are sent the interview excerpts that the playwright wishes to include in the script; if they are then asked for their views on those excerpts, either during the scripting process or at a play-reading, where the piece is fed back to those who were interviewed; and when they attend the final production and watch 'themselves' dramatically represented by actors who narrate their original words. Each one of these stages involves theatre makers making decisions about how they choose to work with their contributors. As well as being practical decisions, these are also ethical ones, since verbatim theatre is a dramatic form created from interviews with living people who will be impacted, to a greater or lesser degree, at each stage of their involvement.

### **Ethical challenges in verbatim theatre processes**

In all areas of research based on interviews with living people, ethical concerns relating to appropriation, exploitation, representation and working methods are inevitably foregrounded. Any discussions about ethical behaviour are, by their very nature, highly subjective and based on fundamental belief systems and these behaviours might be strongly contested since they relate to individuals expressing views on the treatment and well-being of others. Those working with interview material in fields such as oral history, sociology, feminist studies, ethnography and anthropology have spent many years negotiating ethical challenges within their work and guidelines relating to ethical practice have been developed in most of those disciplines. A verbatim play is an artistic creation rather than a research project but the content of the script is secured by interviewing living people and, therefore, matters relating to the treatment of the contributors and to the representation of those who share their stories or experiences for a dramatic endeavour must still be scrutinised through an ethical lens. A small, but gradually increasing amount of documentation has been generated by theatre practitioners who create plays from interviews and who have reflected upon their own working methods, and some of their scholarship addresses ethical challenges they encounter in their work. However, very few open conversations have taken place *among* verbatim theatre practitioners relating to their working practices and, currently, there are no agreed ethical guidelines or established codes of practice in this field.

Some verbatim theatre practitioners have interrogated the thinking of philosophers for guidance on matters pertaining to the employment of other people's testimony in dramatic works. Julie Salverson, reflecting upon a video she and her colleagues produced about refugees in Canada, cites the influence of Emmanuel Levinas upon her understanding of some of the ethical challenges in that project. She outlines Levinas' objections to 'the violence implicit in a process of knowledge and meaning-making that incorporates the other into itself' (1999: 38), and interprets his concerns in theatre based on testimony as, 'assuming responsibility to guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny difference' (38). Another philosopher, Immanuel Kant, embraces the principle that it is wrong for humans to treat one another merely as means since such action would be morally reprehensible. His renowned dictum: 'so act that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means' (1996: 429) is an admirable one, but it raises challenging questions for playwrights

who, in creating verbatim theatre, quite clearly, do use contributors as a means to an end. Janet Gibson, in her insightful article 'Saying it Right: Creating Ethical Verbatim Theatre' (2011), is wary of Kant's 'categorical imperative' which, she claims 'could end with enforced controls on verbatim work, regardless of the differing cultural contexts...' (2011: 2). Her concern is one which is undoubtedly held by many practitioners who fear that any suggested controls might impede their dramatic vision or artistic license.

Verbatim theatre often addresses matters of political and social concern and, bearing Kant's argument in mind, practitioners might therefore question whether, in such cases, the end does justify the means. The end product – namely the play – might, for example, be designed to raise awareness of an injustice which could be publicised to a wider audience than those who would previously have known about it. In such a case, the employment of contributors' personal testimony could serve both the interviewer and the narrators, and so it might be advisable for theatre makers to adhere to the more general principle of 'first do no harm', the popular saying, particularly amongst those involved in the medical field, that derives from the Latin phrase, 'primum non nocere' or 'primum nil nocere'. But even such a resolve can be problematic, since it is not always possible for playwrights to accurately assess the ways in which their work might adversely affect contributors.

In the limited available scholarship where verbatim practitioners have documented their working processes, playwrights who employ interview material for their scripts appear to be fully aware not only of the heightened ethical responsibilities that this work entails, but also of the inherent complexity of working ethically, but with artistic freedom. The playwright and director Alecky Blythe states: 'I think your work should be ethical and, obviously, there's a huge responsibility to the people you interview but, artistically, you can create your own rules in terms of what serves the piece' (Megson, 2018: 230). And Robin Soans, addressing possibilities of manipulation in this theatrical form, asks: 'just because I write about real people and seek to portray them honestly, is there an embargo on editing creatively?' (Hammond and Steward: 2008: 35). Antoinette Moses, in her doctoral thesis 'Constructing the Real: An Examination of Authorship and Ownership in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre', summarises the conflicts such comments reflect by suggesting that

‘tensions will always exist between the wish to write challenging plays and avoidance of ethical and legal difficulties’ (2009: 283).

Without any agreed upon or formal ethical guidelines in verbatim theatre work, practitioners will rely on their own ethical judgement when working with contributors and creating play scripts. The Australian playwright Alana Valentine, advises that playwrights should: “‘Be trustworthy’’: Keep the promises you make, act honourably, be honest about your intentions’.<sup>4</sup> Robin Belfield, in *Telling the Truth - How to Make Verbatim Theatre*, states: ‘I do require – in fact, I demand – that my conduct and creative pursuits are led by respect, honesty and integrity’ (2018: 103). These qualities are unquestionably laudable but are invariably open to subjective interpretation. Stuart Young, in his article ‘The Ethics of Representation of the Real People and Their Stories in Verbatim Theatre’, explains that ‘negotiation between theatre-makers and subjects is often verbal’ (2017: 23), and he states that a duty of care towards contributors in productions 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’ (23). This observation suggests that the intentions of the verbatim theatre practitioners’ work – whether they are pedagogical or ideological, as well as artistic – impact ethical practice. Gibson contributes to this discussion on what she terms the ‘complex ethical dimensions’ (2011: 2) in the creation of verbatim theatre, by contending that: ‘verbatim practitioners have, at the very least, responsibilities to negotiate with the subjects who provide the source material for their productions’ (2). But without any standard or collectively agreed ethical guidelines in place, this directive could be interpreted in as many ways as there are interview-based productions.

One of the most important ethical concerns in verbatim theatre work, addressed by practitioners and critics alike, relates to the appropriation of contributors’ stories by theatre makers. Appropriation occurs when someone takes possession of something or makes use of it exclusively for oneself; exploitation is the action of making use of and benefiting from resources. The creation of theatre productions from personal stories provided by ‘real’ people could, therefore, justifiably be viewed as an appropriative or even an exploitative form of work. Audience members might assume that some form of mutually acceptable arrangement has been agreed upon between the contributors and the playwrights, whereby those who provide their stories are quite willing for their narratives to be dispersed publicly.

But because of the lack of guidelines in this work – both ethical and practical – different theatre practitioners will inevitably operate in different ways, for example when it comes to approaching their contributors and securing permissions.

Some theatre makers have documented their working practice in regard to gaining consent from contributors, but many have not, which does not mean that they do not work with a high level of ethical scrutiny, just that their methods are unknown for research purposes. Whilst some playwrights (such as Blythe) seek consent by asking contributors for their agreement while they are being recorded (Megson, 2018: 227), other playwrights acknowledge that, at the point of interviewing a contributor, they do not even know what the final product will look like. Writing about his own play, *Asylum Section 22*, the South African playwright Pedzisai Maedza states:

I could do no more than tell the subjects that I am a playwright; divulge the research topic and then ask for an interview. This being the case, I am inclined to suggest that the consent granted is not complete [...] if the playwright does not have any idea in advance, of what would be on the tapes or how they will subsequently use the recordings, the interviewee cannot really know to what they are consenting. (2013: 106)

Maedza's comments on this important stage in verbatim theatre processes highlight the fact that, when the contributor's permission is sought before an interview begins, either in oral or written form, rather than this action clarifying the matter of consent, contributors are, in effect, agreeing to a 'carte blanche' version of things they have not said being scripted in a way that has not yet occurred. Such a process is clearly ethically problematic but playwrights such as David Hare attempt to allay any charges of impropriety by arguing that: 'people like talking to theatre people, and they trust them' (Hammond and Steward, 2008: 70). Hare's observation may well be true and the knowledge that the narrator's personal story will be employed in a script and performed on stage could, indeed, be a compelling reason for someone to agree to be interviewed for a play. But if playwrights can gain contributors' trust with such relative ease, simply by virtue of coming from the theatre world, they must also recognise the inherent power imbalance in that exchange.

### **Power dynamics between playwrights and contributors**

Verbatim theatre is ideally suited to the telling of stories that have not been widely heard and is well positioned to respond to pressing contemporary issues. Since the early 1970s, this dramatic form has been at the forefront of bringing the voices of members of marginalised communities (which include members of the working classes, women, LGBTQ people, disabled people, immigrants, and people from the BAME population<sup>1</sup>) into public awareness. When plays based on interviews are created by theatre makers who are not from these populations, even if they are produced with the intention of highlighting injustices or underreported areas of concern, there will usually be a discernible power imbalance between the interviewers and the contributors: The theatre makers might be paid for the work they do whereas contributors are rarely, if ever, financially compensated for sharing their narratives; if the plays are about immigrants or asylum seekers in host countries, the playwright and actors will frequently be full residents of the country in which they live and work; and when a verbatim play addresses a pressing concern of injustice, those who produce it will often be 'outsiders' (not of the same population as those who are interviewed), who have spotted a previously under-reported matter which they wish to publicise using dramatic means. These scenarios are not always the case, but when they occur there is, arguably, an ethical obligation for theatre makers to identify the power dynamics within the interview situation and critically reflect upon their implications, a process which reflects feminist interview practice and necessitates an awareness of intersectional consciousness.

Oral historians, Catherine Fosl and Lara Kelland's interpretation of the directive to name the researchers' subjectivities is demonstrated in their documentation of the Louisville LGBTQ movement, where they advise that: 'white activists foreground race privilege, cis-men [...] understand their own gender construct, those with greater access to resources foreground their own economic privilege, and straight allies recognise how their own internal sense of sexuality is culturally constructed and informed as well' (2016: 151). In oral history work, the identification of existing power imbalances allows for a period of critical reflection to take place during which the project leaders can assess how these may impact the project as a whole and, in particular, the narrators. But, as feminist theorists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge state: 'power is better conceptualised as a relationship,

---

<sup>1</sup> BAME is an acronym currently used to refer to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people.

as in *power relations*, than as a static entity [...] power constitutes a relationship' (2016: 28). The power dynamics in verbatim theatre processes will vary depending on who is conducting the interview, what sector of society the contributors are from, who the actors are who will portray the contributors on stage, and even what population the audience members might represent. All of these factors can impact the experience of the contributors to a lesser or greater extent.

Power imbalances between contributors and verbatim theatre playwrights will also be reflected in the final script, since the personal or political agenda of the playwright will inform its content. Additionally, the playscript will usually be credited to the playwright, rather than to those who were interviewed. This has not generally been a contentious point in verbatim theatre scholarship, but it does raise the question of where authorship of the playscript resides and who should be credited as the writer of the piece. Occasionally, playwrights who produce scripts from interview and documentary material publicly acknowledge that their plays are a form of co-creation with those who have contributed to them but, with many scripted verbatim plays, the authorship of a play based on interviews is assigned solely to the playwright. There is also a strong likelihood that a writer will advance her career and reputation with the production of a well-received play and, if she were then to document her work and reflect upon it through the publication of a book or article, this would afford her additional personal and professional advantages.

The potential benefits for contributors to verbatim theatre processes are harder to identify than those attained by the theatre practitioners. Even if, as Hare suggests, contributors are happy and willing to talk to theatre makers, it must not be assumed that they will always be pleased with the way that their stories are employed in a script and presented theatrically. Theatre makers and the contributors alike may hold a shared aim for the personal testimonies relating to the issue the play addresses to be dispersed publicly, but the more marginalised the contributor is in society, the more trauma they might have suffered, the more silenced they might have been historically, or the more vulnerable they might be as individuals, the greater the need will be for ethical care and vigilance when playwrights employ their interview excerpts in scripts.

## Risks and benefits for contributors

Some theatre scholarship has addressed potential risks that contributors face when engaging in verbatim theatre processes, particularly when they are from marginalised communities. Salverson, for example, writing about drama projects based on narratives provided by refugees, expresses concerns about theatre practitioners who employ what she terms “‘risky stories’, stories of emergency and violation’ (1996: 184). She also asks: ‘what is the cost to the speaker?’ (182), a question that is particularly pertinent to this thesis, and she comments: ‘as artists and educators, we must continually ask ourselves: in what context are risky stories being told? Within what frameworks did they originate?’ (181). The lack of contextualisation in verbatim plays is raised by Deirdre Heddon in *Autobiography and Performance* (2008), where she presents a range of critical observations on verbatim theatre. She addresses its appeal to veracity, the often-undisclosed agenda of the playwright, and the lack of contextualisation of interview excerpts in a script. Heddon’s scholarship makes an important contribution to discussions about the ethical challenges of verbatim theatre and acts as a call to practitioners to closely interrogate their own aims and agenda when working with this dramatic form. Although the questions she poses are generally addressed to the playwright, many of them have profound implications for contributors. One of the most important of these is: ‘to whom is one responsible or accountable in the production of verbatim performances?’ (2008: 129). The lack of accountability Heddon identifies, combined with her highlighting of the playwright’s agency in the scripting process, point to some of the ethical challenges that arise in this work to which playwrights must attend, since they relate to the contributors’ role and value and experience.

The question of accountability in verbatim theatre processes presents one of the main ethical concerns in this form of work, since any project which is based on the experiences of people other than that of the researchers or writers, places those working with that material in a position of creating dramatic representations of the contributors. Three decades ago, Linda Alcoff cautioned that ‘the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise’ (1991-1992: 29). Her comments are directly relevant to

playwrights, who frequently choose to work with verbatim theatre methods because they want to draw attention to a previously underreported matter of political or social concern and they do that by employing interview excerpts in their scripts from those who have been affected by the subject or theme under discussion. Plays based on interviews are often intended to advance dialogue and understanding about a variety of topics but, as Alcoff states, 'the discursive context is a political arena' (15) and, whatever their motives, in the act of scripting words provided by contributors, verbatim playwrights will be in the position of 'speaking' for those they have interviewed.

The inherent perils of speaking for others encountered by researchers who create representations from communities from which they do not, themselves, originate have been addressed in some detail by scholars across several disciplines. These include feminist studies (Alcoff, 1991), race studies (hooks, 1991), oral history (Armitage, 2010), anthropology (Ruby, 2000), and applied theatre, where Sheila Preston addresses such concerns by posing the question: 'how will representations that have been created impact in diverse, unpredictable and political contexts?' (2010:68). Decisions around representations of those who are interviewed for verbatim theatre processes will always present ethical challenges for the playwright, but they are of even greater significance when the contributor comes from a community that has been historically marginalised or even silenced. Within feminist discourse, Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger suggest that those working with what they term 'other' (referring to people from a different community to those running the research project) could 'give representations back to the represented for comment, feedback and evaluation' (2009: 91). In some verbatim theatre processes, theatre makers provide opportunities for contributors to look over the interview excerpts that the playwright wishes to include in the script before it is employed in the rehearsal period. But this is by no means a universal practice. Some companies invite contributors to a rehearsed play-reading, soliciting feedback at that point and, frequently, they will also be asked to attend the final production. But even when these steps are taken, it is still the theatre makers who have the final say over which excerpts are employed in the script and in what context, and over the dramatic representation of those who were interviewed. One way for theatre practitioners to follow feminist interview directives of seeking a form of reciprocity between narrator and researcher, and to mitigate charges of speaking for other, is to look

for ways in which contributors might secure a greater sense of agency in the production process. This thesis will therefore examine possibilities of co-creation, questioning if such an outcome is ever possible in theatre created from interviews, that is not applied theatre but is performed professionally in theatres to the general public.

### **Turning to oral history scholarship and practice**

By offering interviewees a means of involvement and inclusion in the research undertaken using their stories, Wilkinson and Kitzinger contend that those who are represented could be described 'not as "subjects", or even "research participants" but as "co-researchers"' (2009: 91). The idea that research produced from interviews can provide a form of co-creation is one that has also gained significant traction in oral history scholarship and practice, since feminist thinking has had a strong influence on the trajectory of that discipline. Daphne Patai, in 'U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?' (1991), recognises that 'the feminist precept of "returning the research" [...] is one attempt to deal with the inequality of the typical exchange between researcher and researched' (1991: 146). But in response to the interview process as conducted by feminists, she poses the question: 'when is the purported empowerment or affirmation just another psychological surrogate, a "feel good" measure, a means by which researchers console themselves for the real imbalances in power that they know – despite all the talk of sisterhood – exist?' (1991: 146). The oral historian, Michael Frisch asks: 'what is the relation between interviewer and subject in the generating of such histories – who is responsible for them and where is interpretive authority located?' (1990: xx) and he developed the concept of 'shared authority' to offer a response to this critical line of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Fellow oral historians Anna Sheftal and Stacey Zembrzycki interpret shared authority as being a call for 'an acceptance of both the experiential authority that narrators bring to the interview and scholarly authority that researchers offer to the exchange' (2019: 350). Shared authority is now generally accepted by scholars and practitioners in that field as the most productive way in which to view their working processes.

---

<sup>2</sup> There are discrepancies within oral history scholarship as to the capitalisation of the words 'shared' and 'authority' and 'sharing authority'. I have only capitalised these words when they are employed in a citation where they have been capitalised.

Turning to oral history, I have observed that feminist oral history practice which challenged previously accepted understandings of the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator, and Frisch's concept of shared authority, are not the only areas of discussion that have direct relevance to verbatim theatre processes. At the core of many oral history debates lie questions about the experiences of those who are interviewed and the way in which they narrate their stories; these matters also pertain to an enquiry into the role of contributors in verbatim theatre processes. But although oral history scholarship and practice is of particular interest to a study of verbatim theatre, verbatim theatre and oral history are clearly different disciplines and cannot be conflated into one. Oral history methodology follows a prescriptive process, previously developed but still open to revision, as a means to operate ethically and to yield the most productive results when gathering data and historical research material in the form of interviews. Traditionally, oral history seeks to preserve the interview fairly intact, as a direct representation of the narrator's words, for the historical record in an archive. The role of the verbatim theatre playwright, however, is to gather personal testimonies for a work of art, often with a goal of raising social or political awareness. In this process, the playwright may or may not use the narrators' words verbatim or in the original context. Material gathered from interviews by playwrights can contribute towards historical understanding, but it will generally be employed only as dramatic content in a play, and not be archived, as oral histories are.

In spite of the difference in the intended outputs of both disciplines, it is apparent that one of the most striking points of connection between oral history and verbatim theatre is the shared attention both fields of work give to the interview process and also to seeking spoken testimonies from members of communities who may not otherwise have had their stories sought and dispersed. Over the last few decades, oral historians have paid much attention to the ethical challenges in their projects. One such area of discussion relates to the positionality of the interviewer in relation to the narrator, addressing the insider or outsider position of an interviewer and examining the benefits and the drawbacks that can exist in both situations ('insider' refers to someone who shares the same identity or experiences as the interviewer and 'outsider' refers to someone who is of a different identity and has had different experiences in life to those of the narrator). Although the terminology of insider and outsider presents a binarism, which could be seen as problematic

in the light of intersectional thinking that encourages a deeper interrogation of overlapping identities and subjectivities, the notion of whether the interviewer is from the same community or a different one from as the narrators is, arguably, a helpful starting point in determining positionality.

The terms insider or outsider can occasionally be observed in verbatim theatre scholarship referring to the positionality of the playwright in relation to those who are interviewed, but there has been limited discussion of this terminology and no collective understanding has been reached about its meaning or implications. Because of potential power imbalances in theatre work which often seeks to represent people from marginalised communities by employing excerpts from their interviews, and potential accusations of appropriation in such projects, the need to identify the positionality of the playwright in relation to the contributors is heightened. Turning to oral history discussions on this matter provides a means for verbatim theatre practitioners to critically reflect upon how their own working practices affect the contributor.

### **Research questions addressed in this thesis**

Since possibilities of exploitation and the existence of power imbalances are both matters of ethical concern when playwrights conduct interviews with contributors, identifying the positionality of the theatre makers is one way to mitigate any risks of harm. Critical reflexivity on the part of the theatre makers also enables them to recognise how the interview dynamics might impact the contributors' levels of trust and disclosure, and such analysis could result in contributors being treated with an even greater degree of care and understanding throughout the interview and production process. When the playwright comes from the same population as the contributors or has shared experiences with them, the power differentiation between them will not be so apparent. It may still exist in other forms – such as ethnicity, gender, class, residency – but a closer positioning affords playwrights the possibility of claiming to speak with and about those they interview, rather than for them. In contrast to the accepted view in applied theatre, and one that often prevails in professional verbatim theatre productions, this thesis proposes that, in some plays based on interviews with contributors who come from marginalised, silenced or vulnerable populations, an 'insider' playwright can greatly increase the contributors' trust in

the project, thereby also enhancing their level of disclosure and ultimately broadening scripting possibilities within that work.

Since ethical guidelines have been drawn up in many disciplines to protect those who are more vulnerable in research processes, this thesis questions whether similar guidelines might be created for plays based on interviews and, if so, what they might resemble? Verbatim theatre is an artistic form rather than an academic research method and any ethical or practical guidelines could potentially be viewed as restrictive to theatre makers' working processes by limiting their creative choices. But, turning to existing guidelines in oral history, I will explore which directives from that field might be productively adopted or adapted into verbatim theatre work. An examination of debates within oral history relevant to verbatim theatre processes will therefore include: identifying inherent power imbalances within the interview situation, turning to feminist understandings of reciprocity between interviewers and narrators; exploring ways of feeding back interview content to narrators; and examining possibilities of how the information attained during an interview can produce a version of co-creation, whereby those who are interviewed have a degree of continued involvement within the project and their agency is not diminished or even eradicated at the point of 'handing over' their stories to playwrights. I will speculate on the implications of ethical shifts in practice using oral history practice and theory, thereby outlining a proposed good practice of care towards contributors in verbatim theatre processes.

Some theatre scholarship has addressed the risks posed to contributors who share their stories with playwrights, especially when those interviewed have suffered trauma, prejudice or oppression (Salverson, 2001; Jeffers, 2012), but since verbatim theatre practitioners do not follow any collective set of ethical guidelines, the risks of harm to contributors could potentially be greater than in other disciplines which draw upon personal experience in their research. However, unlike other forms of research based on interviews, contributors are often invited to attend the final production of the play for which they have been interviewed, when they will see 'themselves' dramatically portrayed by actors and hear words they spoke delivered by actors on stage. There is sparse documentation of the impact that such an experience has upon contributors and, in analysing feedback provided by contributors who have undergone this experience, I will examine how, rather than this

being viewed as a risky venture, beneficial possibilities of reflection and reflexivity for contributors can also occur in verbatim theatre work.

In summary, this thesis focuses on how oral history guidelines and theory can inform and enhance ethical practice in verbatim theatre processes; it discusses how a playwright's positionality impacts the experience of contributors; and it investigates ways in which verbatim theatre processes can provide benefits as well as risks for contributors. The following sections on the methodology employed in this thesis outline how these research questions will be approached in subsequent chapters.

### **Methodology 1: Parameters of this research**

Verbatim theatre is a relatively recent dramatic form, supported by the technological development of the tape recorder, with the term being first used in England in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> In the UK, verbatim theatre generally refers to plays that convey spoken testimony in dramatic form. A looser definition of 'verbatim' problematises the assumption of using the exact words of the narrator. A more common related term for productions created from interview material is 'documentary theatre' – which is frequently understood to be an umbrella term for plays based on interview content and other forms of documentation. Many theatre scholars have outlined their own understanding of verbatim theatre, but, partly due to its proliferation over the last few decades and the innovative productions created in its name, it remains an amorphous term. Will Hammond and Dan Steward's statement that 'verbatim is not a form, it is a technique; it is a means rather than an end' (2008: 9), points to the significance of the varying processes involved in creating this kind of theatre, rather than one final outcome. Verbatim theatre productions take many forms, reflective of theatre makers' innovative and diverse practices which are constantly evolving in many countries around the world. Whilst some plays cover subject matter which may prove of interest to a wider general audience, it is also the case that much verbatim theatre work has a goal that is closer to the community in which it takes place. In such

---

<sup>3</sup> Derek Paget states: 'I first heard the term "Verbatim Theatre" in 1985, in conversation with *NTQ's* [*New Theatre Quarterly*], distinguished co-editor, the late Clive Barker'. Derek Paget, "New Documentarism on Stage: Documentary Theatre in New Times," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 56:2 (2008): 132.

pieces, interviews are conducted and dramatic productions created for the benefit of the community, perhaps for the purpose of collective healing, a call to action, or simply to celebrate.

There are numerous forms of what is termed either verbatim or documentary theatre, but over the last three decades in the UK, plays created from documents – interview material or other kinds – have generally appeared in two noticeable economies of production. The first is small-scale theatre shows, created from a relatively small budget by companies who might perform their work in theatres with a seating capacity of between fifty and two hundred people. If finances permit, these plays can then tour to similar venues around the country, occasionally programmed by a Repertory theatre or sometimes performed in more traditionally non-theatrical venues such as residential homes (as seen with Age Exchange Reminiscence Theatre), or village halls (where many of Eastern Angles shows have been presented). Small-scale verbatim theatre pieces do not always address matters of social or political concern, but frequently they do. Some examples of such work in the UK include *This Much is True* (2009), by Sarah Beck and Paul Unwin, about the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell tube station; *Sochi*, produced at the King's Head theatre in 2014; *From the Mouths of Mothers*, by Amanda Stuart Fisher, performed at The Pleasance (2013); and *The Asylum Monologues* by Ice and Fire theatre company, which premiered at the Amnesty Centre in London in 2006. In Australia, where verbatim theatre is also a popular form, many plays over the last thirty years have been community based where the subject matter speaks to a community of locality or interest, such as *Aftershocks* (1991) by Paul Brown, *Parramatta Girls* (2007) by Alana Valentine, and several productions which address matters relating to asylum, such as *Through the Wire* (2004), written and directed by Ros Horin, and *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* (2004), produced by the company, version 1.0.

The second (or at least one other) economy of verbatim or documentary theatre that has garnered attention from a wider public in the UK has often been produced in the more privileged or subsidised sector in larger theatres, mainly in London, such as the National Theatre and the Royal Court. Practitioners who have worked in these venues include David Hare, Robin Soans, Alecky Blythe, Richard Norton-Taylor (the playwright/journalist and former security and defence editor at the *Guardian*), and Max

Stafford-Clark (from Out of Joint theatre company). The former Tricycle Theatre is a smaller theatre space, in comparison, but one that gained a reputation for producing a series of Tribunal plays (edited verbatim accounts of public inquiries), under the artistic directorship of Nicholas Kent, including *The Colour of Justice: Based on the Transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, edited by Norton-Taylor, which premiered in January 1999.

Their artistic and commercial success has afforded these theatre practitioners a public platform from which to speak about their work, but it is interesting to note that, in comparison to theatre practitioners who work on small-scale productions which draw on interviews with members of marginalised communities, there is a limited documentation of written reflective analysis by these better-known theatre practitioners. Furthermore, much of the documentation relating to the work of these playwrights and directors is in the form of transcribed interviews. Such interviews include Alecky Blythe who was interviewed by Chris Megson (2018), David Hare by Richard Boon (2014), Robin Soans by Sarah Beck (2009), and Hare, Soans, Norton-Taylor and Blythe, by Hammond and Steward in *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (2008). These theatre practitioners have frequently been questioned about ethical considerations in their working practices and their replies demonstrate an awareness of the complexities of working with this form, but occasionally the responses raise more questions than they answer. For example, in Hammond and Steward's publication, Hare, speaking about his contributors to *Via Dolorosa*, explains how, during the scripting process, he showed them excerpts of what they were going to say. He states: 'when they were people who I knew would disapprove of the way I represented them I changed their names' (2008: 73). Talking about one particular contributor to that play, Hare comments, that after seeing it, he asked her: "'have I represented you correctly?' And she said: 'yes, those are the things we said ... but they sound different when they're said on stage'". And I said: "well is it possible that you're hearing them for the first time'" (73). This is, arguably, a highly problematic response, since it appears to diminish, if not erase, the contributor's concern. In that same publication, Soans talks about the 'everyday people who have populated my plays' and he asks 'do they really know what they're letting themselves in for?' (37). He then answers his own question by commenting: 'I think they do and I think they value the chance to relate their account'

(37). But without any documented research into their experience of involvement in the production, his observation is purely speculative.

When Alecky Blythe describes her working methods for *The Girlfriend Experience*, (a play about a seaside brothel that specialises in services to an older clientele), she explains that: ‘when I’m unable to be at the parlour myself, the girls have agreed to record themselves in my absence’, stating that ‘this is the ultimate way of creating a non-pressurised, non-interview environment’ (93). About this production, Tom Cantrell, in *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (2013), informs us that: ‘all the women [...] knew the purpose of the recording. By contrast, the male clientele did not know that they were being recorded and thus did not give their permission’ (2013: 144). These stated examples of recording practice raise significant ethical concerns which, seemingly, are not interrogated to any great extent by the playwrights themselves. Their working processes might well involve a far deeper degree of analysis and reflection than these selected comments suggest, but without any more detailed documentation, readers are left to draw their own conclusions about the level of ethical scrutiny employed in these productions in relation to a number of matters concerning contributors. These include: how they felt about their dramatic representation; how much they understood during the interview process about what form the final production would take; and how it was justifiable to use some contributors’ interview content without them knowing they were even being recorded, let alone providing consent.

There is clearly much to be explored about the ethical implications of the working methods of many of these prominent theatre makers. However, with a few exceptions, my own research will not extend into that realm of enquiry since that might involve a lengthy process of re-interviewing all these practitioners. Instead, this thesis will primarily focus on the small-scale economies of theatre where plays are created from interviews with members of marginalised communities. I refer to the works of these better-known playwrights to introduce the observation that there appears to be less scrutiny or reflective analysis on their practices than on those created by playwrights working with smaller companies. Furthermore, since this research will identify ethical areas of risk for contributors in verbatim theatre productions and seek to outline possible ethical and practical guidelines that could be created for this work – in large part drawn from oral history practice – it is useful to highlight incidents where mainstream verbatim or

documentary theatre practitioners appear to act in ethically problematic ways within their own working processes.

I now continue to outline the scope of this thesis explaining why some forms of verbatim and documentary theatre work will be addressed and others will be omitted. The main exception to the focus of my examination of plays based on interviews with members of marginalised communities occurs in Chapter Four, where I discuss the issue of a playwrights' positionality. Most of the theatre practitioners mentioned above, especially those working with plays created from trial transcripts, have operated with an understanding that a playwright who is an outsider to the community and the material with which they work is best placed to create a verbatim or documentary piece since they will bring with them an objective, almost journalistic-like scrutiny to the project, which has generally been regarded as a beneficial quality. The perceived advantage of a playwright's lack of personal identification with those who are either interviewed or dramatically portrayed can also be found in applied theatre scholarship. Although my own research does not extend to applied theatre projects based on interviews, in order to advance my exploration of positionality, in Chapter Four, I briefly turn to discussions in that field. I also examine the views of some mainstream professional verbatim theatre makers who expound the merits of a verbatim playwright holding an outsider positioning

The existing documentation of contributors' experience in mainstream verbatim theatre processes in the UK mainly appears in Tom Cantrell's *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (2013). In the course of conducting interviews with actors in plays created by Soans (*Talking to Terrorists*), Alan Rickman and *Guardian* journalist Katharine Viner (*My Name is Rachel Corrie*), Richard Norton-Taylor (*Called to Account*), and Alecky Blythe (*The Girlfriend Experience*), Cantrell mentions several incidents when actors expressed concerns about the way in which they dramatically portrayed living people, or times when the relatives of the characters upon which the plays were based attended the final production. There will be limited focus on these accounts, however, since the theatrical pieces they refer to were either created from 'hot-seating' (which occurred in several plays under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark, where an actor interviews a contributor and then improvises a version of them in the rehearsal room and a script is thereby created), or were produced from documentation other than interviews (for example, emails and journal accounts in the case

of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*). Nor will I examine plays based on trial transcripts, since the focus of my research is on the experience of those who are interviewed, who then see ‘themselves’ portrayed on stage and hear their own words spoken by actors.

This thesis will largely pay attention to plays where contributors come from marginalised communities or which address matters which relate to those populations. However, I have chosen not to focus on *The Colour of Justice: Based on the Transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, by Norton-Taylor, because, although it is about the murder of a teenager from the black community, it is based on trial transcripts and not interviews with members of that population. Some plays which I identify as belonging to the more mainstream theatrical sector do include dramatised characters based on contributors who have suffered certain traumatic experiences. Such examples are to be found in *The Permanent Way* (by Hare) and *Talking to Terrorists* (by Soans), but these are not plays which are based primarily on the experiences of groups in society who have suffered prejudice or discrimination or whose lives have been previously under-reported in existing historical and social documentation. Similarly, my research will not extend to the experience of contributors who work in high status professions – such as lawyers, doctors, or Members of Parliament – whose interview excerpts might have been included in scripts but often for the purpose of providing additional information and expertise on the matter addressed in the play.

At times, references will be made to practitioners who work in headphone theatre or Recorded Delivery (in the case of Alecky Blythe) but the impact of that theatrical form on contributors, although certainly deserving of critical scrutiny, will not be undertaken in this thesis since, I suggest, the mimetic focus of that work and the fact that there is not usually a script created from interviews means that the theatre makers work in a related, but significantly different way from productions where the contributors’ interview content is curated and edited, then dramatically staged and where the lines are learnt by the actors.

## **Methodology 2: Interdisciplinary research**

The direction I have taken in my research, particularly in turning to existing practice and debates within oral history, has been informed by my own work in leading several commissioned oral history projects. I have also written two publications on LGBT oral

history, another on verbatim theatre and oral history, and one article for the British *Oral History Journal*.<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Morss, Heather Lazrus and Julie L. Demuth, writing about ways in which interdisciplinary research can be conducted, state: 'often, interdisciplinary research involves multiple interdisciplinary researchers trained in different fields. However, it can also be conducted by multiple interdisciplinary researchers or by an individual with expertise in multiple fields' (1997: 2). Whilst not claiming expertise in 'multiple fields', my experience both in leading oral history projects and in producing verbatim theatre has afforded me the opportunity to interview several hundred narrators for social and historical research or for plays based on interviews. My academic interest and professional employment in both areas places me in a position where I can not only identify similarities between the two disciplines, but I can also turn to discussions in oral history which inform my study of verbatim theatre processes, where there is limited documented analysis of the experience of contributors.

Rick Szostak, in his article 'The State of the Field: Interdisciplinary Research' (2013), claims that 'interdisciplinarity was once thought impossible and it is now imagined to be easy' (48). Bearing this cautionary statement in mind, I am aware that my own thesis is written from the perspective of a theatre scholar and practitioner, rather than an oral historian. But Szostak also states: 'the interdisciplinarian need not master an entire discipline but rather only understand the insights that it generates regarding the research question, and place these insights within the context of that discipline's overall perspective' (54). This is what I aim to do within the context of my research.

At its core, the process of gathering oral history consists of recording people's experiences, whether their life stories or memories of a particular subject or theme. Those interviews are archived in audio recording and, frequently, also in transcribed form. Although methods of creating verbatim theatre vary enormously, one recognised process involves gathering interviews – again, usually about a specific subject, theme or period – and using excerpts to create a script for theatrical production (with the occasional addition of documentary evidence supporting those narratives). Carol Martin describes the central

---

<sup>4</sup> 'It's Like Telling Your Story to Family': Reflections by an older lesbian on being interviewed for a verbatim theatre project' (2020), in *Oral History Journal* 48:1 (66-74); *Gateway to Heaven: Fifty Years of Lesbian and Gay Oral History* (2012); LGBT charity Stonewall's publication, *Sharing Our Past, Shaping Our Future* (2014); and *Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories* (2020), published by Routledge.

preoccupations of what she terms 'Theatre of the Real' as 'recording ourselves, re-creating our experience and our narrative accounts of history, and remembering and memorialising the events of our own time and other times' (2013: 59). In both oral history and verbatim theatre practices, stories are often (but not exclusively) sought from members of marginalised, vulnerable and, sometimes, previously silenced populations. These narratives are then made accessible to wider audiences in the forms of publicly accessible archives or theatre productions. Verbatim theatre and oral history are, therefore, closely related disciplines, but the purpose of each practice differs: one is regarded as a form of historical research; the other as a way of creating a dramatic production – which can also involve historical research, but its main aim is artistic or even pedagogical. One of the principal areas of overlap in both these practices lies in the interviewing situation, and within oral history scholarship I have observed several discussions addressing the narrator's experience. Since this subject has been relatively neglected in verbatim theatre scholarship, I will explore these debates in Chapters Two and Three, to determine their relevance to plays based on interviews.

Throughout all the chapters in this thesis, I reference oral history scholarship and practice when it sheds light on matters relating to the interview situation and on other points of a contributor's involvement in a verbatim theatre production. Szostak's guidelines on interdisciplinary research include the observation that 'interdisciplinary risk being superficial if they take insights from a particular work without placing these in context or evaluating them' (2013: 55), and I endeavour to be vigilant in this respect, when examining discussions in oral history scholarship which may have a bearing on verbatim theatre processes.

### **Methodology 3: Use of interview content in this thesis**

For this research, I conducted two in-depth conversations with theatre practitioners whose work includes creating theatre from interviews. One of these, Della Pollock, is a Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Executive Director of the Marian Cheek Jackson Center for Saving and Making History, founded in 2008 with students and community members. She is the author of *Remembering: Oral History Performance* (2005) and, in this work, she states: 'oral historians

and performance scholars/practitioners are increasingly discovering shared and complementary investments in orality, dialogue, life stories and community building' (2005: 1). The publication includes contributions by scholars and practitioners of 'Life Reviews', which Pollock defines as 'the process by which individuals assess and make meaning of their lives through the kind of retrospective reflection enabled by story' (23). The case studies in Pollock's book provide analyses of drama productions based on personal stories, where participants (mainly from marginalised communities) enact their own stories, whether as part of a show or in a workshop situation held in non-traditional theatre venues such as classrooms or prisons.

Pollock's work pays close attention to the experience of those who provide their stories for use in dramatic productions, an approach which speaks to my own research on this subject. Furthermore, she states that 'with virtually all my oral history work, I team up with my interviewees to co-create the final products (exhibits, performances, books, etc) based on the interviews we conducted together' (25). Pollock's aims for this kind of co-creation between theatre practitioners and contributors reflect Frisch's concept of shared authority, (discussed at greater length in Chapter Two). Frisch suggests that, during and after the process of providing one's testimony in the form of an oral history, a narrator is able to 'make sense of their past' (1990: 188) and use it to 'interpret their lives and the world around them'' (188). This understanding of an interview's potential is shared by Pollock and I explore this in Chapter Three, where I employ excerpts from my interview with Pollock reflecting upon her own landmark oral history performance project, *Like a Family*, a play based on 300 interviews and produced by Pollock in 1983 with her students from Chapel Hill University.

My second interview was with Christine Bacon, Artistic Director of the UK theatre company, Ice and Fire. Bacon discusses her own working methods regarding contributors to her plays and her company's political and artistic aims. Ice and Fire's full productions and playreadings primarily address human rights issues and many contributors are migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Bacon explains that the ethical implications of working with these vulnerable and frequently traumatised contributors are of great concern to her, as a playwright. She also describes ways in which playwrights can extend their relationship with contributors after the initial interview with the option of conducting further interviews with

them when the contributor's circumstances change, and updating the script accordingly. Reflecting the worldwide increase in refugee movement, the last decade has seen a significant rise in the number of plays based on the stories of asylum seekers and refugees, and Ice and Fire is one of the most prolific small-scale theatre companies addressing human rights issues. Interviewing Bacon about her working process provided me with valuable documentation about a theatre maker's aims, agenda and working practice with contributors in the creation of theatre from interviews with contributors who are asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

Amanda Stuart Fisher observes that 'within a lot of the commentary around verbatim and documentary theatre there seems to be very few examples of playwrights evaluating their projects by consulting those whose stories generated it' (2011a: 200). In her article 'That's Who I'd Be if I Could Sing: Reflections on a Verbatim Project with Mothers of Sexually Abused Children' (2011a), Stuart Fisher questions 'the assumption that appropriation always only equates to an eradication of the other by the self' (2011a: 193), and she reflects upon feedback provided by contributors to the play *From the Mouths of Mothers* about their relationship to the actors who played them on stage. Salverson also offers an analysis of the experience of one of her participants in her article, 'Performing Emergency: Witnessing, Popular Theatre, and the Lie of the Literal' (1996), where she documents her work with a community-based movement for social change, with refugees in Toronto, and a production she scripted and produced in 1993 entitled *Are the Birds the Same in Canada?* In this project the refugees participated as performers. In a boldly reflective examination of her work, she discusses one participant, Tom, who had been quite distressed during and after his involvement with the piece. Although her reflections relate to a participant in a devised theatre piece in which contributors acted themselves, and not a verbatim theatre play where actors portray the contributors, this case study is, nonetheless, of considerable value to my own research, since it focuses on the experience of an individual who shared his stories for use in a theatre project. In the following chapters, I will build upon Salverson's reflective documentation about her participant, Tom, and I will follow Stuart Fisher's directive to attempt to evaluate the experience of contributors by introducing feedback, mainly gathered in the form of interviews from some contributors to my productions, analysing aspects of their involvement in my own theatre practice.

Ever since Debbie wrote her online review to my play *Hearing Voices* (an extract of which is cited at the beginning of this chapter), I was keen to employ it in some form of analysis on how contributors experience their involvement in verbatim theatre processes. While studying for my MA in Applied Theatre, four years after the full production of *Hearing Voices*, I decided to interview Debbie about her experience as a contributor to the play. I shall cite excerpts from this interview in Chapter Seven, which seeks to determine whether a contributors' involvement in verbatim theatre processes can afford them reflexive opportunities. In the same year, 2012, I interviewed Eileen, a contributor to a play I had written in 2004 based on interviews with older lesbians and gay men.<sup>5</sup> As with Debbie's follow-up (or longitudinal) interview, I questioned Eileen about her experience of being interviewed for the piece and of attending the play and seeing an actress perform her story. After another of my own plays, *Rights of Passage*, was produced in 2016 (based on interviews with lesbian and gay asylum seekers), I interviewed two of the main contributors, Miremba (originally from Uganda) and Izzuddin (from Malaysia), and I have employed excerpts from all of these follow-up interviews at various points throughout this research.<sup>6</sup>

In reflecting upon contributors' involvement in my productions, I have chosen to use qualitative methods, namely narrative research, to engage with the subjective experiences and realities expressed by the contributors I interviewed. Valerie Raleigh Yow, writing from an oral history perspective, cautions that 'the qualitative researcher must be conscious of assumptions and interests that inform the work and be aware of how and why these change during the research process' (1994: 9). Although I have endeavoured to follow her advice, I am aware that, in employing excerpts from these longitudinal interviews, I am acting as an 'editor' in much the same way that verbatim theatre playwrights edit interview material, and that I have selected quotations that reinforce my own arguments and areas of concern that I wish to highlight. In addition to the inherent subjectivity in interviewing contributors to my own work about their experience is the risk that – because of our ongoing and often

---

<sup>5</sup> Eileen is not the real first name of the contributor, but the name she selected for herself in the published script of *Gateway to Heaven* (2019).

<sup>6</sup> Miremba is not the real first name of the contributor. It was a name I chose (and one the real contributor agreed to) for one of the main characters – a lesbian asylum seeker from Uganda – in the play, *Rights of Passage*. Izzuddin is the name chosen by the contributor for the script since this was his birth name, but one he, as a refugee, now feels he has left behind.

close relationship – they could simply tell me what they think I want to hear. Although this is almost impossible to assess, I address this matter, in relation to contributors to my play *Hearing Voices*, in Chapter Seven.

I employ the terms ‘follow-up interview’ and ‘longitudinal interview’ interchangeably in this thesis, but am aware that the term longitudinal interview is one that usually refers to a specifically recognised form of research employed in many disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and ethnography. Over the last couple of decades, there has been an increasing interest in employing longitudinal qualitative methods for social policy research since, as sociologists, Anne Corden and Jane Millar explain, it ‘seeks to uncover and understand processes of change over time’ (2007: 529). They state: ‘having people look back over time can provide insight into how they perceive and explain their actions, given the opportunity to discuss and reflect’ (529).

Oral history as a research method also has close links to qualitative interviewing although in that discipline, the idea of using follow-up interviews to examine how narrators felt about sharing their narratives is in its infancy and something which I have examined in my *Oral History Journal* article (2020). The oral historian Joanna Bornat notes the connection between oral history and interviews conducted for sociological research and she explains how: ‘the shift towards qualitative rather than quantitative methods in sociology was pioneered by Thomas and Znaniecki in their study, *The Polish Peasant*, first published in 1918-1920, where they distinguished the importance of “subjective interpretation” in understanding individual and social action, in contrast with observation of “objective factors”’ (2001: 222). Shulamit Reinharz, in *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992), suggests that ‘starting from one’s own experience violates the conventional expectation that a researcher be detached, objective, and “value neutral”’ (1992: 261) and she explains how some feminist scholars challenged the concept of objectivity, arguing that, ‘what passes for “objective” is actually the position of privileged white males’ (261). Reinharz also points to the fact that ‘multiple interviews characterise much feminist research perhaps because multiple interview research helps form the strong interviewer-interviewee bonds some people define as characteristic of feminist research’ (36). It is certainly the case in my own plays that a close bond has often existed between myself, as the playwright, and the contributors.

In writing this thesis, it seems fitting – where possible – to draw upon the contributors’ own testimony, rather than speculate from the theatre practitioner’s viewpoint on the experience of a contributor. This methodology also reflects Bill McDonnell’s directive to theatre makers to operate with ‘thick description’, a concept expounded by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), when documenting their work. McDonnell’s article, ‘The Politics of Historiography – Towards an Ethics of Representation’ (2005), offers suggestions on ‘how we might move towards a richer, more complex and ethical historiography’ (2005: 127). To this end, one of his proposals is for the creation of ‘oral histories made up of the reflections of participants and taken over a period of time to allow for a richer perspective on the values of these collaborations’ (6). McDonnell states that, by operating with ‘thick description’, theatre practitioners ‘might ensure that those who are the subjects of these histories do not remain as silent extras in a tale told for others, but become collaborators in a respectful dialogue: one which sees the making of theatre, and the making of its history, as a unitary political praxis’ (137). In this thesis, reflections upon my own working processes provide documentation about a playwright’s navigation of ethical issues relating to contributors’ involvement, but accounts of the personal experiences of contributors are also included in order to produce the ‘thick description’ that McDonnell encourages theatre practitioners to employ.

Furthermore, excerpts from the longitudinal interviews which I conducted with four contributors which are included in this thesis provide a source of documentation that is not only invaluable to my study of the contributor’s experience but also represents a distinctive and valuable form of knowledge. Cantrell, describing the benefits of writing a book about the experience of actors in documentary theatre processes, states: ‘my work clearly demonstrates that their spoken testimony is no less illuminating than written publications, and ignoring this vital resource has led to a significant gap in our knowledge’ (2013: 13). I suggest that a similar beneficial process occurs when spoken testimony is secured from contributors to verbatim theatre processes. Selected comments – as spoken by contributors – which support findings in this thesis can in no way be representative of the collective experience of all contributors to verbatim theatre productions. However, meaningful engagement with the circumstances surrounding some contributors’ involvement,

combined with their own documented feedback about the process, advances this relatively unchartered area of research.

I participated in College processes intended to secure good ethical practice by completing an Ethical Approval form, to ensure an appropriate level of scrutiny.<sup>7</sup> The contents of this form were discussed within my own department, then taken to the College Ethical Committee, where my proposed inclusion of interview excerpts was approved. Since two of the interviews with contributors were conducted prior to my research for this thesis, I sent those contributors consent forms, which they signed and returned, and sent two other contributors consent forms after the production of *Rights of Passage* in 2016. These forms were produced from a hybrid of two existing consent forms, one created by Dr Emma Cox, (Reader in the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, and an authority on asylum seekers and theatre), and the other a consent form which can be found on the website of the UK Oral History Society.

One of the questions on the Ethical Approval Form asks if the applicant will be working with a vulnerable population. In two cases, I responded in the affirmative. In common with many of the verbatim theatre practices discussed in this thesis, my own plays address matters of political and social concern and I have conducted interviews with contributors from marginalised communities. In the case of Debbie and Miremba, I considered them both to be 'vulnerable': Miremba had experienced severe trauma in her country of origin and still suffers from post-traumatic stress (PTS)<sup>8</sup>, and Debbie is diagnosed with bipolar<sup>9</sup> and has been hospitalised many times because of the mental distress caused by this condition. Although I viewed these women as vulnerable, I believed them capable of making an autonomous decision about sharing their stories with someone who had carefully explained to them how excerpts from their interviews would be included in the script of a

---

<sup>7</sup> For this research, I have followed the approved ethical guidelines laid out by my college, Royal Holloway, University of London, which state that 'All research conducted by staff or students and involving human subjects requires ethical scrutiny.' (<http://www.royalholloway.ac.uk>, 2019)

<sup>8</sup>PTSD is the acronym used in psychiatry to stand for post-traumatic stress disorder, but some mental health sufferers take objection at the fact that the word 'disorder' is added to the end of many psychiatric terms and therefore refer to this condition as PTS, as I have done. <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/the-dirtiest-word-in-the-dsm-0130147>

<sup>9</sup> See footnote <sup>7</sup> above for an explanation as to why I have not termed Debbie's mental condition as bipolar 'disorder'.

play. I also believed they fully understood what was written on the consent form, in that I wished to use some of their comments in my own work and research. Whatever methods employed by playwrights who interview contributors, there will always be ethical risks involved in seeking recorded testimony from members of vulnerable populations. Although I present arguments supporting the case that I was well placed to gather testimony from these contributors for the purpose of creating plays which raise awareness of issues underreported in the mainstream, I also interrogate my own choices (in Chapters Six and Seven) and am fully aware that there are ethical implications for a playwright seeking to justify their working methods in the way I am doing.

### **Definition of ‘contributor’ as employed in this research**

In this thesis, I use the word ‘contributor’ to designate someone who shares their views and experiences in an interview with verbatim theatre practitioners. Since, to date, there has been no in-depth research specifically focussing on those who provide narratives in interview form for use by theatre makers, there is no agreed terminology for such a participant. Paul Brown, who creates community-based verbatim theatre projects in Australia, refers to the person who is interviewed by theatre makers, as the ‘interviewee’ (2010: 80), as does Robin Belfield in *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theatre* (2018: 28). Pam Schweitzer, when describing her working methods with Age Exchange Reminiscence Theatre (2007: 43), also employs the term ‘interviewee’ to refer to people she interviewed for her productions. The South African playwright Pedzisi Maedza uses the term ‘research respondents’ to refer to those who share their stories for use in a verbatim play (2017: 107), and the scholar and theatre practitioner Amanda Stuart Fisher, employs the term ‘verbatim subjects’ (2011a: 193). Stefan Kaegi, part of the German team of Rimini Protokoll's directors (with Helgard Haug, and Daniel Wetzel), views the performers they work with – non-professional performers who may have no prior experience of, or interest in, theatre-making – as ‘experts of the everyday’ (Abdullah, 2019).

In oral history practice and scholarship, the word ‘narrator’, rather than ‘interviewee’ is frequently employed to refer to the person being interviewed (Perks and Thomson, 2016: xiii). The renowned American oral historian, Donald Ritchie, explains the reasoning behind this preference, stating: ‘some oral historians reject “interviewee” for its

passive sound and have embraced more active designations like “informant” “respondent” “oral author” and “narrator”, the latter term often used by folklorists and social scientists’ (2003: 30). In this research I employ the term ‘narrator’ when discussing oral history work and scholarship, but the main reason I employ the term ‘contributor’ when discussing people who have been interviewed for verbatim theatre productions is because, in my opinion, ‘narrator’ or even ‘interviewee’ imply a more limited involvement in the process, confined to the interview situation, whereas ‘contributor’ offers a wider interpretation of their possible role and contribution in the theatre production process. Contributors may, for example, be invited to review excerpts from their interviews, providing feedback for the playwright; they might also attend rehearsals or rehearsed playreadings and final productions, and participate in post-performance discussions. The word ‘contributor’ implies an active and continuing role in the process and reflects my own understanding that verbatim theatre practitioners and scholars are always indebted to such a person for their contribution to the creation of a play based on interviews.

### **Thesis structure**

In summary, the main research questions of my thesis are: how can oral history scholarship and feminist thinking about the interview situation inform the creation of ethical guidelines and protocols in theatre work based on interviews?; why is the positioning of a verbatim playwright who works with members of a marginalised community important and how can it impact the experience of contributors?; and how, in spite of the inherent risks posed to contributors, can beneficial opportunities also be afforded to them during the production process?

Following a Literature Review in Chapter One, the subsequent chapters in this thesis address the research questions that I have outlined above. In seeking to examine these, I draw upon a selection of verbatim plays that I have seen myself, some that I have not seen but have been written about in theatre scholarship, and others that are my own productions. These, I mention at several points throughout this research simply because I can speak with personal knowledge and a degree of authority about them and contributors who were interviewed, rather than because they are exemplary pieces of work. The shows produced by my theatre company, Artemis, are *Gateway to Heaven* (performed initially at

Oval House, London in 2005, created from interviews with older lesbians and gay men); *Hearing Voices* (produced at the Cochrane Theatre, London in 2010, a verbatim play based on interviews with a group of patients who met and became friends on a secure psychiatric ward), and *Rights of Passage* (which premiered at Chelsea Theatre, London in 2016, based on interviews with lesbian and gay asylum seekers in the UK). These productions toured to theatres around England, and the playscripts have all been published by Tollington Press.

This thesis has not been written as Practice as Research (PaR), partly because two of my own plays which are discussed (*Gateway to Heaven* and *Hearing Voices*), were written and performed prior to this research, and partly because I wished to examine the role and experience of contributors across a broader range of productions than would have been possible had I restricted my research to my own body of work. However, since detailed documentation of verbatim playwrights' working methods is limited and information about their relationship with their narrators is sparse, by critically reflecting upon my own plays, I am in a position of being able to share my experiences of working with contributors, interview material and production options.

Chapter Two will provide an analysis of oral history debates which are relevant to verbatim theatre processes. The intention of this exploration is to identify theory and practice in that discipline that could inform theatre makers and enhance their work from an ethical standpoint, specifically in relation to contributors. Several of the main tenets of oral history practice are based on feminist thinking around the interview situation and this chapter will explore what areas of that work could be productively employed in verbatim theatre processes. These include: identifying the interviewers' subjectivities and the power dynamics within the interview situation; working throughout the project with a high degree of self-reflexivity; seeking possibilities of reciprocity when narratives are employed from contributors for research purposes or for creating a piece of theatre; and determining best practice in regard to obtaining narrators' consent.

Having outlined important connections between oral history and verbatim theatre, in the previous chapter, Chapter Three builds on this investigation by discussing two pieces of theatre based on hundreds of interviews provided by members from two different communities: *Like a Family* and *The Laramie Project*. *Like a Family* was a small-scale production created by Della Pollock and her students at North Carolina University in 1988.

Although Pollock terms the work 'oral history performance', the reason I am including this case study in my research is because of the theatre makers' focus on the experiences of the contributors to the piece. Pollock also operated with a high level of critical self-reflexivity in regard to the impact of her production process upon those who provided their stories to be used in the performance as well as those who attended the play, who she regards as wider contributors, since they were from the same families and community as those who were initially interviewed. Pollock's working methods in approaching and interviewing contributors reflect the methodology employed by feminist scholars and oral historians, as detailed in Chapter Two. This included placing the contributors and audience members in the position of experts and understanding the performances as a co-production of knowledge between the theatre makers, contributors and community members. Pollock also suggests that the piece afforded the contributors reflective opportunities about their past and present lives. Since Pollock's performances of *Like a Family* were all improvised, there is no script to draw upon and, consequently, no quotations from this play can be cited in this case study. But, to compensate, in my analysis of this project I include several excerpts from the interview I conducted with Pollock about the piece.

Examined alongside Pollock's work in this chapter is Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, based on 200 interviews with residents of that town. Although this play has been documented extensively in theatre scholarship, there has been little analysis of the experience of contributors to this production. My research seeks to explore this subject through the lens of oral history theory and practice, addressing matters such as the power dynamics between members of Kaufman's theatre company and those who were interviewed, seeking to determine in what way the narratives were appropriated and whether the contributors received benefits from their participation. *The Laramie Project – Ten Years Later* was a follow-up play in which some of the original contributors were interviewed and also some new narrators. This study will investigate whether both plays provided reflective opportunities for individual contributors or to the town as a whole, and it will explore Kaufman's claim that the original production created a dialogue between the theatre makers and the community.

Chapter Four addresses the subject of the positionality of the playwright in relation to those who are interviewed, questioning if an 'outsider' positionality held by the

interviewer or playwright can potentially de-authorise the work and trouble a respectful representation of contributors to research or theatre projects. The question of 'who can speak for who' is addressed, since ethical concerns are foregrounded when a researcher or a playwright claims to speak for a community from which they do not originate. Several of the plays and practitioners examined in this chapter are from the more mainstream and subsidised theatre sector of British theatre. The reason for this shift of emphasis from small-scale productions to larger ones, is because several playwrights and directors working on those productions have claimed that objectivity and a degree of detachment in regard to the contributors and the subject matter of the play create benefits for the project. This is also a view held by many applied theatre practitioners, but one which I interrogate and also challenge, particularly in verbatim theatre work where contributors come from marginalised communities.

The one small-scale production I refer to in this chapter is a piece called *Bare Mountains*, created by Erica Nagel, who wrote a reflexive account of her experience as the co-creator of that project. As an outsider verbatim playwright, seeing the production process develop, Nagel began to question the degree of agency that she felt contributors could experience in a project initiated by an outsider. Her work is therefore of interest and relevance to the research questions addressed in this chapter but, like Pollock's production, there is no existing script, and I did not see the original piece. Consequently, there are no quotations from the piece and my analysis is based on my interpretation of Nagel's own documentation.

In exploring the terms outsider and insider in relation to an interviewer's positionality, I employ the tools of intersectionality, and since those definitions are clearly binary ones, in practice, accurately defining positionality is a far more nuanced exercise. However, I suggest that using these terms provides a helpful entry point into an investigation of how positionality can impact those who share their stories with researchers and verbatim playwrights. In order to build on the discussion about positionality, Chapter Five presents an analysis of a contributor's experience to the play, *Gateway to Heaven*. In this piece, I, as the playwright, saw myself as an insider in relation to the contributors who were lesbian and gay. I examine how this insider positioning impacted Eileen, a contributor whose moving and powerful interview narrative described how she was dishonourably

discharged as a lesbian from the Navy in the UK in the 1970s. I employ excerpts from a follow-up interview I conducted with her about her experience of participating in the production, both at the time of being interviewed and then when she attended the play and saw 'herself' and her personal stories theatrically portrayed on stage. This chapter not only examines the insider positionality of a playwright in relation to a contributor, but also questions what potential benefits a contributor might gain through their involvement in a verbatim theatre process when their story is performed to, and witnessed by an 'insider' audience (referring to audience members who come from a similar community as the contributor).

Verbatim theatre is ideally suited to telling the stories of those in society who are less powerful and who have not previously had a platform from which to speak about their experiences. Such contributors might come from marginalised and minority communities and they can include people who might be regarded as vulnerable in some way. When employing the narratives of vulnerable contributors in theatre projects, the risk of exploitation is inevitably even higher than in other theatre pieces based on interviews. Some playwrights who secure interviews with members of vulnerable groups might naturally be protective of their contributors and may be wary of producing public documentation which addresses the many ethical challenges that arise within this work. But if this is the case, then there is a risk that those who have been previously silenced in society, by not being included in documentation about their involvement in verbatim theatre work, might be doubly silenced. For this reason, I have chosen to present a reflective analysis of some of my own working methods which included ethical challenges and production choices in my play, *Hearing Voices*, based on interviews with people who are mentally ill.

Another aim of this chapter is to develop the discussion addressed previously, about the importance of a playwright coming from the same, or a different community as the contributors or having some shared lived experiences. Other research questions explored relate to ethical concerns that arise in this work, such as: how and when playwrights can approach vulnerable contributors, how informed consent can be secured, and whether the real names of contributors should be employed in the script.

Chapter Seven continues an examination of the play *Hearing Voices*, but mainly through an analysis of documented feedback from Debbie, one of the contributors. The presentation of some of the content of an on-line review that Debbie wrote after seeing the play, and then excerpts from a follow-up interview conducted with her, four years later, provide a new source of knowledge which contributes towards an examination of the role, value and experience of a contributor. A critical assessment of the follow-up interview content combined with my own reflections leads me to suggest that Debbie's involvement in the production afforded her reflexive as well as reflective opportunities. When contributors are able to see 'themselves' performed on stage, with their own words spoken by actors, it is possible that they can see themselves and their behaviours presented in a way that, arguably, will afford them a greater understanding of their past, present, and even future ways of being. In order to interrogate this theory, I turn to the writings and 'Life Histories' of Barbara Myerhoff, whose work examines opportunities for reflexivity in drama when participants' experiences are shared with a group of interested listeners.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, I discuss ethical considerations and production challenges in the creation of theatre from interviews with asylum seekers and refugees. I address Caroline Wake's concerns that contributors to asylum-based plays may be re-injured, or re-traumatised in the telling of their stories, and I explore Alison Jeffers' observation that a playwright's interviewing process can potentially mirror that of an asylum interview. I also employ content from my interview with Christine Bacon which focusses on her working methods with contributors to plays produced by Ice and Fire, namely *The Asylum Monologues* and *The Asylum Dialogues*. Throughout the chapter, I reference my own production, *Rights of Passage*, based on interviews with lesbian and gay asylum seekers, and analyse feedback from contributors about their involvement. Employing narrative research in the form of post-production interviews with contributors, I identify beneficial opportunities that may have been afforded to them from their involvement. My investigation of this subject matter extends to an analysis of whether or not the inherent risks in verbatim theatre were mitigated to any extent when the lesbian and gay asylum seekers who provided stories for *Rights of Passage* were interviewed by a playwright who shared their sexual orientation and when their experiences were dramatically presented to audiences that comprised mainly of LGBT people.

Verbatim theatre processes which highlight matters of social and political concern continue to be employed in countries around the world at a rate which shows no sign of abating. Theatre makers involved in this work face ethical and practical challenges when creating plays from interviews, since the scripts produced are not entirely fictional but are based on the stories and experiences of 'real' people. Playwrights and audiences alike understand that performed personal accounts can produce deeply moving and powerful theatrical experiences. But the exceptional encounter that occurs between the actors and the audience in this form of work can only be achieved because of the generosity of contributors who share their stories with theatre makers. It is now timely to pay full attention to their journey, role, and value within these theatrical processes.

## Chapter One. Literature survey

This chapter provides an outline of scholarship pertaining to verbatim theatre work, with a focus on those who provide their stories for theatre projects, identifying the ways in which these publications contribute to this research and addressing gaps in scholarship. The proliferation of varying forms and processes of verbatim theatre and audiences' appetite to witness real-life stories portrayed on stage has been reflected by a corresponding increase in theatre scholarship, particularly over the last two decades. As mentioned in the Introduction, in the UK much of this has focussed on the working practices of playwrights such as David Hare, Robin Soans, Alecky Blythe, the playwright/journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, and on the productions of directors Max Stafford-Clark (from Out of Joint Theatre Company), and Nicolas Kent, who produced a series of Tribunal plays (edited verbatim accounts of public inquiries) at the former Tricycle Theatre, London. Much of the written documentation relating to the working practices of these playwrights and directors is in the form of transcribed interviews, the most candid and informative of which can be found in *Verbatim: Verbatim. Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (2008), edited by Will Hammond and Dan Steward.

Among those interviewed in that publication, Soans appears to have given considerable thought to the ethical issues that verbatim theatre processes raise, addressing the risks of manipulation by playwrights in this form of work (Hammond and Steward, 2008: 35). Whilst conducting interviews for one of his plays, he describes how he was once cautioned by the sub-warden of a bail hostel in Leeds to 'never forget that it's someone's life' (36) and Soans states: 'I have been aware ever since of the potential for titillating an audience at someone's expense' (36), which speaks directly to the potential risks facing contributors during verbatim theatre processes. Soans asks, 'is there ever a tension between being truthful to the interviewees and creating something that I know is going to work theatrically?' (41) and then responds by saying: 'the answer is yes – but not a lot' (41). Although he acknowledges that respect and gratitude must always be afforded to those who provide the stories for use in his scripts, other than demonstrating an awareness of inherent ethical concerns, Soans does not provide suggestions on how these may be addressed during the scripting and production process. This thesis will explore such

possibilities through an analysis of selected case studies and an examination of reflective scholarship by practitioners.

David Hare is another playwright interviewed by Hammond and Steward. When replying to questions about his working practice and his views on the theatrical representations of a contributor, Hare states: 'people like talking to theatre people, and they trust them' (70), explaining that, 'we don't have the bad record journalism has for misrepresenting people' (71). He comments: 'they like their stories to be told' (70). Whilst sharing the stories of those without a public platform is often a stated intention of verbatim theatre productions, these remarks require analysis because of the power imbalances that exist between a playwright and the contributor, a factor which Hare does not acknowledge in this interview. When Hare is questioned about the possibilities of contributors being misrepresented, he replies that 'I've heard very few examples where people have gone to plays and felt misrepresented' (71). This may well reflect Hare's experience but, arguably, only pro-active research undertaken with contributors can provide theatre makers with concrete feedback on how verbatim playwrights' work affects those who share their stories and see them dramatically portrayed.

In his essay 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and its Continued Powers of Endurance' (2011), Paget criticises Hare for using the term 'hunter-gatherers' to describe the actors who conducted the interviews for his play *The Permanent Way*, calling it a 'self-consciously aggressive metaphor' (2011: 230). Paget argues that by employing this term, Hare encourages the actors to 'enter the story-space of people interviewed with the purpose of expropriating it – thus by-passing any ethical dilemmas the company might feel about subsequent exploitation of traumatic stories of loss and suffering' (230). Paget states: 'seeking the testimony of a witness in order to dramatise it involves a different level of commitment from all parts of the theatrical communication circuit to that required in a freely-imagined work' (236). These comments highlight some of the artistic, practical and ethical differences between plays created from the writer's imagination and those created from interviews with living people whose personal experiences are later portrayed dramatically and viewed by the contributors, themselves. Paget suggests that the disparity is due, in part, to the fact that 'there is both a legalistic and a spiritual component in Western notions of witness' (236). But beyond acknowledging the need for greater vigilance

in working processes and highlighting the fact that theatre practitioners have 'certain pleasures and certain responsibilities toward the real people whose thoughts and feelings have been sought for the show's material' (1987: 329), Paget does not offer verbatim playwrights any detailed suggestions on how to improve ethical practice within this work. My research will explore ways in which theatre makers navigate ethical concerns that arise in verbatim theatre processes.

Paget is not alone in expressing doubts about Hare's methods of production of plays which employ stories from living people. In his article 'Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?' (2006), Bottoms contests that 'like the politicians he satirises, Hare insists that he is shedding light on hidden truths, but then fabricates his own evidence' (2006: 61). This comment is made in reference to Hare's play, *Stuff Happens* (staged at the National Theatre in 2004 and written in response to the Iraq war), which includes verbatim content alongside some entirely fictional scenes. Bottoms argues that 'such performances need to foreground their own processes of representation in order to acknowledge the problem and encourage audiences to adopt an actively critical perspective on the events depicted' (61). Bottom's concerns address the extent to which a playwright's dramatic license can impact an audience's understanding of how the piece has been sourced, but this discussion does not extend to an exploration of how a contributor's personal interview content can be ethically conveyed in a production.

In *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (2013), Tom Cantrell focusses on the lack of attention in scholarship on the role of an actor in documentary theatre projects. He points out that Hammond and Steward state, in the preface to their publication, that they will 'discuss frankly the unique opportunities and ethical demands that arise when portraying real people on stage' (2008: 4). Cantrell is disappointed that the collection 'omitted actors entirely' (2013: 4) and that the authors only interviewed writers and directors. But, to date, there is even less available scholarship on the role of contributors, who play such a vital role in the work. Cantrell does, however, include a handful of examples of theatre practitioners (writers, directors, and cast members), who have addressed the involvement of contributors to verbatim and documentary plays. He discusses *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (first staged at the Royal Court in 2005; a piece based on the diaries and emails of a young activist who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in the Gaza Strip) and references an interaction between

Megan Dodds, the actress who played the part of Rachel, and the parents of the real Rachel Corrie, when they came to see the show. Cantrell describes how Dodds 'felt responsible when she met them' (2013: 84) and he explains how Katharine Viner (one of the editors of the play) took an interest in the kind of impact the show might have upon Rachel's parents. Cantrell states that Viner's memory of Craig (Rachel's father) on the first night was that 'he had this look of shock and recollection, and at the end they [the parents] were both in floods of tears' (85). Such observations reveal how members of a theatre company can feel a sense of responsibility towards the 'real' people involved in their productions. But although Rachel Corrie's correspondence was employed in the script, Rachel herself was, of course, no longer alive; so, from Cantrell's documentation, we can only gain a glimpse into her parents' reactions on seeing the play. Furthermore, we might assume that the concern for Rachel's parents' feelings shown by the actress and the playwright demonstrate empathic personal responses, rather than any intentional methodology employed by company members to monitor or evaluate the impact of the show upon the relatives of contributors.

In notable contrast to the plays discussed in *Verbatim: Verbatim: Techniques in Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, Paul Brown's edited publication *Verbatim. Staging Memory and Community* (2010), offers an overview of Australian verbatim productions in which the principal focus is on the social context of the piece and community involvement generated by the production. Brown and his co-authors (who include Caroline Wake and Meg Mumford), address subjects such as ethics, ownership, and authorship – all of which are critical concerns in the creation of such plays. Brown raises what he refers to as the 'contentious issue' (2010: 111) of the 'extent to which the people whose story is being told should be involved in the editing process and other elements of the play-making' (111), suggesting that 'the answer lies in establishing agreed and tailor-made processes, rather than any one solution' (111). He also discusses possibilities of playing back 'the draft script to the people whose stories are being told, through preliminary readings and "closed" performances' (111). The discussions in Brown's book relating to authorship, release forms, and feedback from contributors and other community members in post-show discussions are invaluable to ongoing discussions about the role of contributors in verbatim theatre

processes: providing ethical and practical suggestions of ways in which theatre makers can not only involve contributors in productions, but also protect their best interests.

Antoinette Moses, in her 2009 doctoral thesis 'Constructing the Real: An Examination of Authorship and Ownership in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre', also recognises the important contribution that Brown has made to the field, both in his edited publication and in his own theatre work. She claims that: 'Brown, while working on *Aftershocks*, initiated a code of practice which involves the community at every stage of the theatrical process, and that became a basis for other Australian community arts organisations' (2009: 268). Moses notes that 'this methodology is not, however, universal' (268) and, in a critical reflection upon the scripting processes of her own play, *Trash and Cuts*, as well as other plays created from interviews, she outlines some proposals for ethical guidelines, mainly relating to informed consent and copyright, which verbatim theatre makers might wish to follow.

Although much of the emphasis in Moses' work is on the ethical framework of verbatim theatre processes, she also discusses the tension that can occur between a contributor sharing their story with a playwright and then, at a later point, seeing themselves portrayed on stage. This matter has rarely been discussed within theatre scholarship and Moses' research is a valuable addition. She observes a disjoint between the original contributor to the play and the 'character' they become, as performed by an actor on stage, stating that:

the two are never the same, even, I would suggest, when the original person plays him/herself, since the crafted script forms a layer of representation. The response of the audience may appear to be to the person whose testimony is being spoken, but it is always a response to a character on a stage. (237)

Moses argues that 'verbatim theatre, however much it may strive for authenticity, is always the manifestation of a performance' (238). In other words, however accurately the play has been scripted from the words of contributors, playwrights (and at a later stage, actors and directors) have final control over how contributors are theatrically represented.

Moses examines the working process of Blythe in the play *Cruising* (first performed at the Bush Theatre, London, in June 2006); a piece about pensioners going in search of love. When contributors to that production were shown a draft script, Blythe commented

that they were happy with ‘how they were portrayed’ (ctd. in Moses, 2009: 272). But Moses argues that it might well be the case that ‘the pensioners, whose search for partners forms the subject of this play, were too polite to complain about the manner in which their lives and words were exploited, or that they did indeed want a moment of fame’ (272). This observation identifies a critical flaw in the process of scholars relying solely on playwrights’ responses to questions about the experiences of their contributors. It also points to the need for additional ways in which contributors’ feedback could be secured and disseminated, a subject which will be explored in this thesis. Underpinning Moses’ research is her understanding that, ‘if verbatim theatre acts as a conduit for unheard voices and gives them an audience, integrity in the representation of these voices must be of paramount importance’ (272). Her contribution to discussions about the ethical representation of contributors, and her interrogation of the role the writer plays in this regard, are both relevant to my own research – which further explores these important stages of verbatim theatre processes by analysing reflections provided by contributors to some of my own plays.

Sarah Beck is another scholar and practitioner who has examined the ethical responsibilities of verbatim playwrights in her doctoral thesis, ‘Appropriating Narratives of Conflict in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre: A Practice-as-Research Led Investigation into the Role of the Playwright’, (2016). Beck also points to the lack of scholarship pertaining to contributors and she argues that this oversight is due ‘in part to practitioners being protective of these relationships, often out of respect for the privacy of the individual subjects represented’ (2016: 11). She also suggests it may be because ‘some practitioners are reluctant to examine their control over their representation of verbatim subjects’ (11). In an interview conducted with Soans in 2009, Beck interrogates Soans about his working practice regarding the ethics of interviewing contributors. She discovered that ‘only if interviewees insist on reviewing the material does Soans extend what he calls “red pencil right”’ – the subject’s “right to review” allowing interviewees to make changes to the material’ (71). Such detailed information provides insight into the working process of a well-known verbatim theatre playwright and goes some way to addressing Beck’s concern that ‘little discussion has been devoted to what structures and considerations take place between playwrights and the individuals they are interviewing for a verbatim play’ (215).

Beck's thesis is written in the form of Practice as Research (PaR) and she critically reflects upon her own projects, *This Much is True* (a verbatim play about the fatal shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell tube station by the Metropolitan Police, first produced at Theatre 503, London, in 2009) and *Yardbird* (presented as a rehearsed reading at the George Wood Theatre, Goldsmiths College, in 2013). Employing these productions as case studies, she scrutinises her own ethical and practical choices when creating plays from interviews. In common with my own research, Beck observes that oral history methodology has historically shared some common ground with verbatim theatre processes. She states: 'oral historians use spoken testimonies in the hope that "alternative narratives" might reshape collective memory or perhaps disrupt grand historical narratives' (66). In this thesis, I outline connections between oral history and verbatim theatre processes, but – crucially – one of the main areas of my research is on the interviewing stage of both practices, wherein power dynamics can affect the content of the contributors' narrative and impact their level of trust in the project and the playwright.

Recognising that verbatim theatre productions are often created in response to matters of critical social or political concern, Beck's research investigates the role of a playwright who integrates testimonies of war into the script. Areas of our research overlap, in that she, too, examines the employment of interview material provided by vulnerable and traumatised contributors; but the main difference between the focus of our studies is my attention to the contributors' experience, rather than that of the playwright. Furthermore, my thesis extends to a discussion of plays which include interview content from other marginalised and vulnerable contributors, such as LGBTQ people, asylum seekers and refugees, and people suffering from mental health problems.

An article written by Sarah Peters is highly relevant to research on the experience of contributors in verbatim theatre processes, and possibly the first of its kind to focus solely on the involvement of those who provided stories for the creation of a play. In 'The Impact of Participating in a Verbatim Theatre Process' (2017), she outlines how she wrote, and performed in the play *bald heads and blue stars* (2014), based on interviews with fifteen women from across Queensland who have experienced alopecia, a community of which Peters, herself, is a member. The documentation she produced about this play consists of personal reflective journals, interviews with fellow practitioners and anonymous surveys

with contributors at three key junctures across the period of their involvement. Peters concludes that their participation ‘intervened in the storytellers’ self-awareness, enriched their interpersonal communication around the central themes of the performance, and created stronger community connections’ (2017: 32). She called her theory of practice ‘Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis’ and offers it as a model to other practitioners to examine the impact that involvement in verbatim theatre processes has on ‘a community of storytellers’ (33). Although this is only one example from one verbatim theatre practitioner documenting her own working practice and focusing on the role of the contributor, Peters provide a template for other playwrights to gain much-needed information about the experience of those who provide their stories for dramatisation. In my own research, I explore the involvement of several contributors to my own productions and demonstrate how follow-up (or longitudinal interviews) can serve to inform and enhance theatre makers’ practices in regard to the experience of contributors.

One of the most significant contributions to scholarship on documentary and verbatim theatre is *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2009), edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson. This publication contains chapters by practitioners and scholars examining aspects of working dramatically with documentary material. With respect to my own research, the chapter by Alison Jeffers, ‘Looking for Esrafil: Witnessing Refugative Bodies in *I’ve Got Something to Show You*’ is of particular value. Jeffers discusses ethical and theatrical challenges that arose during her work on a verbatim play about an Iranian refugee scheduled for deportation who died by setting fire to himself. In this case, the central subject/character was inevitably absent, which led the production team – which included five refugees from a range of countries and four professional actors – to navigate choices about artistic representation and ethical demands relating to the contributors involved.

Jeffers describes how two women, whose transcribed interviews were employed, saw their words in the script at one point in rehearsal, and ‘refused to believe that the transcriptions were an accurate representation of what they'd said on tape and both re-wrote their verbatim conversation into what they called “better English”’ (2011: 100). According to Jeffers, the final extract of the script was somewhat ‘bland’ (100) and when the women presented it, ‘they refused the invitation to *perform* themselves and were criticised

by some in the audience for their lack of presence' (100). This case study raises questions of tension and negotiation between the script writer and contributors, asking if their aims are ever in conflict. When theatre makers involve their contributors beyond the interviewing stage, the balance between personal agency and dramatic output can become problematic. Jeffers' research provides an important addition to the sparse documentation of working practices addressing the experience of a contributor. However, in the play in which she was involved, some of the contributors acted as themselves on stage, alongside professional actors playing other characters. It was, therefore, not the kind of verbatim production in which contributors watch actors playing 'themselves' which can, arguably, enable reflective understanding.

Finally, in this section, I turn to the work of Amanda Stuart Fisher. In her article, 'That's Who I'd be if I Could Sing: Reflections on a Verbatim Project with Mothers of Sexually Abused Children' (2011), Stuart Fisher addresses the experience of contributors to a professional verbatim production and she challenges the assumption that, within such work, 'appropriation always equates to an eradication of the other by the self' (2011a: 193). Reflecting on her play, *From the Mouths of Mothers* (first performed at The Pleasance, London, in May 2013), she explains that 'one of the objectives of the project was to ensure that the mothers felt comfortable and empowered by the process of creating the play' (198). The piece was produced in association with Mosac (a charity that provides support resources for non-abusing parents and carers of sexually abused children) and performed by members of Big Fish Young People's Theatre Company (a company that uses drama to address issues about social injustice and young people). Contributors to the piece were invited to provide feedback on playreadings they attended and consult with the playwright as she redrafted different versions of the script. Stuart Fisher states that the contributors, whose voices had previously been silenced and their testimonies often doubted, wanted 'the final say in terms of the detail and "facts" of what the play covered' (203).

In defending her own working process against charges of appropriation, Stuart Fisher explains that: 'always at the forefront of the mother's discussions, and possibly, underpinning their reason for participating in this project was a desire – or rather – a *need* to make this story public and to 'get it out there' (199). The mothers interviewed were keen for a wider audience to learn of the injustices they and their children had endured – not

only at the hands of the sexual abusers, but also by social services and the judicial system. Stuart Fisher asks how playwrights can speak for others in ways that are 'empowering and ethical' (195), and her critical reflections upon her own working process during this production contribute to a relatively neglected area of verbatim theatre scholarship – in identifying the benefits afforded to contributors through their involvement. I will expand upon such possibilities in relation to vulnerable contributors in Chapter Seven, which addresses the experience of a contributor to a play about mental health, and in Chapter Eight, with regard to asylum seekers and refugees who provide testimonies for inclusion in scripts. In Stuart Fisher's scholarship on plays created from interviews with members of vulnerable communities, she critically reflects upon her own practice and, of particular relevance to this thesis, she examines the potential benefits for contributors within that work. However, there are still few documented case studies available which focus on the experience of contributors and this area of study is in its infancy.

In summary, whilst some scholarship addresses the experience of contributors to plays created from interviews, there have, to date, been no books devoted to this particular subject. As I have shown, a handful of writers and theatre practitioners (such as Moses, Beck, and Stuart Fisher), have critically reflected upon their own working processes and raised important matters relating to choices made by a playwright which impact the experience of contributors, particularly concerning dramatic representation. The focus of my own research, however, will be entirely on the contributors' experience in verbatim theatre processes. This thesis will explore how the risks of exploitation of contributors from marginalised communities can be mitigated, and beneficial outcomes may result from affording reflective opportunities to contributors seeing 'themselves' portrayed on stage, as well as by their anonymisation, through actors delivering their words. I will also examine how the positioning of the playwright in relation to the contributor can impact disclosure during the interview process and affect the degree of agency a contributor experiences in the project. Furthermore, I will study the close relationship between the disciplines of oral history and verbatim theatre, which has been observed by some scholars and practitioners but has not yet been fully explored in relation to the role and experience of the contributor or narrator.

## Chapter Two. The significance of oral history debates to verbatim theatre processes

### Introduction

This chapter outlines the aims and practice of the discipline of oral history with the purpose of demonstrating how scholars and practitioners of verbatim theatre might gain valuable insights and synergies from the theoretical perspectives explored by oral historians. Initially, an overview of oral history theory and practice will be presented, highlighting some of the similarities as well as differences between that discipline and verbatim theatre work. This will be followed by an exploration of connections between the emergence of oral history and verbatim theatre in the UK in the late 1960s and 1970s. The basic tenets of feminist oral history methodology will then be discussed, in order to examine how ethical oral history theory and practices might interface with verbatim theatre processes, were they to be applied.

Feminist oral history sought to address the power imbalances of the interview situation, in which it was perceived that narrators were vulnerable to exploitation by researchers who used the interview content for their own purposes.<sup>10</sup> Initially claiming that oral history conducted with women was a means to empower an oppressed group by sharing their stories, feminist oral historians then began to critique their own working methods while employing a high degree of reflective analysis. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which a similar level of critical reflection, specifically upon the interview situation but also in the feedback process, could be implemented by verbatim theatre practitioners.

One of the most striking points of connection between oral history and verbatim theatre is the shared attention both disciplines give to seeking verbal testimonies from members of communities who may not otherwise have had their stories sought and dispersed. At the core of many oral history debates lie ethical questions about how

---

<sup>10</sup> When referring to those who are interviewed for oral history projects, I use the term 'narrator' in this chapter but it will also occasionally be employed in sentences which jointly refer to the person who is interviewed in oral history projects and verbatim theatre work.

narrators should be treated by researchers within the interview situation. Several aspects of the interview in oral history practice will therefore be examined in this chapter, including: how oral historians identify their own subjectivities, inherent power dynamics and the positioning of the interviewer in relation to narrators; how permissions are sought; what reciprocity might look like; and ways in which the interviewing of narrators can be viewed as a co-creation, thereby mitigating risks of appropriation or exploitation.

There are notable similarities between the interview process for oral history projects and verbatim theatre productions but the principal difference between the disciplines of oral history and verbatim theatre lies in their goals. The oral historian's goal is to balance the historical record by including the voices of everyday people. The verbatim theatre playwright's goal is to create an artistic piece. In both areas of work, however, the recorded interview is the essential component and foundation, and oral history projects and verbatim theatre productions are totally reliant upon the narrators who take a prominent role. Both practices can involve a 'feeding back' of the material secured in interviews to members of the communities who share their stories. In oral history, this can occur in the form of exhibitions or open-archive days and other events which involve showcasing the interview content. With verbatim theatre, the main aim of the work is to disperse the interview content through dramatic means. When the interview transcript is sent to the narrators in either area of work for approval and feedback, they are afforded a greater sense of involvement and agency in the project. A review process can also inspire narrators to reflect upon, and make sense of parts of their past. This reflective stage and the impact of the interview process on the narrator has been explored to a far greater extent in oral history than in verbatim theatre scholarship. But, unlike oral history in which the narrator can only reflect upon what they said in their interview, narrators who contribute to verbatim theatre projects have the opportunity to witness versions of 'themselves' portrayed on stage, with their own words being spoken by actors, an experience which can potentially produce an even deeper reflective experience.

Oral history projects and verbatim theatre productions often seek the alternative version of a current or historical event – one that was not recorded in more 'official' forms of documentation. Furthermore, verbatim theatre productions can create a version of performed historical documentation. The narratives employed in such plays may not always

be published or available for academic scrutiny and interpretation in the way that archived oral histories are but, when performed and if they are published as scripts, they can contribute to filling gaps in historical and social knowledge in the same way oral history interviews do.

The differences between the two disciplines are as important to note as the similarities. Oral historians, as historians, are careful to place an individual narrative or a current social issue into a larger picture of time, place, or cultural phenomenon since context is everything for historians. Thus, record keeping is an integral part of any oral history project. All stages of the work are documented by oral historians, including identifying their own agenda, the project concept and what they hope to achieve from their research. Oral historians often document the circumstances of the interview and use the interview as a springboard for further research. The aims of verbatim theatre productions can be political, social, educational or ideological, but playwrights are primarily artists. In creating pieces of verbatim theatre, the transcribed interview is all they need, and from that they develop a script. (The exception to this being headphone verbatim, where the recordings are used by the actors during the performance). After the script is finalised and handed over to the actors and the director, there is usually no reason to keep either the recorded interviews or information relating to the contributors.

Since the ultimate aims of oral history projects and verbatim theatres differ – one usually being for research purposes and the other a dramatic production – the interview is approached differently. The questions asked and the way they are asked will differ. In interviews for verbatim plays, the playwright might, for example, encourage a contributor to speak at greater length and in more detail about a subject which the playwright feels may have dramatic potential. Or, when a playwright asks a contributor about a social or political matter, the playwright/interviewer might not conceal their own view on the subject, as an oral historian will generally endeavour to do. Whilst oral historians attempt to maintain a neutral position in their questioning of narrators, the political, social or ideological agenda that theatre makers hold often provides the motivation for the productions they create. In oral history practice, after the interview has been completed and the content transcribed, the interview recording will be preserved intact and archived and editing of the interview transcript or the actual recording takes place only under special circumstances. In the

process of creating a play based on interviews, however, the playwright critically selects which excerpts to employ in a script and the original interview transcripts are rarely seen by anyone other than the playwright.

In this chapter, I will outline some of the main developments in the oral history movement in the UK and in the US. These two countries have been chosen to reflect the majority of the case studies discussed within this thesis, which are plays based on interviews produced in the UK and the US, authored by English and American scholars. However, the history of the development of the oral history movement in both countries cannot be conflated into one narrative. Similarly, the documentary theatre produced in the US by theatre makers such as Moisés Kaufmann and his Tectonic Theater Project (discussed in Chapter Three), and other US plays based on interviews, such as those created by Emily Mann and Anna Deavere Smith arguably emerged from political and theatrical influences specific to that country. In the UK, the rise in theatre created from interview content in the 1960s and 1970s was largely fuelled by theatre practitioners wishing to secure oral narratives from working-class contributors and I will demonstrate how this emphasis on retrieving working-class history was shared by oral historians and verbatim theatre practitioners alike.

Oral history methodology follows a prescriptive process, previously developed but still open to revision, as being a means to operate ethically and to yield the most productive results when gathering data and historical research material in the form of interviews. On their websites, both the Oral History Society in the UK and the American Oral History Association provide information on how to prepare for, and conduct an interview, and on the copyright situation concerning the interview content. Templates of release forms are available and there is also a list of courses offering training in oral history techniques. In addition to such guidelines on oral history websites – not only in the UK and the US, but in several other countries – there are a number of oral history publications detailing interview techniques, power dynamics, ethical issues, and matters relating to consent and copyright. Valerie Raleigh Yow's *Recording Oral History* (2015) and Donald A. Ritchie's *Doing Oral History* (2003) are just two of the most respected 'How To' publications in the field, but other works focus on the demands facing interviewers when interviewing specific

populations, such as Carol McKirdy's *Practicing Oral History with Immigrant Narrators* (2016).

In contrast to the numerous guidelines on ethical best practice that are available to oral historians, playwrights creating scripts from interviews have no similar forms of advice to follow. Although theatre makers may not see this as being, in any way, an oversight or even an impediment to their work which is, essentially, a creative venture, it does mean that there is no documentation that outlines a duty of care for contributors. Consequently, each practitioner will follow her own ethical compass when making decisions which affect those whom she interviews. Janet Gibson explains how there could be some value in the impulse to resist ethics in the theatre, stating:

given the increasing codification of ethics and ethical standards of conduct in business, government and other institutional arenas, I am concerned that these paradigms, emboldened by the weight of law, and possibly without discrete reflection on specific theatre/performance pieces, may encroach on the creative practices of theatre-makers, compromising the autonomy necessary to their political and artistic efficacy. (2011: 2)

The focus of Gibson's concerns is on the playwright's artistic license, which she fears might be curtailed by the introduction of any ethical directives. In oral history work, although researchers are encouraged to identify their own aims in running a project, the understanding is that they will endeavour to ensure that their own personal agenda does not interfere either with the interview situation or with the analysis of the content. But Gibson sees the autonomy of playwrights as a critical factor when selecting excerpts from the interview content for their dramatic potential and relevance to the subject matter of the play, which also reinforce the playwrights' own artistic, political, or ideological vision. However, this thesis proposes that it is now timely to question whether theatre makers working with interview material should also produce their own ethical and practical guidelines, most especially when the plays they create are based on interview material gathered from members of marginalised communities. Throughout this chapter, best practice as demonstrated by oral historians will be discussed and this subject will also be addressed intermittently throughout subsequent chapters when deemed relevant to an examination of how theatre practitioners can enhance their ethical working processes in regard to their contributors.

## **An overview of oral history theory and practice in the US and the UK**

This section briefly outlines some of the main developments in oral history which led to its increased popularity and eventual acceptance within academia as an alternative to more traditionally sourced historical documentation. The first recorded origins of oral history can be traced at least as far back as the fifth century BCE when Thucydides, as Yow explains, 'sought out people to interview and used their information in writing the *History of the Peloponnesian War*' (1994: 3). But it was not until the nineteenth century that oral history came under a degree of critical inspection, when, in some European countries, there was a noticeable increase in cases of social history gathered in the form of interviews. One example of this was *The Morning Chronicle*, published in the UK in 1849 in the newspaper of that name: a survey conducted by Henry Mayhew, conceived in the wake of the great cholera epidemic of 1849 with the aim of demonstrating 'the relationship between industrial wage levels and social conditions' (Thompson, 1978: 35). Paul Thompson, who founded the *Oral History Journal* in 1969 and played a key role in the formation of the British Oral History Society in 1971, suggests that some of the roots of oral history lay in Scandinavia, in the systemic folklore collecting of the nineteenth century and he references the creation of the first archives for direct fieldwork in Finland as early as the 1830s (1978: 56). The early 1890s saw the invention of wax cylinders or discs (hard wax surfaces into which sound grooves were cut), and ethnographers employed these devices to record stories or, in some cases, songs. The steel wire recorder was invented in 1898; this was an analog recorder that used steel tape or wire as the magnetised recording medium. Such recording technologies were to propel the development of oral history and, at a later stage, contribute to verbatim theatre practices, which also depended upon the existence of relatively affordable recording devices.

In the US, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was established, whereby the Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired unemployed writers to chronicle the lives of ordinary citizens, including former black slaves, workers, and homesteaders. Ritchie explains that although the term had been used earlier, 'not until the 1940s did "Oral History" attach itself to interviewing' (2003: 22). He states that in 1942 an article appeared in *The New Yorker* about Joe Gould, a 'Greenwich Village

Bohemian who claimed to be compiling “An Oral History of Our Time” (2010: 3). Somewhat ironically, or perhaps symbolically – since the study was of an oral nature – no manuscript was ever found of Gould's work, but the term became a popular one. In 1948, oral history was established as a formal methodology at Columbia University's Oral History Research Office (OHRO) and the first organised oral history project was initiated by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in New York.

Nevins interviewed people who were deemed to be significant in American life and the project has since been viewed as a ‘top down’ form of oral history, as opposed to the ‘bottom up’ approach whereby narrators were sought from less powerful sectors of society, a practice which was to become more prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century. Ritchie explains that during the middle of that century, in contrast to the oral historians working in the US who were focussing on political, economic, and cultural elites, ‘European oral historians were more rooted in social and cultural history and allied with political movements on the Left [...] intending to include the voices of those previously excluded from national narratives’ (2010: 4). Ritchie states that ‘the radical adult education movement combined with women's history and community history to shape British oral history’ (5) and, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, on both sides of the Atlantic, the ‘bottom up’ approach to oral history became more popular than using recorded interviews to inquire about the lives of the rich and powerful. In 1970, in the US, Studs Terkel, a veteran writer of the WPA Federal Writers’ Project, published a popular work entitled *Hard Times*, in which he assembled more than one hundred and fifty testimonies of life during the Great Depression. The oral historian, Michael Frisch, discussing the reviews of *Hard Times*, observes that ‘the critics described the book in terms of literature, rather than history’ (1990: 7). Frisch’s main interest lies in examining the historicity of the interviews, but this comment demonstrates how interview material can easily lend itself to artistic expression, as well as providing information that adds to existing historical and social documentation.

Until oral history (in the form of recording, transcribing, and archiving interviews), was finally accepted as a legitimate discipline by history departments within mainstream academia in the 1970s, academics had assumed that records of historical events providing the predominant narrative existed only in the form of political legislation, social data, legal documents, and the published memoirs of important social or political figures. The desire to

seek out the stories of ordinary people – especially those from minority communities – rather than narrators who were more socially, politically, and financially influential, issued a challenge to historians, who had previously employed a far more traditional, document-based approach to gathering historical information from hegemonic sectors of society.

Early proponents of oral history had to fight for its recognition, due to objections from historians who worked with previously established methods of historiography and questioned its validity as a reliable academic resource. Alistair Thomson states that the reason behind some of the criticism levelled at oral historians was that ‘Positivist critics, who were mostly traditional documentary historians of a conservative political persuasion, feared the politics of people’s history’ (2010: 79). Criticism mainly revolved around two concerns: firstly, that oral history dealt primarily with historical narratives from marginalised groups who had not left the usual hard copies of documented evidence accepted by historians as primary source material, and secondly, that oral interviews were based on the narrators’ own memory and, therefore, could not be regarded as reliable because of their subjectivity. This argument led to an important debate within oral history concerning the acceptability of using memory in historical research. It also gave oral historians the opportunity to look at their own practices with an acutely critical eye and to hone discussions within their discipline to meet the rigorous standards set by those historians who had initially questioned its worth.

From the 1960s onwards, with the re-visiting of previously documented historical interpretation as, if not inaccurate, then at least prone to ideological instrumentalisation by those who had recorded it, the advantages, rather than the flaws, of personal recall began to be expounded by some oral historians. Alessandro Portelli states: ‘oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did’ (Perks and Thomson, 1998: 67). His view is that the subjectivity of oral sources generates greater meaning, not only for historical records, but also for the people narrating them. Portelli’s observations on the impact of material provided in interviews on understanding past events imply that, fundamentally, the methodology of oral history was producing a new form of historiography.

The social historian E.P. Thompson wrote an essay entitled ‘History from Below’, which was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* (1966). This work brought the phrase

to the forefront of historiography during the 1970s, describing the newly-found historical interest in the lives of the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and otherwise under-documented groups of society. E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), concentrates on English artisan and working-class society between 1780 and 1832. In this publication, he famously states: 'I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott [a self-described religious prophetess], from the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson, 1980: 12). This perception of history 'from below' speaks to Paul Thompson's understanding that by hearing the stories of those from the working classes, oral history can provide 'a means for radical transformation of the social meaning of history' (1978: 28). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the increasing technological development of readily available recording devices, Paul Thompson and other oral historians argued that their practice could enable the voices of the working classes to be heard for the first time: not only by historians, but also by working-class people themselves. Significantly, this understanding was also shared by several verbatim theatre practitioners in England during the same period.

### **Connections between the emergence of oral history and verbatim theatre in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s**

The newly-found interest in working-class history and culture was apparent in the 1957 series of 'Radio Ballads' created by Charles Parker for the BBC. These were produced in collaboration with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger and, rather than being performed by actors, they featured the actual voices of fishermen, railwaymen, and construction workers. The narratives were interspersed with songs composed and arranged by MacColl and Seeger. During the 1960s, discussions were held amongst oral historians about ways in which working-class histories might be retrieved and Radio Ballads offered one form whereby the general public was able to listen to a range of voices seldom heard. Another way the stories of working-class people came to be more widely dispersed in the UK at that time was through the development of 'documentary theatre', a form of drama which featured in the repertoire of Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop and became more widely known when Peter Cheeseman, the director of the New Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent, produced a series of plays referred to as the 'Stoke documentaries'.

Cheeseman's work was directly influenced by Parker's Radio Ballads and many of his productions drew attention to local causes. The first of these was *Jolly Potters* (which premiered at the Victoria Theatre in Stoke in 1964), based on the early history of the local potteries. To research this play, Cheeseman dispatched actors into the nearby working-class community to record previously unearthed stories. The actors would then come back into the rehearsal room and, with the director and sometimes with a writer, they created a piece of theatre, thereby casting aside the conventional 'top down' process of theatre production. A correlation can be observed, here, between this theatrical working method and the 'bottom up' philosophy and practice occurring in oral history at the same time in the UK.

During the late 1960s through to the 1980s, the focus of many of the productions created by Cheeseman and by several of his colleagues and contemporaries in the UK was on stories told by working-class contributors. These practitioners included Chris Honer (Artistic Director of the Gateway Theatre, Chester, 1976–1980), Chrys Salt, (writer *Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope*, 1983, created for Age Exchange from the memories of the Cooperative Women's Guild) and the playwright, Rony Robinson. Cheeseman's plays provided inspiration for many other playwrights and theatre companies in the UK at the time and in later years. Amongst others, they influenced John McGrath and his theatre company, 7:84, Banner Theatre, Pam Schweitzer's Age Exchange Reminiscence Theatre, Ivan Cutting's Eastern Angles, and Max Stafford-Clark's companies, Joint Stock and Out of Joint – all of which employed a variety of verbatim processes within their productions.

For these companies and playwrights, there was no one single form of creating plays from interviews, but one of their shared aims was to produce theatre that provided a platform for the voices of previously unheard populations and communities whose stories had not been portrayed dramatically. Many of them presented small-scale touring plays in non-theatrical settings, including community centres, working clubs, day centres and residential homes. The relative simplicity of set, props and lighting for these productions was driven by the theatre practitioners' desire to make their shows accessible to a wider audience than would otherwise have attended theatres and to perform them to members of the same communities as had provided the stories for the script.

Close connections between the aims and working methods of verbatim theatre and oral history during the latter part of the twentieth century were becoming evident through

the work of several theatre practitioners in the UK, including Chrys Salt, who states: 'one of the interesting things about the genre [...] is that you actually bring working-class history to the stage. It's the language of the common man [sic] – something that would never in normal circumstances become material for the theatre' (Paget, 1987: 326). Portelli observes that 'oral history is not where the working-classes speak for themselves' (1998: 71) and he reminds us: 'it is the historian who selects the people who will be interviewed' (72). These comments are as relevant to verbatim theatre practitioners as they are to oral historians, since a similar selection process is undertaken by playwrights when seeking contributors.

Paul Thompson states: 'for the social history of any minority group the limitations of written documentation are such that the use of oral sources introduces an entirely new dimension to the subject' (1978: 88). Oral historians and verbatim theatre practitioners alike have seized opportunities to employ spoken testimony from non-hegemonic communities. The result has been an ever-widening dispersal of stories from marginalised groups created in the forms of archived oral histories and the production of plays based on interviews. Thompson's comments on the limitations of written documentation about minorities presenting opportunities to oral historians apply in equal measure to verbatim theatre practitioners keen to portray stories about lives less documented and people who have been historically silenced or shamed.

### **Feminist Oral History**

In the 1980s, feminist theory, informed by post-modernist and post-colonialist thinking, significantly impacted the practice of oral historians, particularly in regard to ethical concerns about the interview process. This development – although it may well have influenced the work of some individual practitioners – is not so easily discernible in verbatim theatre processes of the same period. The following section will explore the basic tenets of feminist oral history and also discuss how, shortly after they were initially employed, feminist oral historians began to recognise some of their flaws and limitations. I suggest that many of the discussions that arose from feminist oral history theory and practice are of relevance to verbatim theatre scholarship, especially when production processes are carried out with members of marginalised communities. Consequently, I will explore some of the implications of feminist oral history practices were they to be employed at certain stages in the creation of plays based on interviews.

Yow describes the core of feminist ethics as a process whereby researchers can 'reflect on their own code of ethics and humanitarian concerns so that they understand how these impinge on the research' (2005: 160). She explains that: 'as a feminist, during the decision-making process in the research and writing, I have uppermost in my mind the good of the person involved' (161). Self-reflexivity is encouraged in feminist oral history work where identifying the subjectivities of the interviewer is deemed to be a vital step in seeking to understand what impact this information has upon an interview. A further example of recommended best practice is to scrutinise power imbalances within the interview situation since, as feminist scholar, Daphne Patai states: 'when academics do research with women of races, classes, and cultures different from their own, a common experience is that they are perceived as more powerful than the people they are researching' (Gluck and Patai, 1991: 143). Additionally, as Amy Tooth Murphy comments, 'feminist oral history [...] called on researchers to adopt the maxim "no intimacy without reciprocity"' (2020: 37), which Tooth Murphy interprets to mean that 'you must be willing to give of yourself in order to gain interviewees' trust and build rapport' (37). Feminist oral history was work that was regarded as an emancipatory practice and Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki explain that it 'asks more of both interviewer and narrator' (2019: 352), since it 'demands both personal and professional engagement and is interested in documenting marginalised voices as well as the process and politics of doing so' (352). These are the main tenets of feminist oral history which informed the discipline at the time they were introduced in the late 1970s and 1980s, and continue to dominate its practice.

In 1991, a seminal publication appeared, entitled *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. Tooth Murphy notes that its content 'critiqued and complicated the concept of feminist methodology as a panacea for power imbalance, raising concerns that such an approach overlooked complex socio-cultural inequalities' (2020: 36). In this book, Gluck and Patai address feminist understandings of the interview situation and Patai observes that 'even "feminist" research too easily tends to reproduce the very inequalities and hierarchies it seeks to reveal and to transform' (1991: 149). She asks: 'even where empowerment does occur, as indeed it may, is it a justification for the appropriation that occurs along with it?' (147). Although Patai contends that 'in an unethical world, we cannot do truly ethical research' (150), she still

suggests that 'there is much to be gained from the ongoing discussion of appropriate research methods' (150). Bearing this consideration in mind, I now turn to several discussions in oral history relating to the theory and practice of interviewing people from marginalised communities.

### **Power dynamics in the interview situation**

Sue Armitage, describing how post-modernist perspectives impacted oral history practice, states: 'the destruction of the notion of objectivity undermined the confident interview methods used by historians and anthropologists, drawing attention to the difficulties inherent in the relationship between interviewer and narrator' (2010: 174). Oral historians subsequently focussed on power relationships and dynamics between the researchers and the narrators within the interview situation. Certain inequalities which had previously gone unnoticed and unaddressed could now be identified. Yow explains how, as a consequence of this new understanding, 'we seek to become more aware of the political situation in the interpersonal relationship and of the political context within which interviews can be used. We analyse the effects of differences in gender, race, class, status, age, and culture' (1995: 53). Yow recognises that one of the reasons the power in an interview relationship is tipped to favour the interviewer is because 'the researcher takes and moves on, using the information to get a degree or a publication and a better job situation' (1994: 105). She notes that: 'the narrators usually trust us. They do not know how we will use the information. [...] As interviewers and authors we know what we intend to do, but our narrators do not. We have the advantage of this knowledge' (107). Although Yow is speaking about how narrators might view oral historians, who are often academics, such observations echo similar comments made by theatre practitioners such as Hare (Hammond and Steward, 2008: 70). But a willingness on the part of narrators to share personal experiences with either researchers or playwrights based solely on the perceived reputation of their profession is problematic in both oral history projects and verbatim theatre productions, since work in these fields is essentially appropriative.

Addressing feminist oral history methodology, Patai acknowledges that 'exploitation and unethical behaviour are always a possibility when research is conducted with living persons' (1991: 137), but she suggests that 'this danger is increased when the researcher is

interviewing “down”, that is, among groups less powerful (economically, politically, socially) than the researcher herself’ (137). This observation applies in direct measure to verbatim theatre that is created from interviews with members of marginalised communities, although less applicable to interviews with contributors who come from high status professions (such as those in the legal, medical or political professions). Playwrights will always seek to employ ethical propriety in their work, but this is of even greater importance in the creation of plays where the contributors are from minority groups in society.

Researchers and playwrights who employ interview material from narrators from non-hegemonic sectors of society might understand this work to be, in some way empowering for those whose stories they tell. But, again, such a claim can be ethically problematic when those holding power believe that their projects provide emancipatory opportunities for a marginalised group in a community. Interrogating the tenets of feminist oral history theory, Patai asks: ‘when is the purported empowerment or affirmation just another psychological surrogate, a “feel good” measure, a means by which researchers console themselves for the real imbalances in power that they know – despite all the talk of sisterhood – exists?’ (146). Patai’s argument is of equal concern in verbatim theatre when practitioners (again, such as Hare) suggest that their work can ‘give a voice to the voiceless’ (Heddon, 2008: 128). Deidre Heddon states: ‘the typical process of creating verbatim dramas causes me to think that Hare’s formulation might more accurately be phrased as “voicing the voiceless,” since talking out is replaced in this act of ventriloquism by talking for or talking about’ (2009: 116). In verbatim theatre productions that are not written or performed by disempowered members of society but which employ narratives from members of such populations, as in feminist oral history work, there is always the possibility that the contributors, rather than being empowered, are actually being exploited. In such scenarios, it is the theatre makers who have control over how the contributors’ characters and stories are dramatically represented. Gluck and Patai note that, after an oral history interview is conducted and transcribed, and at the point where a researcher begins to interpret the text, ‘what at first may have appeared to be an immediate accessible account of a life or an episode with the speaker as the ultimate authority, becomes a site of interpretive conflict’ (1991: 61). In verbatim theatre processes, when the transcribed interviews are edited and created into a script by the playwright, there is similar potential

for a diminution of any power or agency the contributor held in the interview situation to occur.

It would appear from the available documentation produced by mainstream practitioners about their own working processes that the development of verbatim theatre does not reflect, to any significant extent, discussions about post-modernist understandings of power dynamics within interview situations. Oral history and other disciplines which employ interview material (such as sociology and anthropology) are, of course, research methods, not artistic forms, as verbatim theatre is, but the uneven power dynamics which Yow, Armitage and Patai identify when interviews are conducted with members of marginalised communities, are still inherent in this form of theatre work.

### **Subjectivity and positionality of the interviewer and playwright**

A critical part of feminist oral history practice is for interviewers to operate with self-reflectivity by interrogating their own subjectivities and assessing how they could be perceived by narrators, because this will, as Tooth Murphy explains, 'contribute to the final interview recording as well as to our subsequent analysis' (2020: 35). Since oral history work is used for historical or social research, the subjectivities of an interviewer and the power imbalances within the interview can influence the results. It is now common practice for oral historians to not only identify their subjectivities but also to reflect upon their positioning in relation to those who they interview. They will therefore assess whether they view themselves as an outsider to the members of the community whose stories they seek, or an insider – someone who shares the same experiences or identity as those they interview – or some less binary definition that relates to their positionality.

When embarking on oral history projects, interviewers identify their own agenda for the work, the project concept, and what they hope to achieve from their research. Verbatim theatre practitioners may take similar steps but, since their work is an artistic product rather than a form of research, it is often the case that they will have been drawn to the idea of creating a play based on interviews precisely because it allows them to present a particular viewpoint about the subject matter they address. As Belfield observes, 'many verbatim plays are born out of a sense of moral injustice – a need to right a wrong, set the story straight' (2018: 110). In such cases, identifying the subjectivity of the playwright or

determining the writer's positionality in relation to the contributors might not be regarded as an integral part of what is ultimately an artistic endeavour. But I suggest it is precisely because many verbatim plays *do* focus on matter of social or political injustice, that a reflective analysis of how stories and information for verbatim scripts are secured, who seeks them and for what purpose, is a necessary and beneficial requirement by theatre makers.

### **Feeding back and reciprocity**

In oral history, lengthy discussions have been held on the concept of reciprocity and Yow recommends that one way for the imbalance of power to be mitigated is for interviewers to explore ways in which they can 'give something tangible back to the narrator' (2015: 165). She suggest that narrators be provided with a copy of their recording or transcript and advises that interviewers might 'write a letter summarising the research findings so the narrator can learn, too' (165) and also 'publicly acknowledge the narrator's help unless he or she wishes to remain anonymous' (165). Yow proposes that oral historians 'in the case of marginally literate narrators, call or visit and read the quotation or paragraph pertaining to their testimony' (172). Patai explains that 'the feminist precept of "returning the research" – presumably to those communities who made it possible – is one attempt to deal with the inequality of the typical exchange between researcher and researched' (1991: 146). But she points out that such action raises additional questions, such as: 'how is the research returned? To whom, in what form, and to what avail?' (146).

Playwrights also face decisions about the extent to which they might want contributors to be involved after the interview stage. The available documentation of working processes relating to such choices demonstrates that methods differ widely. Blythe states that she would 'dread the thought of any real-life person coming into the rehearsal room' (Megson, 2018: 228) but 'as a way of thanks, I invite them to come and see the show' (228). However, Christine Bacon, the artistic director of *Ice and Fire*, explains to contributors that, 'we will send you the edited transcript when it's finished, you can change anything you like, and it will be honoured. You can withdraw permission at any stage. Even when it's already running, you can withdraw your permission' (2016). This working practice is one

that affords the contributor a significant degree of agency within the production process, after the interview has been conducted.

The Australian playwright Alana Valentine, spent four years researching her play, *Parramatta Girls*, (2007), based on the testimonies of former inmates of the Parramatta Girls Home, and, during that time, she interviewed thirty-five former residents of the home who had suffered physical abuse, excessive workloads, intrusive examinations and appalling conditions while being institutionalised. There were two public readings of the script as work-in-progress prior to the play's first season with Company B at Belvoir Street. The first reading employed only the spoken testimony of the narrators in a form of direct address out to the audience and, at the second reading, actors presented the stories in Valentine's 'massaged verbatim' form (where the script is based on the interview content rather than it being an exact word for word account). Contributors were invited to each public showing and were asked for their feedback on the developing scripts. Valentine believed that if the women initially saw the piece in a pure verbatim form, their trust in her and her working process would increase and that they would feel, in the final production, that their stories had still been faithfully told, even though not word for word.

The practice of 'feeding back' to members of the community from whom the stories came has been an important part of verbatim theatre work over previous decades, as seen particularly in many small-scale plays created in Australia and the UK. But choices about whether the contributors are invited to attend rehearsed playreadings and are asked for their views on the script at that point, or whether the interview content that the playwright intends to employ in the script is sent back to contributors for review before it is finalised, are left to individual playwrights. In verbatim theatre, not only are there no official guidelines to follow as exist in oral history projects, but neither is there a collective understanding that reciprocity is a fundamental part of the work.

Following Patai's call to for her peers not to abandon their research but to look for just research methods, Jennifer Scanlon argues that 'oral historians must recognise the imbalance of power between researcher and subject and then give something back – something more direct and measurable than "scholarship" – to the people they interview'. (1993: 640). In her article, 'Challenging the Imbalances of Power in Feminist Oral History: Developing a Take-and-Give Methodology' (1993), Scanlon describes how she conducted

oral histories with Central American women refugees travelling alone or with children in Plattsburgh, New York State. She states:

I have, in the most basic terms, attempted to pay, in ways that at times include monetary compensation, for the interviews I have conducted. I should say at the outset that the payments most often have not been made to the individuals being interviewed but rather to the larger group of refugees living in my community. (1993: 643)

Scanlon describes the voluntary work she does one morning a week at the Crisis Center in Plattsburgh, which provides services for refugees, where she employs her skills as a Spanish speaker to translate for the refugees and she helps: 'with arrangements for food and housing, and, most importantly, assist[s] them with their paperwork' (643).

If reciprocity is seen as a way in which narrators can be thanked or in some way compensated for their stories which provide beneficial outcomes for oral historians in the form of research outputs or greater professional recognition, theatre practitioners might wish to speculate on what forms of reciprocity could occur were a similar concept to be employed in verbatim theatre processes. Like oral historians, playwrights and other theatre makers also benefit from their work. When the budget is sufficient, theatre company members are paid at professional rates and the playwright, like the researcher, can enhance her reputation within the theatre world. Scanlon is correct in stating that direct monetary compensation for contributors might be ethically problematic, if not practically complicated (except perhaps where narrators' travel expenses could always be offered), but in what other ways might theatre makers be able to 'pay back' contributors for 'mining' their stories? I suggest that Scanlon's personal example of demonstrating reciprocity is one that could easily be implemented by theatre makers as a way of showing their gratitude to contributors, whereby they could work in some way with or for a group or organisation with members of the population whose issues the show addresses; such as asylum seekers, victims of sexual abuse, or homeless people.

But in existing verbatim theatre processes, or at least those that have been documented in scholarship, it appears that this is not a practice that is generally employed. It may be the case that theatre makers view the fact that they are using contributors' stories to shed light on matters they deem to be of political or social importance as a sufficient

form of reciprocity. But since the power imbalances inherent in oral history projects are also present in the creation of plays based on interviews, especially pieces based on the stories of members of marginalised communities, perhaps it is now timely for theatre practitioners to not only identify the power dynamics in their work, but also to seek ways in which they too can compensate their contributors for the 'gift' of their stories, without which there would be no final production.

### **Seeking contributors' consent and the interview as a co-construction**

This section examines how consent from narrators is obtained in oral history work and endeavours to determine how practice in that discipline can inform and enhance verbatim theatre processes. The American Oral History Association (AOHS), presents clear guidelines for gaining consent from narrators. Since 1968, they have published a series of statements outlining a set of principles and obligations for oral history practice. In their statement, entitled 'Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History', the guidelines include the directive that:

oral historians inform narrators about the nature and purpose of oral history interviewing in general and of their interview specifically. Oral historians insure that narrators voluntarily give their consent to be interviewed and understand that they can withdraw from the interview or refuse to answer a question at any time. (Oral History Association, 2009)

Yow is one of several highly respected oral history scholars who outlines interview best practice. She suggests that the interviewer visits narrators before the day of the interview to meet them to explain the project and she states that, at the beginning of the interview, narrators should be informed of their rights, 'such as withdrawal from participation and refusal to answer every question or discuss a topic' (1994: 110). She also proposes that the release form should be handed to the narrator at the end of the interview and explained to them in full, with the narrator given time to read it and ask the interviewer any questions.

Within oral history, the term 'informed consent', rather than just 'consent' or 'permission', is employed and the difference between these terms is important, since 'informed consent' signifies that it is the duty of the interviewer to obtain not only the narrator's consent for use of their interview content but also to ensure that the narrator comprehends the scope of the project. Informed consent is a legally non-binding term that

refers to an agreement among parties about what will happen and why and it can take place either verbally or in writing. It often takes the form of a conversation between interviewer and narrator at the beginning of the interview process, although it can also be outlined in written form: a letter, an email, or a brochure describing the project. The Oral History Association defines informed consent as ‘an agreement that documents, verbally or in writing, that the narrator has been given all the information necessary to come to a decision about whether to participate in the oral history project’, but most oral historians seek written permissions from their narrators.<sup>11</sup>

If ‘informed’ consent was sought from contributors to verbatim plays, this process would not simply involve producing a consent form and asking the contributor to sign it before or after the interview, but also explaining to them, either before they meet (by phone or email) or during the interview situation, the intended form of the final theatre production and the ways in which the contributors’ words may be employed in a final script, performed by actors. A clause could be added to the consent form stating that, for future versions of the play (for example if it were to be adapted for radio or television or uploaded on line in some form), additional consent will be requested at that stage. After demonstrating their comprehension of the way in which their recorded words will be used for the purpose of creating a play (informed consent), contributors could then be asked to sign a form (providing legal consent addressing copyright issues), consenting to the use of their interview content in a playscript which will be performed publicly

Antoinette Moses, in her examination of ethical concerns within verbatim theatre processes, observes that ‘the use of release forms is becoming increasingly widespread’ (2009: 270). From the handful of available documented examples describing verbatim theatre working processes (including those of Beck, 2016; Moses, 2009; Peters, 2017; and Maedza, 2017), as well as in my own working process, it appears that many of the consent guidelines, as proposed by the Oral History Association, are often employed in various forms by verbatim theatre practitioners. But some playwrights seem reluctant to ask all of their contributors to sign permission forms at the point of being interviewed. Alecky Blythe,

---

<sup>11</sup> “Informed Consent,” Oral History Association, accessed March 4, 2020, <https://www.oralhistory.org/informed-consent>.

states that for her play, *London Road* (which she co-authored with Adam Cork, and which premiered at the National Theatre in April 2011), before she found her central characters and at the stage when she says she was ‘sniffing around chatting to various people’ (in Megson, 2018: 227), looking for potential contributors, she would ‘get verbal permissions and explain, right at the top of the interview, that [she’s] recording’ (227). At the end of the interview, she would then ‘reiterate and record a verbal permission’ (227) but with characters that she later sees as ‘ongoing’ (227), she will then ask them for formal permission.

Blythe is exceptional in two regards: firstly, she is one of a few mainstream verbatim playwrights who has spoken candidly and at length about her working practices and secondly, the commercial success of her work and the fact that her co-production of *London Road* was made into a film on general release has, arguably, placed her and her work under greater ethical scrutiny than some other playwrights creating scripts from interviews. Blythe describes the moment a playwright asks a contributor for their written consent as: ‘there’s a scary two-page document which looks like you’re signing your life away’ (Megson, 2018: 227), a comment which could indicate that more detailed conversations about securing informed consent (rather than only legally-required written consent) do not always occur. In contrast, Christine Bacon explains that, with contributors to plays at Ice and Fire, ‘we encourage them to come and see something before we interview them, so they get an idea of what we do’ (Bacon, 2016). This working method is one that reflects the recommended oral history practice of securing informed consent and provides an example of best practice to other theatre practitioners.

Oral historians understand the seeking of informed consent not only as an action worthy of significant discussion but also as one that is an integral part of the process of interviewing narrators. It is not viewed simply as a legal technicality to be ironed out before interview content can be used for the researcher’s purpose, it also contributes towards a sense of co-creation between narrators and project leaders. Michael Frisch popularised the term ‘shared authority’ in his 1990 publication, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. In regard to interviews for oral history, shared authority calls for ‘an acceptance of both the experiential authority that narrators bring to the interviews and scholarly authority that researchers offer to the exchange’ (Sheftel and

Zembrycki, 2019: 350). Frisch understands the interview as a co-construction between the interviewer and the narrator and his interest lies in determining who the actual author is within an oral history interview, asking: 'is it the historian posing questions and editing the results, or the "subject" whose words are the heart of the consequent texts?' (1990: xx). Building upon Frisch's concept of shared authority, oral historians have engaged in discussions about how they can find ways to focus less on simply eliciting and utilising interview material provided by narrators for their own purposes, and pay more attention to the value of the information being imparted and the experience of those who are interviewed. As Yow explains, the wider investigation into the relationship between researched and researcher, spearheaded by Frisch and other leading oral historians in the 1970s and 1980s, led to the understanding that 'the stance that there is a researcher and there is a subject is replaced by the conviction that two people, each bringing a different kind of knowledge to the interview, share equally in a process of discovery'.<sup>24</sup>

Verbatim theatre is generally not regarded as a form of research but is viewed mainly as an artistic venture and Frisch's focus on the 'scholarly authority' of the interviewer is, therefore, not always relevant to a discussion about the creation of plays based on interviews. But since playwrights are also totally reliant in their work upon contributors sharing their stories then, to mitigate charges of appropriation or exploitation, I suggest that theatre practitioners seek ways to more formally recognise the role and contribution of those whom they interview. Gaining informed consent from contributors, where they are made fully aware of the aims of the production and its intended dramatic style, would be one important step in acknowledging the fact that contributors are, to some extent, co-creators in the process.

However, the use of written consent forms for narrators has been brought into question by the playwright and scholar Pedzisai Maedza who, in his own productions with asylum seekers and migrants in South Africa, has noted what he refers to as the 'scriptocentrism' of this practice (2017:123). He argues that these contributors:

whose material condition and being is largely governed through 'texts and the bureaucracy of literacy', i.e. through passports, Section 22 permits, arrest warrants and deportation orders, may

experience and be disoriented by papers which they may read to be inaccessible and charged with the regulatory powers of the state. (123)<sup>12</sup>

Other examples of cases where an oral informed consent could be sought in verbatim theatre work is when the narrator connects a recent trauma or distress with signing a written document, or when the narrator is unable or unaccustomed to a reading/writing culture and word of mouth is more appropriate, or when the theatre project takes place within a closed community where everyone knows and trusts each other and the content of the piece is never going to reach beyond the current space or participants.

Some verbatim playwrights must comply with guidelines laid down by the institution where they work. For example, when research is carried out in the form of interviews within an academic institution for Practice as Research (PaR), or for a verbatim play that is produced within a college, the playwright's working methods will be informed by the ethical codes and regulations under which that establishment operates. In some cases, when interviews are conducted outside of academic institutions, a playwright may have to adhere to guidelines as provided by organisations or groups, relating to how their members can be approached. This is frequently the situation when contributors come from populations deemed to be vulnerable: for example, older people in residential homes, hospital patients, or members of some support groups, for whom regulations are designed by the ruling bodies of the groups or organisations in which such people are located.

In some productions, and with some contributors, there may be a strong argument that permissions should be sought in verbal rather than written form, and yet, for the sake of transparency and for documentation of ethical practice, as well as for legal reasons, written permissions would seem preferable. There is still undoubtedly a discussion to be held among verbatim theatre practitioners about this extremely important issue, since this work is open to charges of appropriation and exploitation of contributors, but replicating oral history practice, by contributors signing an agreement that they are content for their words to appear in a play and understanding the full implications of that consent, rather than simply making a verbal agreement at the beginning or end of a recorded interview would help to counter any such accusations.

---

<sup>12</sup> A Section 22 permit is an asylum seeker permit which is valid for six months and makes it legal to stay in South Africa while waiting for the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to decide whether it will grant refugee status or not.

## **Does verbatim theatre work need the kind of ethical guidelines that exist in oral history?**

The final section of this chapter builds upon the observation, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, that, in stark contrast to the extensive advice offered on oral history methods through publications, websites and in the form of training provided by oral history organisations internationally, verbatim theatre practitioners have minimal scholarship and no existing guidelines to turn to when seeking ethical advice concerning working methods. One possible reason for this is a plausible underlying assumption that verbatim theatre is more ethical, *per se*, through its injunction to scrupulously employ the exact words of ‘real’ people. Another possibility is that playwrights creating theatre from interviews might not see the need to seek ethical advice from an external source. In *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theatre* (2018), Robin Belfield devotes a handful of pages to the subject of ethics, but admits that he speaks from an entirely personal standpoint about the challenges that can arise in this area, stating: ‘I am not qualified as a legal expert or a moral philosopher, nor am I required to be. However, I do require – in fact, I demand – that my conduct and creative pursuits are led by respect, honesty and integrity’ (2018: 103). By admitting that he is not a legal expert and claiming ‘nor am I required to be’, Belfield appears to imply that he sees no need for prescriptive rules or formal ethical standards to be introduced to verbatim theatre work and he comments that, even his own publication: ‘can never be considered a rulebook, but simply a guide’ (104). Belfield acknowledges that verbatim playwrights have ultimate editing control and influence over the interview material with which they work and the underlying premise informing his views is that the ethical conduct of verbatim theatre practitioners is generally guided and informed by their own opinions and values. If this is the case, then ethical practices in verbatim theatre work will inevitably vary, depending on the playwright and the theatre company, resulting in contributors to different projects receiving different treatment and undergoing different experiences during their involvement.

Discussions, however, have taken place in applied theatre scholarship about theatre practitioners’ ethical responsibility to those with whom they work. Applied theatre is an umbrella term often used in academia to describe theatre work that takes place in non-theatrical settings, such as prisons, health and therapy settings, community arts centres,

museums and art galleries, support service venues, housing and industrial sites. Frequently, applied theatre is constructed as a response to social and political challenges and is seen as a process which can bring about change. In his 2018 article, 'Becoming Ethical Through Relational Interaction: An Examination of a Performance Among Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria', Taiwo Afolabi investigates ethical concerns that applied theatre practitioners navigate during artistic practices in IDP (internally displaced persons) camps in post-conflict zones. He states that 'ethics is a set of moral principles that guide researchers from harming those they research' (2018: 7). Afolabi suggests that they entail 'ideas of confidentiality, research relevance, and impact on the community, and issues that border informed/implicit consent, documentation, image generation and funding protocols' (7). Afolabi is discussing drama projects conducted with groups of people in camps, but his thoughts and theories on ethical practice closely resemble those of oral historians. It is of interest therefore to note that such matters not yet been addressed to a similar extent in scholarship pertaining to either small-scale verbatim theatre or to more mainstream verbatim theatre work.

In applied theatre scholarship, Bill McDonnell's article, 'The Politics of Historiography – Towards an Ethics of Representation' (2005), examines historical representation in dramatic form within Theatre for Development (TfD), Theatre in Education (T.I.E), and Community Theatre. Although the primary focus of McDonnell's work is on applied theatre, his observations are also relevant to verbatim theatre processes where professional actors are employed to portray contributors on stage, since his concern is that 'those who are written about rarely, if ever, have power over how they are represented in theatre history, sometimes with critical consequences for the "oppressed"' (2005: 129). He proposes that those involved in the creation of such theatre projects should employ 'thick description', a concept expounded by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), which McDonnell defines as: 'the laying bare of power relations, a transparency about the necessities, personal and political, which are being met in these encounters' (2005: 134). McDonnell argues that: 'such a politics of representation might ensure that those who are the subjects of these histories do not remain as silent extras in a tale told for others; but become collaborators in a respectful dialogue' (137). But again, we see that this call for theatre practitioners to implement 'thick description' around their working practice has, to

date, occurred more frequently within applied theatre work and scholarship than in verbatim theatre where playwrights create a script from interviews with contributors, and actors are employed to perform it.

But the fundamental premise of ‘thick description’ is one that is shared by early feminist oral historians who strove towards operating with a high level of self-reflexivity in their work and who were concerned with the question of how to extend the maxim of ‘Do No Harm’ to narrators. They actively engaged with a broader discussion about the ethical implications of sourcing research material in the form of interviews from members of an oppressed group in society – namely women. The need for self-reflexivity on the part of those working with members of marginalised populations, as expounded by Alafobi, McDonnell and oral historians alike, is one that is also shared by verbatim playwrights, such as Salverson, Beck, Jeffers, Young, Maedza, and Stuart Fisher; the latter contending that ‘any practice that is constitutively appropriative must engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection and questioning of assumptions’ (2011a: 207). Undoubtedly this view is one that is held by others practitioners who do not document their working processes but, nevertheless, it is still a possibility that, owing to the of the lack of guidelines on ethical practice in verbatim theatre, not all playwrights operate with a heightened mindfulness of their duty of care towards contributors.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter’s inquiry into the theory and practice of oral history is based on the observation that debates have taken place in that discipline which are of direct relevance to verbatim theatre processes since both areas of work rely upon narrators who share their stories and experiences in interviews. It has been demonstrated that both practices have a related history in their search for working-class narratives and a shared interest in securing testimony from members of marginalised communities. This work inevitably raises questions of an ethical nature which are mainly related to the duty of care shown to those who are interviewed.

Sheftel and Zembrzychi state that ‘oral historians’ approach to ethics have emerged from two major fears: the fear of failing as researchers and the fear of failing our narrators

and doing them harm' (2016: 338). A discussion among verbatim theatre practitioners is long overdue on how a set of ethical guidelines might look in their work and how they might be produced. Questions must be addressed about whether the artistic aims of theatre makers ever override their duty of care to contributors, meaning that the end justifies the means. Discussions must be held on whether heightened ethical vigilance should only apply to small-scale theatre work that focuses on vulnerable and excluded communities or should mainstream commercial playwrights also be held to the same level of ethical accountability. Additionally, theatre makers might look for ways in which Scanlon's concept of reciprocity towards those who have provided interview material for the researcher's personal use could productively occur in verbatim theatre practices.

This thesis therefore suggests that many of the basic principles of oral history practice, as influenced and shaped by feminist thinking, could – with relative ease – be adopted by all theatre makers who create productions from interviews with living people. These would include playwrights identifying their subjectivities in the work, examining power dynamics in the interview situation, seeking forms of reciprocity, paying particular attention to their duty of care towards contributors, securing fully informed and written consent, viewing contributors as co-creators, looking for ways in which their involvement in the production process could continue after the initial interview and drawing up ethical guidelines. Taking these steps would ensure ethical best practice and also practically reflect the theatre practitioners' acknowledgement of, and indebtedness to, the contributors upon whom they are reliant for their scripts.

## Chapter Three. Analysing the experience of contributors in verbatim theatre work through the lens of oral history: Two case studies

### Introduction

Following on from an examination of how discussions in oral history can inform verbatim theatre practices, this chapter will reflect upon two pieces of theatre – *Like a Family* and *The Laramie Project*, produced in the US in 1988 and 2000 respectively. Although notably different in the way they were created, both of these pieces were based on interviews with hundreds of contributors and there are several stages in their production processes which speak to verbatim theatre's connections with oral history theory and practice, as discussed in the previous chapter. *Like A Family* is an oral history performance, created in 1988 by Della Pollock and her students at the University of North Carolina, from interviews with more than three hundred members of a local working-class mill region. It was performed in small venues to six mill communities in the Piedmont area to audience members who consisted of former and current mill workers, and their friends and relatives. *The Laramie Project* was written by Moisés Kaufman and members of his Tectonic Theater Project; a play addressing the murder of a young gay man, Matthew Shepard, in the small town of Laramie, Wyoming, in the US. Two hundred Laramie residents were interviewed by members of Kaufman's company about this incident and the impact that it had upon the community and the production had its world premiere in 2000 at the Denver Center Theatre Company and subsequently toured internationally.

Since the focus of my research is on the contributor to verbatim theatre processes, I will explore the following areas: the ways in which contributors were involved in each production process; the degree of agency afforded to them; and how interview content was selected and presented in the performances. Building on earlier discussions about oral history theory and practice, I will examine how the inherent power imbalances between the theatre makers and those whom they interview and then portray dramatically are addressed in each production. I will also look at ways in which the stories – or the 'gifts' of

those stories – were reciprocated by the theatre company members and seek to determine how the contributors' narratives were fed back to members of the community from which they came. This chapter will also question whether either or both plays afforded the contributors possibilities of reflection and a way to create meaning from their personal, or their community's performed histories. Pollock and Kaufman have also claimed that their work provided dialogic opportunities and I will examine to what extent this was the case with each production.

Both of these pieces of theatre were based on interviews with members of a geographical community. *Like A Family* sought to present stories from a working-class community of mill workers, that could be viewed as a group in society who have been under-documented in historical records. Interviews for *The Laramie Project* were conducted with members of that town from all walks of life, education and class, but the subject matter of the play – the murder of a gay student – addressed the possible homophobic motivation behind the crime. Both plays were initially small-scale productions but *The Laramie Project* ended up being one of the most widely performed plays based on interviews in the world. A large amount of scholarship has been written about this production, interrogating several aspects of its form and content but, to date, there has been no work focusing solely on the contributors' involvement with the play. The performances of *Like a Family* have had scant attention paid to them in the academy but I suggest that there is much for verbatim theatre practitioners to interest them in Pollock's work, particularly her own self-reflexivity on the working methods she employed and her company members' focus on the role of the contributors, whose importance and experience were foregrounded throughout the production process.

### **Case Study: *Like a Family***

*Performing Like a Family* was the official title of a theatre project based on interviews and created by Della Pollock in 1988, which she later referred to as simply *Like a Family*. The inspiration for the production was a series of interviews originally published in a book entitled *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987) by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al,. From these interviews and further interviews conducted by her students-actors, Pollock devised a piece of theatre. *Like a Family* is an oral history performance based

on interviews. It is not a verbatim play – where contributors’ narratives are related by actors word for word – but, rather, an improvised piece of theatre in which the content differed slightly each time the piece was presented and consequently, in this case study, there are no quotations available from the play. Although it cannot be termed pure or exact verbatim theatre, nonetheless, it is a piece based on personal experience and/or interviews, and consequently, close connections can be detected between this work and verbatim theatre processes.

In *Remembering: Oral History Performance* (2005), Pollock describes oral history-based performances as ones that ‘take their impetus from formal or informal oral history interviews when oral history is understood as the re-creation of storied experience for the primary purpose of gaining social-historical perspective’ (2005: 4-5). There is no single understanding of the term oral history performance, but often the primary focus of such work is to create possibilities for new understandings of participants’ lives and the opportunity for discussion of those revelations. Oral history performance encourages those involved to seek personal connections to their own history and then bring these stories to life for a wider audience – who might be encouraged to join in a post-performance discussion.

Pollock’s production of *Like a Family* and the other theatre projects that she and her co-authors discuss in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, all link history and performance through the medium of oral history. Pollock states: ‘oral history performance aims to distribute the wealth of any one or anyone’s story/history; enriching each teller along the way’ (2005: 5). Because of the connections in her work to oral history theory and practice (which intersect with my own research on how oral history can inform verbatim theatre processes), and the focus that Pollock and her student-actors placed on the role of the contributors in *Like a Family*, I arranged to visit Della Pollock in 2014 at her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to interview her about the play. In the following description and analysis of the project, I have included extracts from this interview as well as comments she has made in other scholarship about the production.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> All quotations from Della Pollock that are not sourced to publications are from my interview with her on 4 September 2014, at Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

My purpose in selecting this piece as a case study is to not only bring Pollock's work into greater visibility within contemporary scholarship but also to examine her working processes which reflect questions faced by oral historians in their projects, namely: how power imbalances between the theatre makers and contributors can be addressed; what form the concept of reciprocity can take; and how contributors might be viewed as experts, involved in the production of a new form of co-created knowledge. I suggest that an exploration of these matters will bring insights to a wider discussion of the contributor's role and experience in plays created from interviews.

### ***Like a Family: the book and the tour***

In the 1970s and early 1980s, six interviewers from the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted more than three hundred interviews with working-class Southerners in the Piedmont Industrialisation Project in North Carolina. The period discussed in these interviews ranged from the late nineteenth century, when economic pressures pushed farm families in that region away from the land and towards factory work, through to the General Textile Strike of 1934. The interviews were combined with materials drawn from the trade press and letters written by workers to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. They provide a detailed account of cotton mill life, work and protest and were published in *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987). In her review of this book in the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Bess Beatty states: 'this is written history at its best – history with the people left in. Those written about would recognise their story' (1988).

At the time of the book's publication, Della Pollock (then a young lecturer at Chapel Hill), attended the book signing of *Like A Family* and met the primary author, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, who mentioned that she was eager for material in the book to be dispersed among the community from which it came. Pollock decided to create a piece of theatre from the book's content, convinced that 'performance could resist domination by the academic community and the technocracy of print' (1990: 4). Between 11-21 November 1988, Pollock and eleven of her students-actors at the University of North Carolina toured the production to six mill communities in the Piedmont area, joined on tour by those who had created the book. The venues ranged from church basements and an American Legion

hut, to a Union Lodge, and audience numbers ranged from eleven to two hundred. The audiences consisted of former and current mill workers, their relatives, friends, children and students.

The shows were created, under Pollock's direction, by the student-actors reading the interview transcripts and listening to audio recordings of the original mill workers and conducting additional research and interviews with contemporary mill workers and family members of the original contributors. This process of sending actors out into the community to seek local knowledge and history, and for that to be represented dramatically to audience members from the same population as those who gave their stories, reflects the working methods of Peter Cheeseman in his Stoke documentaries. When I mentioned this similarity to Pollock, she commented that there were some additional elements in her work, in the form of the students providing their own reflective accounts during the shows, of what it was like to listen to a particular story they had been told. She also explained how the student-actors would 'raise their own questions as students to the teachers – the audience members being their teachers, or representative of the teachers they had listened to in the interviews'.

Pollock originally intended to write a script version of *Like A Family* for her student-actors but instead opted for an improvised production. She decided that she wanted the performers to 'experience the multiplicity of the mill firsthand, without the textual foreclosures of a script' (1990: 13), explaining that 'I wanted to involve the group in the creative process from the ground up' (13). The student-actors were able to listen to recordings of the interviews conducted for the book and to talk to members of the community from whom those interviews came but, rather than allow them to narrate verbatim versions of the stories, Pollock encouraged the student-actors to 'stay with the gist, with the heart of what has been conveyed'. During the rehearsal process, she asked them questions such as 'what is the ethical and moral thread that is being used to stitch up all the pieces, and what are the key images that consequently get emphasised and re-emphasised? Is there a refrain, a point of reception?' She comments: 'I wasn't working with the mimetic style, so the actors were not trying to act the characters or be the characters'. Employing this method, Pollock felt that she was representing the narrators in a more

truthful way than if actors had conveyed their words in an 'exact' verbatim style of production.

This form of creating theatre from interviews by the actors returning to the rehearsal room with their impressions of those they have met or narratives they have heard bears a close resemblance not only to Cheeseman's working practice, but also to the rehearsing methods employed by Max Stafford-Clark in his UK theatre companies Joint Stock and Out of Joint where, in some productions, actors were asked to 'hotseat' improvised versions of contributors whom they had interviewed, which would then be scripted by the playwright. The main difference appears to be in Pollock's attention to the way in which she understood that contributors could receive their stories. Her view was that 'the appropriate response to the interviewee's gift of their histories was to receive them as fully as possible' (1990: 12). Rather than simply hearing their own words being 'told' back to them by actors, Pollock's working methods suggest a more bi-directional involvement with the contributors, whereby 'they heard themselves being heard'. She states that the reaction of the members of the community from which the interviews came was 'that student is hearing my story'. So, even though the contributors may, to some extent, have foregone the promise of 'the real' – if one understands that term to be an exact repetition of interview excerpts – Pollock's contention is that they were gaining something more, in their stories having been fully heard and received by the listener.

### **Reciprocity**

Closely allied with the concept of reception, as defined by Pollock, is the notion of reciprocity, one that has been explored in depth by feminist oral historians who sought to find ways whereby there could be more of an equal exchange between interviewer and narrator in order to mitigate the power imbalances inherent in that situation. In creating the performance version of *Like a Family*, Pollock states that her initial aim was 'to reciprocate the book's gift by continuing to make and remake the Piedmont mill world in speech and story' (1990: 4). She describes how, as the project developed, 'we began to see the secondhand teller of oral histories [the student-actor] as a particular kind of audience member, that is, not as the passive consumer of gifts received but as the active participant in a cycle of reciprocity' (1990: 15). From this statement, we learn that Pollock saw the idea

of 'giving back' as closely aligned to one of 'passing on', with the student-actors being agents in the redistribution of the narratives provided by contributors. It is interesting to note that Pollock regards the contributors to *Like a Family* as not only the people interviewed in the book version, or even those interviewed by the student-actors during their research, but also audience members who had any kind of relation to the mill-workers' community and who participated in the post-show discussions. This is not the same understanding of the term contributor that I employ within this thesis; nor, indeed, is it one generally shared by contemporary verbatim theatre makers, but Pollock saw the stories that were told by the student-actors as those, not only of the original interviewees, but also of the audience members.

Another way in which Pollock's working approach intersects with understandings in oral history projects can be seen in how she views the interview process and even the performances as representing only one stage of the work undertaken by the theatre makers. She explains:

in all of the oral history performance work that I've done since *Like A Family*, I see the performance as a preface, a spur to the real performances – which are participants in the audience, who are performing audience members for a portion of the performance, rising up and engaging in new tellings of their own histories, whether they're the actual contributors or descendants or allied by work, labour relations, community issues.

Brooke Blackman Bryan, writing about shared authority, states: 'for Frisch, the oral history project is to recognise that the work begins where some would say it ends – after the interview, through active processes of reflection and interpretation with engaged publics' (2017: 381). This is what occurred in the performances of *Like a Family*. The editors of the book version, and then Pollock, after she read its content, were intent upon finding ways to disperse the material secured by the interviews to people from the community whose stories had been told. One of the purposes behind this was to offer all contributors a means to create a renewed historical understanding, on both a personal and a community level, of their shared history. Pollock comments how:

performance – whether we are talking about the everyday act of telling a story or the staged reiteration of stories – is an especially charged, contingent, reflexive space of encountering the complex web of our respective histories. It may consequently engage

participants in new and renewed understandings of the past. It may introduce alternative voices into public debate. (2005: 1)

Again, these last two stated outcomes are ones that are both deemed to be of critical importance in oral history work and ones which, incidentally, echo some of Cheeseman's intentions for his Stoke documentaries, when he comments:

our obligation is to show people the past of their community in a way which will give them a sense of their past, in the knowledge that they stand not alone in the present but are part of a historical perspective. This will give them a sense of self-consciousness and importance. (Elygren, 1974: 91)

The above statements by Pollock and Cheeseman demonstrate how, as theatre practitioners, both were keen not only to create dramatic productions based on narratives by those living in the local community which were then performed to members of the same population, but also for those pieces of theatre to provide an opportunity for audiences to reflect upon their communities' history, their role in that history, and to open up possibilities of further insights for contributors and audiences alike.

### **Dialogic Possibilities**

In Frisch's 1990 publication on shared authority, he asks 'who, really, is the author of an oral history, whether this be a single interview or an edited book-length narrative?' (1990: xx).

When Pollock first came across the initial interviews, she was relatively new to both the region and the history of North Carolina, but she states:

what I had was the liberty of the newcomer who was learning this history and learned it through dialogue, through this space in which the contributor was not only the expert but was the author in a way that I really haven't seen it written as fully as I have in this book. And I do think it had something to do with co-authors having to be fully in conversation with the narrators because, since they had to be fully in conversation with seven other people in the composition of the book, why not add three hundred more, and open it up?

For Pollock, the authorship of the book version of *Like A Family*, in response to Frisch's question, belongs not only to those who had been initially interviewed, but includes the editors of that book, herself, as a drama practitioner, and her student-actors and then those they interviewed for additional narratives and after that, the audience members who all joined collectively to contribute to the creation of a new form of knowledge. This

understanding is clearly an example of ‘author-ity’ (by which I mean authorship and authority combined) that is shared between a large number of participants.

Pollock claims that the performances provided an opportunity to “‘dialogise” the mill world – it could be a nexus of perspectives, a point of contest and intersecting visions’ (1990: 16). She states: ‘on the one hand, the performance could give repressed voices a much deserved public. On the other hand, it could engage those voices in productive, reciprocally transforming dialogue’ (16). The opportunity for this dialogue to take place between contributors (audience members) who were viewed as experts and the student-actors was created by the performers revealing their non-authoritative and ‘questioning student’ status to the audience, and then, at the end of each show, allowing for a lengthy period in which audience members could respond to what they had just seen. This occurred when they reflected (both in their own minds and in comments to the student-actors, from the aisles) on what it had meant for them and members of their community to leave the farm for the mill. Even at the end of the discussion period, those who attended the show continued to seek out the student-actors to ‘fill in the blanks, to make sure our story of the mill world was complete in their eyes’ (29). Pollock recalls that in five of the six venues, the periods of informal exchange lasted as long as the performance itself.

### **Addressing power imbalances between theatre makers and contributors**

As outlined in the previous chapter, oral historians have worked over several decades to identify and mitigate inherent power imbalances in the researcher/interviewee relationship. In *Like a Family*, Pollock explores ways in which theatre makers might address some of the power relations that can trouble a theatre project based on interviews, and viewing contributors as ‘experts’ was one means by which she sought to do this. In the performances, Pollock placed the audience members – who had personal experience of the subject matter – as the experts, the teachers, those who could instruct the student-actors who would inform the audience that they were eager to learn and develop a deeper understanding of the history of the mill workers. Pollock explains:

there were so many ways we built into the performance demonstrations of not knowing, of not understanding, of not having previously known, of starting to learn because of the privilege of listening, and of constantly provoking questions

that only the people in the audience could answer.

An example that stood out for Pollock of an audience member demonstrating their expertise during one performance was after a student-actor had spoken about what it was like to listen to the account of someone she had come across in one of the interviews, who was responsible for doing a certain kind of knot. The student-actor explained to the audience how she herself, had tried to do the knot, but could never manage to do it correctly. She then went on to tell that person's story. At the end of the performance, at the point when the direct engagement with the audience continued, as it always did, with no gap for applause in between, the student-actors asked the audience members if they had any questions or comments about what they had seen and heard. Pollock describes how one woman got up from her seat and, in complete silence, walked down the aisle:

she pulled out a thread from her pocket and she just showed everybody how to do that knot. Then she walked back up to her seat. And it was just stunning. She was clearly somebody who did not speak a lot, or who was not used to public speaking, but she had that expertise that spoke for itself, so loudly. And then there was this blast of applause, and it lifted her back to her seat. It was just a tiny beauty, but for me, that was ultimately one of the defining moments of what was good about our work.

Through Pollock's placement of the narrators and their fellow community members as the experts, and the student-actors as eager to learn from them, the project was reflective of some of the fundamental tenets of oral history, as later expressed in Frisch's concept of shared authority, whereby oral history is not just a means for narrators to help researchers by relating their experiences, but a joint process of learning and exchange between the two parties. Arguably, there is much in this understanding to inform verbatim theatre processes in which practitioners might look for ways to mitigate perceived power imbalances in the playwright/contributor relationship. It would afford those who provide the content of the plays a greater degree of agency and demonstrate theatre makers' acknowledgement of the co-creation inherent within theatre production processes.

One final similarity between one of the feminist tenets of oral history which sought to democratise history-making within that work and Pollock's performances based on interviews, which also relates to the matter of addressing power imbalances, can be

observed in the way in which Pollock worked as the director on *Like a Family*. She explains: 'I wanted to resist my own temptation towards authoritarian, instrumentalist direction' (1990: 13), and, with this intention, she endeavoured to democratise the theatre creation process. Frisch states that the methods of public historians can 'promote a more democratised and widely shared historical consciousness' (1990: xxii). Recognising, and then endeavouring to mitigate power imbalances can be seen as one step in democratising oral history projects. But, as Linda Shopes warns: 'although oral history provides outstanding opportunities to democratise the practice of history [...] as interviewer and interviewee, scholar and community work together to understand the past, in practice the process requires negotiation, give-and-take, and considerable good will' (2006: 269). Pollock's working methods, during both the research and rehearsal period and the tour of *Like a Family*, provide an example of how Shopes' suggestions can be implemented. In this piece, power imbalances were carefully navigated between the academics and writers who initiated the book, the theatre makers from the university and the working-class contributors who provided their stories and who attended the performances. And in her position as the producer and director of the show, at each stage of the working process, Pollock can be seen to have engaged in an impressive level of self-reflexivity with regard to the democratising aims of the project as well as demonstrating many aspects of the 'give and take' approach that Shopes recommends.

### **Conclusion to *Like a Family* Case Study**

Although not an 'exact' verbatim theatre project, where the words spoken in an interview are repeated word for word by actors on stage, Pollock's working methods on *Like a Family* are, I suggest, of interest to verbatim theatre playwrights, most especially in the way they reflect several of the basic principles of oral history practice. Pollock openly acknowledges her project's indebtedness to oral history, stating that 'at least to some extent, performance *praxis* thus realised a primary aim of oral history: to understand history from the perspective of those who made it' (1990: 32). Other tenets of oral history which were applied in Pollock's small-scale production include identifying and mitigating power imbalances, acknowledging the importance of the reception of narrators' stories, creating forms of reciprocity and endeavouring to attain a level of co-production between the

theatre makers and contributors. Furthermore, she and her student-actors sought ways to democratise their theatre work by viewing the contributors as expert witnesses, adding their testimony and experiences to the wider canon of historical knowledge and understanding, with the interviewees as the recipient of this generously shared expertise. In addition to creating an alternative form of historiography, in Pollock's view, oral history performance provides opportunities for ongoing understandings of history and continuing conversations about its meaning.

Pollock addressed some of the inherent power imbalances that occur both in oral history practice and in the creation of theatre based on interviews by acknowledging the important contribution that the narrators made to the work and extending their involvement throughout the production process and into the performances. Pollock's understanding of the experiential authority of contributors can also be observed in some of Cheeseman's early productions at The Victoria Theatre and the New Vic in Stoke, in which those who had been interviewed for the play were invited to performances and occasionally asked onto the set during the show. Such working methods generate a sense of reciprocity, another tenet of oral history work which (as discussed in the previous chapter) is not always regarded by those currently working in verbatim theatre as something that they feel obliged to secure for their contributors.

Professional theatre work based on interviews, where actors play the parts of living people is, of course, not an oral history project or even, arguably, an 'oral history performance', but Pollock's focus on the role and experience of the contributors and the self-reflexivity she demonstrated throughout all stages of her work on *Like a Family* – research, rehearsal and performances – offer contemporary verbatim theatre practitioners an example of how to work in a manner that reflects respectful consideration and regard for the narrators in the employment of their interview content for a play. A deeper study of Pollock's practice and scholarship could potentially enhance discussions within verbatim theatre about ways in which playwrights can work with their contributors, from the initial point of contact during the interview situation through to the post-show discussion after the final performance.

## Case Study – *The Laramie Project*

### Introduction

The focus of this case study is on the experiences of contributors to *The Laramie Project*, and the analysis will be informed by oral history debates that interconnect with verbatim theatre work. To date, there has been sparse documentation on the personal experiences of contributors to *The Laramie Project* about their involvement in the production, although there would undoubtedly be a great level of interest in any such study from verbatim theatre scholars and practitioners since it is such a well-known and highly-respected piece of work. But, given the limited scholarship on this subject, we are left with the kind of questions posed Jay Baglia and Elissa Foster, who ask about Moisés Kaufman and members of his theatre company: ‘how did they approach their participants? What kind of consent forms did they sign? Did anyone in Laramie disagree with the way that they were being portrayed?’ (2005: 129). Responses to any of questions would be significantly helpful in determining the experience of contributors and the practical methods and ethical understandings that were employed during the play’s creation. Without such information, since there are similarities between this work and oral history community projects where many narrators are interviewed from one locality, I will address certain matters relating to a contributor’s experience in *The Laramie Project* through the lens of oral history discussions.

Feminist oral history developments encouraged practitioners to identify power imbalances between narrator and researcher and this issue will be explored in relation to *The Laramie Project* in an attempt to determine how the power dynamics between the theatre makers and those they interviewed impacted contributors to this play. As discussed previously, another tenet of feminist oral history is the seeking of forms of reciprocity between those who work with stories secured from narrators and those who share their experiences with researchers. Although it sometimes difficult to identify specific benefits for narrators, one shared outcome of oral history projects and verbatim theatre processes is the creation of the possibilities they afford those who are interviewed of meaning making in regard to their own personal lives and to their community. When this occurs, it could be viewed as one way in which researchers and theatre makers are able to ‘give something back’ to those whose interview content they employ. In this way, the work is, arguably, less

appropriative and accusations of exploitation are mitigated, at least to some extent. This matter will be examined in further detail in this chapter, as will the question of the degree of agency the contributors enjoyed in their involvement in *The Laramie Project*. The playwright's claim that the piece achieved a form of dialogue between members of the Laramie community will also be addressed.

### **The production**

Moisés Kaufman co-founded Tectonic Theater Project in 1991, stating that the objectives of each production were to 'examine the subject matter in hand, and [...] to explore theatrical language and form' (2001: vi). *The Laramie Project* addresses the shocking and brutal murder of a gay college student, Matthew Shepard. On 7 October 1998, shortly after midnight, Shepard met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson at the Fireside Bar in Laramie. After posing as gay men and offering Shepard a ride home, McKinney and Henderson robbed him, pistol-whipped him, and bound him with rope, leaving him stretched along a fence on the outskirts of Laramie. Eighteen hours after the beating, a biker found Shepard tied to the fence, unconscious. The biker initially mistook Shepard for a scarecrow. Photos of Shepard revealed that he was an extremely attractive, blond young man and the visual images of Shepard and the horrific nature of his death soon captured the public's imagination. Stephen Mead Johnson, a contributor to the play, who is described in the Characters list as a 'Unitarian Minister, in his fifties' (2001: xii), describes the place where Shepard was killed:

I've been out there four times, I've taken visitors. That place has become a pilgrimage site [...] It's so stark and so empty and you can't help but think of Matthew out there for eighteen hours in nearly freezing temperatures, with that view up there isolated, and, the 'God, my God, why have you forsaken me' comes to mind. (2014: 32)

The manner of Shepard's death resulted in a media frenzy descending upon the town of Laramie. At one point in the play, the media attention it attracted is demonstrated during a scene (or 'moment,' as Kaufman terms each scene<sup>14</sup>), where reporters swoop down upon

---

<sup>14</sup> 'A "moment" does not mean a change of locale or an entrance or exit of actors or characters. It is simply a unit of theatrical time, a unit which is then juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning'. (Kaufman, 2014: xix)

the town like vultures. The stage directions in the script outline how, in the television monitors which appear in the play, '[...] one can see in live feed the reporters speaking as well as other media images. The texts overlap to create a kind of media cacophony' (2001: 46). The immediate interest from news outlets resulted in the event being broadcast around the country and Kaufman explains how; 'in its immediate aftermath, the nation launched into a dialogue that brought to the surface how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights and the difference between tolerance and acceptance' (2001: vi).

The interview excerpts employed in the script demonstrate a wide range of recollections from contributors about the aftermath of Shepard's murder and views on exactly what might have happened between him and his attackers leading up to his death. Suggestions were made about whether it was a homophobic attack, a drug-fuelled incident, a robbery-gone-wrong or a combination of all these factors. In some ways the play presented a piece of dramatic investigative journalism, attempting to identify the exact reasons why the murder took place but Baglia and Foster suggest that 'the resulting play is not about Shepard so much as it is about how a community identifies itself in the wake of the national media coverage of a hate crime' (2005: 129).

### ***The Laramie Project and community oral history projects***

Although there are few oral history projects which explore the circumstances relating to a murder, oral history work, like verbatim theatre, is also perfectly situated to gathering stories from members of a community about an event or period of time that has impacted the narrators to a significant extent and there are many links to be drawn between the two fields in this regard. The oral historian Linda Shopes, explains that 'a community oral history project typically refers to one defined by locale, to a group of interviews with people who live in the same geographically bounded place' (2006: 261). She offers those involved in community oral history work the following guidance:

first, conceptualise a community history project around a historical problem or issue rather than a series of life-history interviews. A community is formed around the intersection of individual lives: What are the points of connection, tension or alienation? What historical problem defines the community; and how can this problem be explored through questions to individual narrators? (268)

Shopes' outline of a community oral history project bears a strong resemblance to the working process of *The Laramie Project* and, in this play, we observe how the points of connection and tension within a community, which she emphasises, are dramatically juxtaposed within the script in a way that is unavailable to an oral historian whose job it is to present each narrator's contribution in the form of an entire transcribed interview. But the points of tension and difference in Kaufman's work have been noted by Caridad Svich, who states: 'his focus on characters from recent and past history always centres on difference and what the relationship is between a community and how they perceive people who are different from them' (2003: 68).

Verbatim theatre productions dramatise material provided in interview form and are not created with the same purposes as oral history projects, namely to respond to historical questions or problems through research that seeks and records multiple personal narratives. But there are several notable similarities between pieces such as *The Laramie Project* and community oral history work, since verbatim theatre often covers social or political issues, particularly as they relate to a local community. In fact, verbatim theatre (and its related forms of documentary theatre, tribunal theatre, and theatre of testimony) with its foundation in personal storytelling, is a perfect medium to touch the hearts of an audience about social injustice, educate them about a matter which they may otherwise not have known about, and potentially galvanise a community toward action. Furthermore, Svich suggests that Kaufman may have been influenced by the work of Joint Stock and 7:84 companies in the UK and, in creating *The Laramie Project*, he subsequently 'brought back to US theatre a commitment to social conscience [...] through investigations into oral history, public records, and marginal texts' (68).

Caroline Wake states that when a play is fed back to a community through public performances, 'the wider community can listen to a story about an issue or an event that has affected them, and pause to reflect on what has happened since then: in this way the play might change the community' (Brown, 2010: 4). It is hard to gauge how and in what way a community might change since a community is, by its nature, made up of many individuals, but Shopes' understanding of some of the potential outcomes of community oral history work is that: 'laypeople do not get to romanticise the past quite so easily. Scholars can learn that local people often have thoughtful if haltingly articulated

understandings of how change happens; lay people can learn how what is local has links to national and international developments' (Perks and Thomson, 2006: 269). This last point is of relevance to the production of *The Laramie Project* which is fairly exceptional as a verbatim production (or 'documentary' play as it is termed in the US), since it became the second most-produced play in the US in the 2000-2001 theatrical season and was later performed internationally in countries including England, Sweden, France, Germany, Mexico, and Hungary.

### **Multivocality**

A critical feature of *The Laramie Project* is that the script was created from interviews conducted with two hundred members of the local community. Although the subject matter differs, there are connections between this play and Kaufman's company's earlier production of *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (which premiered Off Broadway in 1997). That piece draws largely on the original trial transcripts and also includes excerpts of letters, newspapers, plays, novels, poetry, epigrams and biographies written by Wilde and his contemporaries. While researching *Gross Indecency*, Kaufman explains how he discovered that there were 'as many versions of what had occurred as people involved' (1998: x) and states that his interest lay in 'how to create a theatre piece that could encompass all the different stories, and yet have a coherent, dramatic through line' (x). The dramatic multivocality that Kaufman employed in *Gross Indecency* can be seen in *The Laramie Project* for which, as Baglia and Foster describe, members of the theatre company interviewed people 'who did and did not know Shepard, gay and straight, law enforcement officers, bar patrons, university staff and students, and healthcare personnel' (2005: 129).

One of the outcomes of creating a verbatim play from a large number of interviews is that the multivocality sought by the theatre makers will inevitably result in the production of a script in which some voices are foregrounded, and others are excluded. The list of 'The Laramie Project Characters' cited in the script informs the reader that there are seven company members and fifty-five other characters with lines, in the play; which means that from the two hundred people interviewed, a significant number of contributors' testimonies were not included (2014: xv). Unlike oral historians, verbatim playwrights are afforded

complete editorial control in their selection or exclusion of interview excerpts they believe will enhance the quality of the drama or advance the argument they are presenting theatrically. In the case of *The Laramie Project*, only slightly more than a quarter of all the residents interviewed find excerpts of their interviews in the final script. Bearing in mind that much of the overriding arc of the play relates to determining the motives behind Shepard's murder, the fact that the voices of nearly three quarters of those interviewed are not included in the script highlights the agency of the writers and their capacity to shape whatever meaning they wished to create from the interview content they chose to include.

Commenting on the working process for *The Laramie Project* from the perspective of ethnographers, Baglia and Foster observe how: 'in the process of selecting and arranging the words of the characters, the Tectonic Theater Project grants life to some of the citizens of Laramie and silences others' (2005: 140). This is an ethical concern relating to the treatment of contributors in plays based on interviews and one that has been noted by Heddon more generally in her critique of verbatim theatre. She contends that when some contributors are interviewed for verbatim plays, but their narrative is then excluded from the final script, 'these real people are doubly "voiceless", having been initially courted, but then passed over in favour of voices who are given time in the spotlight' (2008: 136). Whilst one aim of a verbatim playwright might be to create meaning from interviews gathered from a variety of people within a community about an event that occurred, or even afford community members the potential to reconstruct their own histories, the final script is ultimately an edited version of the interview content provided and any meaning bestowed upon that content is influenced and shaped by the playwright. When verbatim theatre practitioners choose who to interview for their play and then decide which interview excerpts will be employed in a script, the power dynamics between the playwrights and the contributors are sharply exposed. The person who shares their thoughts or experiences is in the more vulnerable position because they do not know if their interview content will be included and, if it is, which excerpts will be selected. Nor will they know, until they attend the final production, how their words will be framed or in what ways they, as characters, will be dramatically represented.

As discussed previously, in feminist oral history, debates on power imbalances in the interview situation have been ongoing and persistent and the accepted understanding in

that work is, as Yow states, that: 'power in the relationship is not equal but tipped to favour the interviewer' (1994: 105). Because of the similarities in practice, this is also generally the case with verbatim theatre processes. However the script of *The Laramie Project* includes an interesting exchange between a contributor and one of the theatre makers which troubles the assumption that the interview power structure is always one-directional. Marge demonstrates awareness of her own agency as a contributor and also displays a moment of self-censorship when she asks 'well, uh, where are you going with this story?' (2014: 15) and Greg (the company member) responds, 'oh well, we still haven't decided. When we're finished, we are going to try to bring it around to Laramie' (15). Marge then replies, 'okay, then, there are parts I won't tell you' (15). Marge's responses to Greg about Shepard's death and the memory she has of it are thereafter clearly modified in the exchange because of her understanding that, from comments she makes, she might be recognised by people within her own community. This excerpt from the play shows that, to some extent, the interview process can be governed by the narrator, but it is also the case, as Gluck and Patai state in regard to those interviewed in oral history work, that: 'whatever control they exercise during the interview, when they are able to negotiate the terrain, usually ends when the session is completed' (1991: 2).

Marge's comments also serve to remind the reader or audience member of *The Laramie Project* that verbatim theatre productions, even when based on the testimony of 'real' people, do not contain all the facts about an event; or, in this case, even all of the views held by a single contributor when interviewed. Kaufman may claim that his company created a play 'that allowed the people in Laramie to share with one another their innermost thoughts using the platform of the stage' (Svich 2003: 71), but we can see from this excerpt from Marge's interview included in the script that, even though the power dynamics are generally tipped in favour of the researcher or playwright, contributors are still able to hold a degree of personal agency over what they chose to reveal or not to share with the interviewer.

### **Reciprocity**

In addition to seeking ways to mitigate power imbalances in interviews, feminist oral historians looked for means by which they could demonstrate reciprocity towards those

whose stories they employed in their own research. One way in which reciprocity might occur in an oral history project is when narrators are afforded opportunities for self-reflection. For an individual who is interviewed, Yow asks: 'can the effect on the narrator be positive? Certainly the oral history interview gives the narrator an opportunity to make sense of scattered events' (1994:117). And, in a wider context extending to a community, Perks and Thomson state that, in the 1970s, Frisch explained how oral history could be:

a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them. (2006: 3-4).

Again, we may not know the ways in which the contributors to *The Laramie Project* may have personally benefited from telling their stories or seeing them staged, but we can see that Kaufman's stated intentions for the production echo those of oral historians, to the extent that he comments: 'I am interested in history (both recent and past) and how we look at it in a communal setting. How do we learn stories, tell stories and use pre-existing narratives to construct and re-construct our own identities?' (Svich 2003: 70). Such a statement demonstrates how Kaufman, in creating a play from interviews, sought to generate some kind of meaning making from the interview content, in addition to employing it in a play which would educate and entertain an audience.

The search for meaning making from interviews is an important part of the process for oral historians. Alessandro Portelli suggests that oral history 'tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*. This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events' (Perks and Thomson, 1998: 67). Oral history, then, in Portelli's view, has the capacity to create a deeper understanding and interpretation of the past than traditional history has been able to do. He contends that a deeper comprehension of the past also affords an understanding of the present and that the subjectivity of oral sources creates greater meaning not only for historical records, but also for the people who narrate them.

It might be that one other form of reciprocity by the theatre makers towards the people of Laramie is demonstrated by the creation of the stand-alone follow-up play, *The Laramie Project – Ten Years Later*, which builds on the idea that their portrayal of events

afforded an opportunity for the members of the town to reflect upon what had happened to them in a way that they would not otherwise have been able to do. On 12 October 2009, the eleventh anniversary of the death of Shepard, Tectonic Theater Project premiered *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* simultaneously in one hundred and fifty theatres in fifty states in the US and in eight countries. The script, which was published in 2012, consists of interviews conducted by Moisés Kaufman and four other Tectonic Theater Project members who returned to Laramie to interview people about what had happened in the years since Shepard's murder. This is one of the very few examples of a play based on interviews which re-visits its subject matter, some of its previous contributors and the location after a significant period of time has elapsed. It could therefore be regarded, to some extent, as a longitudinal social study presented in dramatic form. In the Author's Note at the beginning of the script, we read that 'with the tenth anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death approaching, Moisés started thinking about legacy, about transformation and about [the] question: What had come out of Matthew's murder?' (2012: 5). Kaufman states: 'we decided to return to Laramie and ask many of our original interviewees how their town had changed' (5). The result is a play that the company hoped would also be performed in repertory theatre, alongside the original.

Not all of the contributors in the follow-up play are those who provided interviews for the first play. There are some new and important interviews: for example, with the perpetrators of the crime themselves, when they are visited in jail. Within the text, contributors demonstrate that, during the intervening years there had been much contemplation, both individually and among the community, on the events that occurred. The re-visiting of the town by the playwrights and the interviews they conducted for this second script demonstrate the possibilities for reflection which oral historians claim can be created by a group or community telling its past. In the script of *The Laramie Project – Ten Years Later*, Beth Loffreda, a Professor at Wyoming University, comments:

what happened here still feels very present to me. My gut reaction is that Laramie is a somewhat better place to be than it was ten years ago, but I don't know how to tell the story of the past ten years without having to think about both what we've done, but also what we haven't done. (2012: 13)

Jeffrey Lockwood, described in that playscript as 'Laramie resident. 50s. Male' (2012: 7), when asked if he had any final words he wanted to share before the theatre company left, said:

I think this could have happened in dozens of hundreds of communities and ten years later we'd be telling the same story. The difficulty that we have on reflecting, on dealing with deep social justice problems, I think it's a warning – it's a warning to other communities that if they aren't extraordinarily intentional in the face of such tragedies, there will be no growth in ten years. There may be pockets of growth or individual growth, but there won't be community growth. (2012: 59)

Possibilities of community growth or regression are difficult concepts to measure; but for individuals, the act of being interviewed allows narrators to express their opinions on an event, compose them, and in the case of those who contributed to *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, reflect once more upon their initial thoughts about a particular event and what has happened in the intervening years.

### **Dialogic Possibilities resulting from *The Laramie Project***

*The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* offers a rare glimpse into ways in which the production impacted at least some of the contributors, but whether or not either of Tectonic Theater Project's two 'Laramie plays' afforded possibilities of change, they undoubtedly provided contributors with the promise that their stories would be both listened to, and then shared with a wider audience. One of Kaufman's stated aims for the initial play is that 'from a formalist perspective, I was also excited about creating a piece with the company as the listeners of the town' (Svich 2003: 70). He also suggests that 'around the United States perhaps [...] we have been able to incite a certain kind of dialogue' (Svich 2003: 71). Rebecca Hilliker (one of the contributors to *The Laramie Project*, and described in the script as 'Head of the theatre department at the University of Wyoming, in her forties; midwestern accent' (2001: xii)), on hearing that interviews were being sought by the theatre company members, comments: 'I thought about it and decided that we've had so much negative closure on this whole thing. And the students really need to talk. When this happened they started talking about it, and then the media descended and all the dialogue stopped' (11). Ryan M. Claycomb explains how, in documentary theatre such as *The Laramie Project*, a dialogue is created 'around violent events where none existed, and the dialogue is being

presented as a remedy for the moment of violence itself' (2003: 110). He states that playwrights such as Kaufman, and also Emily Mann in her play *Greensboro*, who work with interviews gathered from one community where a memorable event has occurred, 'instead of revising the events that happened' are '(re)constructing a dialogue that never existed in the hopes of inciting new dialogue' (110).

Kaufman claims that through the production process, 'the community talked to itself using the medium of theatre' (in Svich, 2003: 71), but I suggest that this assessment is somewhat problematic. Although the play did allow for some form of a community discourse – which as Hilliker points out had previously been shut down – if Kaufman viewed the discussion as the actual production of *The Laramie Project*, then this was a highly mediated process, with the theatre makers setting the agenda and deciding whose voices would be included and which stories would be heard. The form of dialogue that was ultimately achieved might, arguably, be understood as similar to that produced in oral history work. Portelli observes that: 'oral history is a dialogic discourse, created not only by what the interviewees say, but also by what we as historians do – by the historian's presence in the field, and by the historian's presentation of the material (1997: 3). This statement points to the co-creation of knowledge in oral history work and also, arguably, reflects what occurred between members of the Tectonic Theater Project and contributors from the Laramie community whom they interviewed. Furthermore, it may be the case that the dialogue which Kaufman believed he initiated was possibly one that occurred more between members of the community and the whole country, or between the theatre company members and the contributors, rather than among the residents of Laramie, themselves.

## **Conclusion**

*Like a Family* and *The Laramie Project* might initially appear to be an unusual combination of theatre productions to discuss alongside each other but their main communality lies in the number of interviews upon which each piece was based and in the producers' aim to create dramatic forms of multivocality which told the story of a particular subject or event in a community's history. The ways in which Pollock and Kaufman approached their work

differed considerably and one resulting consequence of their varying production methods, was that the role and experience of the contributors in both pieces also varied.

*Like a Family* provides an example of how a playwright creating a piece based on interviews can involve the contributors beyond the interview stage and, during the performances, present them as experts. Pollock's perception of the narrators to her work as being co-creators, rather than people whose stories are simply mined by theatre makers for their own purposes, reflects the notion of shared authority and challenges theatre practitioners who work with interview content to interrogate their own choices concerning the extent of contributors' involvement. The production of *The Laramie Project* demonstrates how oral histories, as related by community members about a significant social and historical event, can be dispersed to audiences in dramatic form, not only in the town of Laramie, but across the US, and then globally. However, the editorial control exerted by the playwrights over the interview content exposes the power imbalances between the theatre makers and the contributors and only a limited amount of excerpts from a selection of contributors are included in the final script. It might appear that any similarities between *The Laramie Project* and community oral history projects which seek to democratise their working methods or address inherent power imbalances in employing interview material for research, might end here. But in regard to forms of the reciprocity oral historians seek, although this is far more clearly identifiable in *Like a Family*, it could be argued that the production of *The Laramie Project*, and the contributors involvement was sufficient to afford them opportunities of reflection on their community, and what had happened there in the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's murder.

Both Pollock and Kaufman make claims that their work helped to dialogise a community. In *Like a Family*, the conversations that occurred were apparent at each performance with the audience members encouraged to join in discussions about their lives and history and move the dialogue forward again, reflecting Frisch's understanding of the co-creation of a new form of knowledge. A dialogic process is harder to detect in *The Laramie Project* in spite of the fact that Kaufman stated this outcome was one of the production's intended aims. But, as explored, perhaps the dialogue that ensued was one that occurred among the wider public on a national and later, an international level about the more universal matters which the play addressed. And again, possibilities of reflectivity

for contributors are easier to identify in *Like a Family*, where audience members joined in discussions about the content of the play both during and after the performances. However, *The Laramie Project – Ten Years Later*, provides a longitudinal study of the town and its residents, informing us, in part, about how contributors felt about the making of the original production; an exercise which speaks to the follow-up interviews that I will employ for analysis later in chapters five, seven and eight of this thesis.

In the examination of two case studies, this chapter has continued to interrogate the question of why the scholarship and practice of oral history matters to verbatim theatre processes, as proposed in Chapter Three. *Like a Family* is described by Pollock as an oral history performance, and the adherence to oral history tenets within her work reflects her indebtedness to that discipline. The analysis of *The Laramie Project* has raised questions about how inherent power imbalances can be addressed in verbatim theatre work which mines the stories of those who are interviewed and creates a play in which production process they have little, if no agency. An examination of these two pieces of theatre, based on hundreds of interviews from one community – one being a small-scale piece where the importance of the contributors' experience was recognised at all stages of the production, and the other, where those who were interviewed were not consulted again after their initial interviews – addresses the critical concern of whether it is possible for verbatim theatre practitioners to carry out an ethical duty of care to their contributors without their artistic control over the final production being, in any way eroded.

## **Chapter Four. The positionality of the writer in verbatim theatre: Critiquing insider and outsider perspectives**

### **Introduction**

In many disciplines where interview material is used as a source of research – including anthropology, sociology, ethnography, oral history and feminist studies – discussions have occurred about the positioning of the interviewer in relation to the narrators. The reasons these debates have taken place are several: to ascertain the impact such positioning might have upon the narrators and their level of disclosure and trust in the project; to identify power dynamics in the interview situation with the purpose of mitigating charges of appropriation or exploitation; and for the researchers to acknowledge their own subjectivities and agenda, in order to employ the level of self-reflexivity that is now accepted practice in these fields. I use the term ‘positioning’ to refer to the researchers’ or the playwrights’ relation to the narrators in respect to whether they come from the same or a different background or community and whether they have had similar experiences as those whom they interview.

Verbatim theatre in which professional actors are employed to play the parts of contributors the playwright has interviewed for the piece, is one of the few areas of work that relies on interview content where the question of positionality has not been robustly addressed by scholars or practitioners. Similarly, in verbatim productions, although some playwrights engage in reflexive analysis of their work, there is no general understanding that the positionality of the theatre maker is a matter that is necessarily viewed as ethically problematic. I suggest that it is now timely for a conversation to be held among practitioners that interrogates the positioning of the playwright in relation to their contributors, since it is an issue that impacts those who are interviewed. It therefore falls under the remit of my research into the role and experience of the contributor, and this chapter (and the following chapter) will examine why positionality matters in theatre work created from interviews and will explore the ways in which verbatim theatre practitioners view their own positionality in relation to their contributors.

I have employed the description above, of 'verbatim theatre in which professional actors are employed to play the parts of contributors', to highlight the distinction between two different fields of theatre in the UK which employ interview material in their productions: those that are created either for small-scale touring companies or more mainstream, commercially viable plays based on interviews, and applied theatre work which, at times, also employs personal narratives gathered from participants but where the intended dramatic output is quite different. In this second field of work, a significant body of scholarship exists addressing the ethical duty of care theatre makers see themselves extending towards the participants and some of this has focussed on the matter of positionality. But in scholarship that focuses on what I term professional verbatim theatre (performed by actors), sparse documentation exists on this subject. One notable exception comes from Maedza who, in writing about theatre of testimony with asylum seekers in South Africa (2017), examines how a playwrights' positioning 'informs how they create a theatrical space that facilitates the telling of the contemporary South African asylum story' (2017: 13). He understands positionality as referring to the playwright's social location or social identity and argues (in line with the thinking of the philosopher and scholar of women's and gender studies, Linda Alcoff: 1991-2), that identifying positionality 'is important in light of the fact that this has a significant impact on the speaker's claims and can serve to authorise or dis-authorise one's speech' (2017: 13).

Discussions on whether a playwright has the moral, or even perhaps the political authority to speak about, or on behalf of, a group of people who come from a similar or different background from themselves and how those choices might be perceived by an audience are matters of ethical concern. But the focus of my own research is less on how playwrights navigate or justify their positionality, and more directed towards an examination of how the voices of contributors can be ethically dispersed when theatre makers come from a different population to those whom they interview. In order to investigate this matter, I will turn to scholarship and practice in other disciplines where discussions about positionality and representation have taken place, namely feminist studies and oral history, as well as to applied theatre and I will speculate on the implications of ethical shifts in verbatim theatre productions were closer attention to be paid to the positioning of the playwright in relation to those who are interviewed.

## **Insider/Outsider positioning and power imbalances**

The imbalance of power between interviewer and narrator was identified in the wake of post-modernist thinking when researchers in several disciplines, most notably feminist studies, began to realise that the power dynamics within an interview can impact not only that situation itself, but also the analysis of the interview content. The feminist oral historian Sue Armitage explains how, in the late 1980s, ‘the twin waves of postmodernism and post-colonial theory engulfed us all [...] and changed the practices of our disciplines’ (2010: 174). In the anthology, *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991) the editors, Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai, argue that practitioners must identify their subjectivities and positionality, as well as their partiality in their work. Armitage explains how previous assumptions around the understanding that interviewers could be objective were flawed and she states: ‘problems in interviewing were described, not in the old “insider” and “outsider” terms but as questions of power authority’ (174).

In the same year as Gluck and Patai’s seminal work, Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour* (1991), in which, as Devon W. Carbado et al. state, Crenshaw ‘describes the subtle ways in which the law has historically defined the contours of sex and race discrimination through prototypical representatives, i.e., white women and African American men, respectively’ (2013: 304). The concept of intersectionality was intended not so much as a command but more as an analytic tool to address a range of issues. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge argue that intersectionality’s core insight can be a useful one: ‘namely, that major axes of social divisions in a given society at a certain time, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together’ (2016: 4). Carbado et al. comment that viewing intersectionality as work-in-progress ‘suggests that we should endeavour, on an ongoing basis, to move intersectionality to unexplored places’ (2013: 305), and it is in this spirit that I will employ the concept as a useful tool to investigate both the identification, and the significance of a playwright’s positionality in verbatim theatre processes.

Following on from the feminist directive for an interviewer to acknowledge their own subjectivities, and when incorporating the tool of intersectionality, the terms of insider and outsider – referring to whether a playwright comes from the same community as their contributors or a different one – imply a binary definition that, in reality, is far more nuanced. The varying degrees of insider and outsider that a playwright can hold will be explored at different points in this, and subsequent chapters with regard to selected productions and, although the insider/outsider terminology has been redefined in light of feminist oral history as being multi-layered, I suggest that it might nonetheless serve as a basis on which to build a more detailed description of positionality. Since this discussion is one that has been relatively unexplored in professional verbatim theatre scholarship (that is not applied theatre), I will begin by providing an outline of how, over the last few decades, verbatim theatre in the UK has often privileged an outsider playwright's positioning in relation to the contributors. I will then examine why this might have been the case, and question whether it is now timely for greater attention to be paid to the interview dynamics within verbatim theatre processes to align with post-modernist and feminist understandings in other disciplines which rely upon interview material for their work.

### **The search for objectivity within verbatim theatre work**

Although the main body of this thesis principally attends to addressing small-scale verbatim productions created from interviews with contributors from marginalised communities, in this section, I extend the remit of my research to include the work of more mainstream theatre practitioners who have produced verbatim plays where that term encompasses tribunal plays (based on trial scripts), and some other more commercially viable verbatim productions – many of which have been produced in London – that discuss contemporary national and international political developments. The reason I turn to this body of work at this juncture is because its creation has often been predicated on a claim of objectivity.

Prior to post-modernist understandings, in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, where research data is gathered from communities, it was generally assumed that someone who came from outside the community could work objectively in a way that was impossible for an insider to do. In the UK, from the 1920s to 1960s, most theatre that was made by, or for, members of the working classes was overtly political and created with

an agenda which reflected the subjective views of the practitioners. For example, in the interwar years, the dramatic groups of which the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM) consisted were all politically orientated to the Communist Party. The movement faded by the mid 1930s, although many of the local troupes continued developing in their own ways. Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop (founded in 1945) was one of those developments, whilst another was Unity Theatre (founded in 1936), which went on to become a lasting national network.

Gillete Elvgren explains how, in the mid-1960s, Cheeseman's plays were intended to 'find a means to destroy the barriers which so often grow up between the creative artist and the most ordinary people' (1974: 88). But in spite of this democratising intention to erode the distance between theatre makers and community members, Elvgren also states: 'Cheeseman's foremost requisite for documentary theatre is that it maintain objectivity' (90). Elvgren outlines Cheeseman's philosophy in the following way: 'instead of a writer interpreting the factual information according to his own personal prejudices the company hopes to present the many viewpoints which historical material poses and to avoid any single, and perhaps biased, answer' (90). In stark contrast to the German documentary playwright Peter Weiss' declaration in his 'Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre', that documentary theatre must 'takes sides' (1968: 42), Cheeseman was opposed to the form being used as a means of social or political propaganda. His contention was: 'we have to find a way of asking disturbing questions which do not take a single viewpoint or single political alignment' (Elvgren, 1974: 91). Elvgren concludes that 'Cheeseman's dedication to objective presentation, then, is in itself rooted in a philosophy of involvement. He is concerned with awakening his audience rather than in manipulating their beliefs' (91).

Attilio Favorini observes that, in notable contrast to the main current of contemporary documentary theatre which was German or German-influenced, 'Cheeseman is concerned with creating an audience of listeners rather than an audience of believers' (1994: 36) and he explains how: 'Cheeseman does not deny that the inevitable arrangement; editing and abridgement involve subjectivity and personal judgement. But he does intend that the compositional pains taken by his company inoculate his productions against political narrow-mindedness and naiveté' (37). Examining Cheeseman's aims through the prism of post-modernist thinking, it is questionable whether he could have

attained the objectivity Elvgren suggests he sought. But echoes of Cheeseman's intention to theatrically present documented 'facts' as a means to educate and awaken an audience can be detected in the comments of several high-profile British theatre makers discussing their own tribunal and verbatim productions produced during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Richard Norton-Taylor is a playwright who scripts tribunal plays, dramatising public inquiries for the stage. He also works professionally as a journalist, having held the position of Security Editor at *The Guardian* newspaper. His theatre productions include *The Colour of Justice* (based on the investigation into the murder of the black teenager, Stephen Lawrence and first performed in January 1999 at the Tricycle Theatre), and *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry* (first performed in November 2003, also at the Tricycle). Both of these pieces were directed by the Tricycle's artistic director, Nicolas Kent. Speaking about Norton-Taylor's plays, Kent states: 'his whole motivation is to be as objective as possible and to eschew bias' (Hammond and Steward, 2008: 164). Kent therefore regards the quality of objectivity within the creation of this work to be something of great value. He comments: 'I think Richard lends a serious credibility to the plays' (164), a remark that implies that, in Kent's view, Norton-Taylor's journalistic background serves to increase an audience's confidence that the piece has been thoroughly sourced, professionally researched and the content of which is presented through a seemingly objective lens.

Connections between verbatim or documentary theatre and journalism have been noted by several theatre practitioners. Norton-Taylor, for example, suggests that 'the theatre can be an extension of journalism in the best possible way – that is, by communicating and explaining contemporary issues, scandals and events in a unique, fair, positive and intellectually honest manner' (122). This understanding is one that is shared by Hare who, when asked if he understood verbatim theatre as having a journalistic function, replies, 'it does what journalism fails to do' (62). David Edgar, writing about the production process of Hare's play, *The Permanent Way* (which addresses railway privatisation, was directed by Max Stafford-Clark, and opened at Theatre Royal, York in November 2003), states: 'David Hare and his collaborators did the kind of in depth, investigative, historically analytical job on a contemporary political story that conventional journalism rarely does any

more, occupying space abandoned both by long-form print journalism and by traditional television documentary' (theguardian.com: 2008).

The idea that verbatim theatre is well placed to fill the gap that mainstream journalism has neglected is one that is examined by Mary Luckhurst in her co-edited book, *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama* (2008). Addressing ethical concerns in verbatim theatre processes, she admits that the reasons for the increase in these plays in the West are complex but she suggests that they 'seem to be bound up with widespread suspicion of governments and their "spin" merchants, a distrust of the media and a desire to uncover stories which may be being suppressed' (2008: 200). She states that British verbatim theatre has 'lent itself well [...] to the business of scrutinising institutions, legal processes and human rights abuses' (216). Particularly in tribunal plays, writers have endeavoured to compensate for what they view as omissions in the media and have sought to enlighten their audiences with the 'facts' at their disposal: the facts in these productions include edited excerpts of inquiry transcripts from a trial or court proceedings. Within tribunal theatre, and also in other mainstream verbatim plays which draw on interviews to create productions which address contemporary political issues, the playwright is frequently an outsider – someone who has not been personally impacted by the matter addressed in the play. If plays such as *The Permanent Way*, *The Colour of Justice*, or *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry* are intended to fill a void that is not being addressed by journalists and to inform wider audiences about a neglected political matter, then it can make sense for them to be written by writers who aspire to work with a critical distance from the material they employ in their scripts.

In journalism, the ability to write with objectivity is usually not only a requirement of the work, but one that is highly valued. However, Derek Paget reminds us that: 'the jealously guarded liberal conceit of "objectivity" must be reappraised, for the objectivity desired by some can only exist in an unimaginably politics free society. No information is contextless' (1990: 19). But if objectivity is regarded as a stance to which verbatim theatre writers aspire and yet, is also viewed as an unattainable quality because of the researchers' subjective positionality in relation to the forms of documentation with which they work, this is clearly problematic. Furthermore, some verbatim playwrights may be lauded for their journalistic credentials, but at a time when, as Luckhurst notes, the public have increasingly

less confidence in both the media and politicians, it might be impossible for any verbatim theatre playwright to convince an audience that they are accurately presenting ‘facts’ in their productions. An outsider playwright, claiming to work with any degree of objectivity on a piece of verbatim theatre, consequently faces substantive practical and ideological challenges.

Even when a verbatim play is based entirely on trial transcripts, however objectively the playwright might aspire to work with the material, the final script will still be a heavily edited and highly mediated construction. The reasons for this are several, but include the need to reduce a large amount of documentation into a show-length script, and the selection of excerpts that contribute towards the writers’ ideological aims in creating the piece. Furthermore, the script will reflect the playwright’s artistic vision in how the material is ordered and theatrically presented. Such choices may involve presenting conflict and/or revelation during the play which are intended to engage the audience on a visual, emotional and intellectual level, as well as advance the political or social agenda of the playwright. In spite of the fact that the piece is based on documents (transcribed interviews or trial scripts), the creative license employed by the writer still has the potential to devalue the currency of the apparent ‘truth’ the audience is buying into (both figuratively and literally) when they attend a verbatim production. One example of this occurs in David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* (first performed at the National Theatre, London in September 2004), a play which presents arguments for and against the American-led attack on Iraq, mixing verbatim recreations of real speeches, meetings, and press conferences. Within the script, there are also speculative versions of private meetings between members of the Bush and Blair administrations, and international figures such as Hans Blix (the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency at the time of the war) and Dominique de Villepin (the former French Prime Minister) are acted by the cast. In this play, therefore, any claims of objectivity or presentation of purely factual content – as Cheeseman might have understood those concepts – are significantly undermined by the introduction of fictional scenes.

Finally, this section addressing the insider or outsider relationship between some of the more mainstream verbatim playwrights in the UK and their contributors, turns to the related matter of identifying power dynamics in the interview situation. This is one of the principal directives in feminist oral history and is closely related to the question of whether

a playwright comes from the same community or a different one as those who are interviewed. In several of the tribunal and documentary plays produced in the UK in the late 1990s and 2000s which address, and sometimes expose, information about national or international political events, it could be argued that there is little necessity to determine the nature of any power imbalances might exist between the playwright and the contributors. The reasons for this are because, in tribunal plays, those whose words are spoken by actors have not been directly interviewed by the playwright and, in other verbatim plays such as *Called to Account*, (for which the Tricycle invited real lawyers and witnesses to help create a mock trial of the prime minister for aggression against Iraq), those who were interviewed for the play were mainly public figures who were high-profile and high-status participants. Examples of contributors to both of these types of verbatim plays include the politician, Clare Short, played by Diane Fletcher in *Called to Account* at the Tricycle theatre in 2007, and Michael Mansfield QC (the counsel for the Lawrence family) who was played by Jeremy Clyde in *The Colour of Justice*. Contributors such as these would be used to having their views dispersed publicly, by newspapers or television programs, and scrutinised by those who read or heard them, and as the actress Chipso Chung notes, some 'media savvy' people who share their stories 'know how to manage their public persona' (Cantrell and Luckhurst: 2010: 57).

Owing to the absence in these plays of what Patai refers to as 'interviewing down' (1991: 137), it is unlikely that interview content provided by the politicians and lawyers for a number of productions written by playwrights such as Hare, Norton-Taylor, and Soans would have been impacted at all by whether the interviewer came from the same community as themselves or a different one. This is due to the fact that the power differentials between the theatre makers and the contributors are more equal than they would be when less well-known or recognisable people are interviewed who are not used to having their words dispersed publicly and who do not have access to legal recourse should they be misrepresented. This discrepancy in the treatment of contributors by theatre makers is outlined by Soans, who states that, within his own working processes:

if I interview two people and there's only room for one of them in the play, I feel justified in creating a composite character incorporating lines from both originals. This would not work if the characters were well-known public figures, of course; it would amount to putting words in their mouths. But for unknown

characters, who, in terms of the play, represent a certain circumstance or dilemma, this can be dramatically economic without becoming a misrepresentation. (Hammond and Steward, 2008: 42)

Hare also reveals his working methods with contributors who are not immediately identifiable by the public when he discusses his production of *Via Dolorosa* (a monologue which deals with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that debuted in 1998 at the Royal Court Theatre). He explains how he sent the excerpts he intended for use in the script to the contributors beforehand but admits that: 'when they were people who I knew would disapprove of the way I represented them, I changed their names' (Hammond and Steward, 2008: 73). This comment, and that of Soans (cited above), both demonstrate how some verbatim theatre playwrights operate what appears to be a 'two-tier' system, in which greater care is taken over issues of representation when the 'characters' in their scripts are famous or high-profile contributors than when they are unknown or less likely to be recognised by audience members. This is a matter which has ethical implications and is one that, I suggest, requires a deeper conversation among verbatim theatre practitioners as to how best practice might look within all areas of verbatim theatre work, and not only in productions which are created for the purpose of amplifying the voices of a marginalised or previously silenced community.

Although the plays discussed in this section generally reveal a privileging of the outsider positioning of a playwright in relation to those being interviewed, these productions are not representative of all economies of verbatim theatre. Over the last decade in the UK, there has been an exponential increase in professionally produced small-scale verbatim plays which focus on specific political or social matters which the theatre practitioners wish to disperse to a wider audience. Frequently drawing on interviews from members of marginalised communities, these plays do not necessarily strive to present an objective form of theatrical journalism in the way that tribunal plays do, but rather, their creation is inspired by the subjective political or ideological aims of the theatre makers. But even when theatre makers are aware of their subjectivities, power imbalances can still exist when the playwright comes from a different population as those who they interview. Once more, this speaks to the question of how the playwright's positionality might impact the experience of the contributors. When contributors come from a different population to the

playwright in theatre created from interviews, writers have to make decisions about they intend to dramatically represent those contributors, and in doing so, must acknowledge that they are now in a position of *speaking for others*. I turn again to feminist scholarship to interrogate this issue, since robust discourse has occurred in that field about who speaks for whom, and from what location the speaker is speaking.

### **Speaking for others: Representation and partiality within feminist discourse**

Linda Alcoff in her article 'The Problem of Speaking for Others' (1991-92), discusses the positioning of a researcher who finds herself speaking for others, and she examines the intentions of that speaker. Noting that those who wish to speak for others often originate from a position in society that is far closer to the hegemonic classes than those whom they wish to represent, Alcoff states:

I would stress that the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. (1991-2: 29)

Reflecting upon feminist thinking, Alcoff notes that, as a type of discursive practice, 'speaking for others has come under increasing criticism, and in some communities is being rejected. There is a strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate' (1991-2: 6). Furthermore, Alcoff warns that there is a possibility that one person who claims to speak for another might be doing more harm than good, since, however well-meaning their intentions, a danger remains that claiming to represent another will take the voice away from those for whom one claims to speak. This debate was one that was critical in feminist discussion in the 1990s and still has significant implications in any field of work where professionals – whether in anthropology, sociology, feminist studies, oral history, verbatim theatre or some other discipline – gather material in the form of research or interviews and then have to make decisions on how to present their findings.

Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger, writing about how the 'other' can be represented, from a feminist perspective, suggest that one solution to the ethical dilemma of speaking for others is to refuse to be drawn into representing others at all. For them, such an option requires that:

speaking only for ourselves, we leave Others to represent themselves. Instead of speaking for Others, we maintain a respectful silence, and work to create the social and political conditions which might enable Others to speak (and to be heard) on their own terms. (2009: 86)

Such advice, if followed by verbatim theatre practitioners, would have a significant impact on professional productions, the vast majority of which are created by outsiders to the populations who have provided interviews for the script. Allowing 'Others to represent themselves', although not impossible and certainly ideologically laudable, might however result in a dearth of drama for, and about, marginalised communities, rather than an increase in productions initiated by people who come from areas of society currently underrepresented by theatre professionals (such as asylum seekers or homeless people). Alcott questions whether: 'I should only speak for groups of which I am a member' (1991-2: 7) and then, employing the tools of intersectionality, she comments that, as a 'Panamanian-American, and a person of mixed ethnicity and race: half white/Angla and half Panamanian mestiza' (8) she understands herself as having 'membership in many conflicting groups but [her] membership in all of them is problematic' (8); an observation which, again, complicates the matter of a researcher determining their authority or otherwise in speaking for or about someone else.

Alcott warns of the potential risks when privileged people speak for others, stating that such practice has 'resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for' (6). She also asks: 'if I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my own privilege?' (7). Alcott's concerns reflect a potential drawback to Wilkinson and Kitzinger's theoretically admirable suggestion that 'Others' should be left to represent themselves. In societies in which minorities suffer prejudice or are oppressed, ignored or even silenced, people from those communities may not always be in a position, either financially or practically, to create the platforms they need in order to be heard by those who hold the power within a society and who can effect change.

Endeavouring to seek a balance between what might be viewed as the two extremes of appropriation and negligence when it comes to speaking for and about those who come from marginalised communities, Alcott proposes that 'we should strive to create wherever

possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others' (1991/2: 23). In a similar vein, Wilkinson and Kitzinger state that 'there are repeated suggestions that "dialogue" with Others can be more illuminating than the monologue of the single researcher presenting "data" about Others' (2009: 92). In examining ethical ways of approaching work with 'Self and Other', Wilkinson and Kitzinger highlight the practice employed by feminist social psychologists and suggest giving 'representations back to the represented for comment, feedback and evaluation' (91). They state that the idea behind such practice is that those who are represented are described 'not as "subjects", or even "research participants" but as "co-researchers"' (91). The concepts of dialogising, reciprocity and co-creation are all tenets of oral history practice.

In some instances, another approach taken by outsider researchers whose work involves gathering community narratives has been to secure a professional ethnographer or anthropologist. Examples of this can be seen in ethnographic and documentary filmmaking where many collaborative film productions involve anthropologists. Jay Ruby in his article 'Speaking For, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside' (2000), explains that this is 'undoubtedly because anthropologists tend to spend long periods of time with their subjects, develop a rapport seldom possible with traditional documentary methods, and seek feedback as a means of verification' (2000: 211). However, the author, feminist and social activist bell hooks, argues against the option of employing an ethnographer when research is conducted by someone outside of the community they are studying. Writing as an African American woman, she is wary of people who say they are going to tell the story of others. She imagines how they might regard their work and those about whom they are speaking:

no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew: I am still author, authority. I am still the coloniser. (1991: 152)

hooks is also troubled by the term 'other', stating that 'often this speech about the "Other" annihilates, erases' (1991: 151). Although they employ the term, Wilkinson and Kitzinger also observe that the employment of the word 'Other' is sometimes unhelpful, commenting that 'Others are constructed - by those who do the Othering, by those who reflect upon that

Othring, and by the Others' own representations of themselves' (2009: 89). Discussions on the ways in which researchers can best approach, interview, and represent their subjects have been held in many disciplines for several decades and the guiding principles of feminist theory have been employed in most fields, but the advantages and drawbacks of insider and outsider research continue to be addressed in oral history scholarship.

### **Oral History discussions about the positioning of an interviewer**

Oral historians work from the premise that self-reflexivity is called for on the part of the interviewer. Tooth Murphy explains that this is 'so we might understand how our own subjectivities, and how they are perceived by those we interview, contribute to the final interview recording, as well as to our subsequent analysis' (2020: 35). In 1978, Paul Thompson, the founder of the UK Oral History Journal wrote *The Voice of the Past*, an important guide to the practice and theory of oral history which has had two further editions. In the first edition, looking at both sides of the insider and outsider positioning question from an oral historian's perspective. Thompson states:

in any tight-knit community [...] the insider knows the way round, can be less easily fooled, understands the nuances, and starts with far more useful contacts and, hopefully, as an established person of good faith. All this has to be learnt and constructed by the outsider. (1978: 117)

He also cautions against an insider approach, which could be viewed as one way to smooth out possible inequalities, commenting:

it is not necessarily true that an interviewer of the same sex, class, or race will obtain more accurate information. If the social relationship in an interview becomes, or is from the start, a social bond, the danger towards social conformity in replies is increased. (116)

I suggest that both of these assessments are accurate to some degree, but the act of interviewers identifying their positionality is one that allows them to acknowledge their own bias and, consequently, temper any comments or questions they might ask, and conduct an interview that is more open-ended in nature that allows the voice of the narrator to be clearly heard. The interviewers' positionality or even their bias or agenda concerning the subject will still exist, but an awareness of it is the first step in gaining a greater

understanding of the dynamics of the interview and will inform their analysis of the recording.

But, however self-reflexive oral historians might aspire to be, it is possible that their own identities can impact the power dynamics in the interview before a word is spoken by either party: for example, when the interviewer is white and the narrator is not, or if the interviewer is middle class and the narrator is working class. Variants on these more obvious identity markers will also be present in cases where someone's identity is less visibly obvious: when the interviewer or the narrator are LGBTQ or heterosexual, or belong to an ethnicity that is not always identifiable. Additionally, power dynamics can enter when the researcher is from an academic organisation which might prove to be intimidating for the person being interviewed who is not from that world. Again, the concept of intersectionality allows for the identification of varied or overlapping identities in both parties, making any analysis of positionality a more complicated procedure. This more nuanced understanding of identity, which renders the insider/outsider definition in an interview setting as insufficiently informative, came about after the feminist debate which determined that a so-called first-world woman could not and must not speak for all women, especially those from a different social class or race. From this discussion came the realisation that every narrator is situated in a specific location, which they are encouraged to recognise.

At times, it can still be of great importance to identify whether an interviewer is from the same community as those who they interview or from a different one. Perks and Thompson, in their introduction to *The Oral History Reader* (1998), point to case studies in that publication which demonstrate clear advantages of holding an insider position when interviewing. One example they present is when Akemi Kikumura interviews her own mother, an Issei woman from Japan, who immigrated to the US in 1923. Kikumura believed that 'her mother would *only* have spoken openly to her because she was an "insider" family member' (1998: 102). Perks and Thomson conclude that 'whilst "outsider" status is believed to accord objectivity and detachment, an "insider" perspective has the benefits of special insight otherwise obscure to outsiders' (102). But Shopes, warns that because 'a celebratory impulse also infects many community interviews' (2006: 263) and she states that 'a community outsider, interviewing a peer, does not want to risk disturbing an ongoing, comfortable social relationship by asking difficult or challenging questions' (263).

Some oral historians who have found the binary terms outsider and insider too restrictive have sought to employ more fluid terminologies in their work. Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca, for example, when interviewing Cuban families about how it felt to be a transgender person or family members of a transgender person in Cuba before and after the 1990s sexual revolution, refers to herself as an 'insider/outsider' (2017: 29). In that project, she saw herself as an insider, in that she was a Cuban-born researcher, and an outsider, presumably (although she does not state it explicitly), because she was neither transgender nor a family member of someone who was transgender. Another example of someone who resists defining himself as either insider or outsider, is performance artist and scholar, E. Patrick Johnson who, in his interviews with Southern African American queer women, refers to himself as an 'outsider/within' (2016: 57). He explains that his interlocutors and he shared 'many of the same identity markers (queerness, Southernness)' (57), but not others, such as gender and class position, again using the tools of intersectionality to situate himself in relation to those he interviews and demonstrate an awareness of his subjectivities.

It is clear that oral historians seek to operate with the self-reflexivity that feminist scholars call for and, arguably, an examination of the way in which they do so offers much to verbatim theatre practice and scholarship. However, in disciplines where researchers or project leaders draw on interview content and situate themselves by prior announcement, as, for example a white working-class heterosexual or as a black feminist activist, Patai cautions that, at times:

these tropes sound like apologies, more often they are deployed as badges. Either way, they give off their own aroma of fraud, for the underlying assumption seems to be that by such identification one has paid one's respects to 'difference' – owned up to bias, acknowledged privilege, or taken possession of oppression – and is now home free. (1991: 149)

The argument behind Patai's seemingly harsh criticism of practitioners who seek to identify their own positionality in the interview process and for the purposes of subsequent research, is that 'such rhetoric once again deflects attention from the systemic nature of inequality' (149). Her comments are perhaps of greater relevance therefore when the interview is intended for emancipatory purposes, rather than simply for research. In turn, they might therefore be applicable to theatre practitioners who create a play based on

interviews when the aim of the piece is to change minds and hearts about a political or social matter and encourage activism around that issue. But Patai's underlying concern is that the act of identifying the interviewers' subjectivities is insufficient on its own and should be accompanied by a deeper understanding of the inherent power differentials within the interview situation and how these might affect the narrator and the research subsequently produced.

### **Discussions in applied theatre about insider/outsider positioning**

Applied theatre – also known as applied drama – is an umbrella term often used in academia to describe theatre work that takes place in non-theatrical settings and, as Philip Taylor explains, it is a form of drama with a mission 'to introduce theatre in a range of communities as a kind of problem-posing interventionist' (2003: 87). Taylor defines applied theatre as 'theatre work that takes place in non-theatrical surroundings: most typically prisons, health and therapy settings, community arts centres, museums and art galleries, support service venues, housing and industrial sites' (86) and he refers to the practitioner involved in such projects as a 'teaching artist'. Although not necessarily regarded as part of emancipatory process, applied theatre practitioners frequently work with members of marginalised communities and participants have often experienced trauma or have suffered from prejudice and oppression.

Professional verbatim theatre productions scripted from interviews and performed by actors, often in traditional theatre spaces, do not aim to solve problems in the way that applied theatre projects do. Rather, they are produced by theatre companies to bring greater attention to an area of social or political concern, thereby raising awareness of issues underreported by the media and unknown to the wider public. In applied theatre work, there are many different types of creative practices, which can include verbatim or other types of narration of life experience. I turn to this closely related discipline to examine discussions that have taken place in scholarship about the advantages and disadvantages of the theatre practitioner (the person who edits, directs, creates, or interviews participants) coming from within, or from outside the community with whom they are working. Since it is a form of theatre which frequently targets members of marginalised communities, a brief exploration of how practitioners view and navigate the positioning of the project leader in

relation to the participants contributes to a discussion on those who are interviewed in verbatim theatre work which is performed to public audiences by professional actors.

In applied theatre scholarship, there is a presiding assumption that practitioners are best placed if they come from outside of the communities or populations with which they work. James Thompson, whose projects include working abroad in TfD (Theatre for Development) as well as applied theatre projects in prisons, states: 'applied theatre comes to psychology, development and prison education [...] but cannot speak for or speak from those fields' (2003: 20). Thompson contends that, as theatre practitioners, 'we are only ever visitors with the disciplines into which we apply our theatre' (20). His understanding is that: 'we are not expert in these fields nor should we seek to be. One of applied theatre's strengths is in its status as the outsider, the visitor and the guest' (20). Thompson encourages practitioners to work with critical detachment in their theatre projects: a stance which, he claims, can ultimately benefit the community members involved.

Stuart Fisher, addressing the ethical positioning of the practitioner who facilitates an applied theatre project, agrees with Thompson that the person running the project generally comes to the work as an outsider. In her article, 'Developing an Ethics of Practice in Applied Theatre: Badiou and Fidelity to the Truth of an Event' (2006), she interrogates Badiou's philosophical thinking about ethics in respect to what commitment to the truth of a situation might entail within applied theatre. Stuart Fisher notes that Badiou encourages the laying aside of preconceived expectations and judgements, a total commitment to the truth of an event that is 'not driven by self-interest' (2006: 250) and a full engagement with 'that which is revealed and disclosed by the event itself' (250). His aim is one of approaching an event in a state of what he terms, 'disinterested interest' (250), but Stuart Fisher examines why this might be a problematic concept for applied theatre practitioners. She notes that some of the barriers to achieving such a position include the fact that the theatre projects' stakeholders frequently 'hold a set of beliefs which inevitably inform the kind of work that is subsequently funded' (250). Another point she raises is that practitioners will be influenced by their own 'inherited beliefs and expectations' (250), and that they do not 'enter a project in a "value vacuum"' (250). Stuart Fisher concludes that applied theatre practitioners should therefore 'engage in a *process* of critique and draw out the emerging truths of the community' (251), whilst working with the client group 'towards developing a

critical awareness of their own situation' (251). Her advice largely echoes the feminist directive for researchers to reflect upon and analyse their working methods when engaging with a community from which they do not personally belong. But, in exploring how the concept of disinterested interest might not always be one that can be achieved by practitioners owing to their own subjectivities and the aims of the project funders, she also highlights some of the contradictions inherent in the notion of an outsider researcher or theatre maker claiming to work with any degree of objectivity.

Bill McDonnell, in his article 'The Politics of Historiography – Towards an Ethics of Representation' (2005), focuses on the historians' responsibilities in documenting forms of theatre work which 'claim to be radical, or to intervene on the side of the marginalised and oppressed' (2005: 128) and he observes that this work is mainly written by outsiders. He states: 'most communities who are the focus of "radical" theatre practice or theatre for development [...] do not control the decisions and the economics which underpin our presence' (132). McDonnell explains how 'these asymmetries are rarely if even addressed within our writing, and yet they go to the heart of the political meaning and value of what is done' (132). His focus here is on the writing up of applied theatre practices rather than on the working process or resulting performances and he advocates that any documentation or analysis of work undertaken by practitioners or academics 'in situations of crisis and conflict' (134), must be undertaken following Clifford Geertz's concept of 'thick description'. McDonnell suggests that, drawing on the lessons of ethnography, anthropology and social research, 'thick description', in the context of ethical historiography of theatres of resistance, theatre for development and forms of applied theatre and theatre in education, means:

the laying bare of power relations, a transparency about the necessities, personal and political, which are being met in these encounters. It requires that we write with respect for all that is subtle, complex and progressive within communities, and with a rigorous sense of the limitations of our understanding and usefulness. (134)

He explains that, 'this is not to argue that outsiders do not have a radical role: but it is a role that must be tempered by dialogue, and the recognition of the dangers of political intervention into any reality' (133).

Sheila Preston examines the ethics of representation of 'the real lives of individuals or groups who may be vulnerable and/or marginalised from the dominant hegemony' (2010: 65), and she proposes the need for the dialogue in this work, to the extent that:

as cultural workers, whether we are researchers writing about individuals, theatre makers constructing narratives and stories, or facilitators enabling people to write or perform their own stories, we have a responsibility towards ensuring that the representations that are made are produced through a climate of sensitivity, dialogue, respect and willingness for reciprocity. (65)

Preston explores the feminist discussions (as addressed above), about speaking for others or – in the case of applied theatre – creating a theatrical representation about a community of which you are not a member. She reflects upon the arguments made by scholars such as bell hooks and Kitzinger and Wilkinson, that speaking critically from a position of marginality can create radical possibilities, but then she concludes that, although in applied theatre and social research this way 'may feel the "preferred" standpoint [...] without critical awareness of its ideological and political impact, self representation might be equally vulnerable to appropriation when it appears in the public sphere' (2010: 67). Some of the critical questions she urges applied theatre practitioners to address include: 'how we can work sensitively, and create a climate of dialogue and reciprocity?' (68), and 'how are issues of voice, authority and ownership reconciled in the process of constructing narratives and representations that result?' (68).

In much the same way that some stages of oral history practice are similar to verbatim theatre processes but are not the same work, since oral history is for the purpose of historical research and verbatim theatre provides entertainment, applied theatre and verbatim plays performed by professional actors in theatres are also closely related – especially when the applied theatre work is interview based – but these varying forms of theatre are created for different purposes. Since applied theatre is intended to be a problem posing or problem solving interventionist dramatic device in which the theatre makers work extremely closely with the participants who are from different populations than the practitioners, it is clear that the critical reflexivity called for by some scholars is one that is integral to this work which, by its nature, is often targeted at communities who are vulnerable or marginalised. Verbatim theatre that is based on interviews and performed to public audiences in theatres, even when the contributors are also from marginalised

communities, generally sees far less involvement by the contributors in the production process, once the interview process is completed. However, verbatim playwrights would find much to inform them by studying the reflexivity practiced by those running applied theatre projects, particularly when practitioners in both areas of work are outsiders. The feminist research tenets which applied theatre processes often reflect, include outsider researchers or practitioners operating with a high level of critical reflexivity (or 'thick description'), which involves identifying their own values, aims, subjectivities, examining existing power dynamics between the theatre makers and the participants, encouraging dialogue between the interventionists and the community members and, where possible, providing some form of reciprocity to those who participate in the theatre project.

### ***Bare Mountains***

One example of a playwright documenting her own practice with the kind of 'thick description' encouraged by McDonnell in theatre historiography can be found in Erica Nagel's article, 'An Aesthetic of Neighbourliness: Possibilities for Integrating Community-Based Practices into Documentary Theatre' (2007). I include her analysis of a production she worked on to demonstrate how a verbatim playwright involved in producing a piece based on interviews conducted with members of a community can interrogate her own practice with a high level of critical reflexivity. She also adapted both her working methods and the direction and purpose of the project, based on an awareness of her own positionality in relation to the contributors with who she worked. There are no quotations available from this play, since it has not been published, and only Nagel's account of the production. But, because it is a piece that could be viewed as applied theatre, oral history performance, or professional verbatim theatre, and since Nagel examines these definitions in relation to the production, an examination of her documentation is of relevance to my own research into the implications of the positioning of a playwright to contributors.

*Bare Mountains* is the title of a play co-designed by Nagel and Matthew Shook in 2005, that addressed the issue of communities in the Rampopo Mountains near New York, who were displaced by an Interstate Park Commission reclaiming their land. With similar intentions to those stated by Pollock in *Like A Family*, the purpose of the piece was to disperse the stories of one community, and Nagel describes how 'when Shook approached

me about the project, he said that he hoped my background in theatre and story-structure would help make the oral narratives more accessible and enjoyable to a wider public' (2007: 154). Nagel and Shook interviewed fourteen older contributors, in their seventies to their nineties, about their family history and what they recalled about the years before the state took their land. The project was conducted over two stages, the first resulting in a reading of edited monologues performed by a small group of theatre professionals to seventy-five members of the local community. Nagel's views as an outsider in relation to the community from whom she secured interviews align with those of James Thompson. She states: 'an artistic representation by someone who is not "of" the community can illuminate things about a community that are invisible to the people within it' (160). Nagel also suggests that 'if a community has control over the way it is represented, perhaps it will choose to conceal rather than to confront the issues and conflicts within the community' (160). These observations reflect her own understanding that an artistic representation of a community is best produced by a theatre practitioner who comes from outside that community.

In Nagel's initial presentation of *Bare Mountains* she explains how: 'we worked to create an interview-based documentary-play that could both speak to an outsider audience and make the community feel heard, honoured and fairly represented' (154). Nagel was keen to elicit feedback from the community and after the performance, she asked audience members for feedback on what they had just seen. But she observes that, 'it was very clear that this audience was not as interested in artistic subtlety as they were in celebrating and sharing their individual stories' (157). One of the conclusions she drew from this was that 'operating under a model in which artistic integrity and community engagement were positioned as opposites had left me certain that I hadn't served either goal fully' (158). After the first presentation of the piece, she resolved to seek further funding and return to the community to work with the members more closely on the same material; this time, with the intention of involving the contributors more in decisions around the scripting and performance of the play. She asked herself: 'what ultimately served this community better: sharing their stories with others or celebrating them among themselves? Which served the play better? Which of these was I more obligated to serve?' (158).

Reflecting upon her project, Nagel identifies some of the main differences between working with community members in an applied piece of theatre – what she refers to as

‘community based theatre’ – and a play based on interviews presented by professional theatre practitioners, which she terms ‘documentary theatre based on a community’ (154). She comments that:

burdened by the feeling that I had to choose between a process that labelled me as amateur and one that labelled me as exploitative, between serving the community and serving the audience, the next stage of developing the script became a process of seeking a balance between these concerns. (157)

Whilst Nagel does not appear to question the validity of her holding an outsider status, her considerations are, nonetheless, relevant to the positioning of a playwright since between the two stages of the project, she was unsure how she could sufficiently give voice to the community members she was representing in the play and she questioned the degree of agency that contributors could experience in a project initiated by an outsider. She subsequently decided to ask the participants to work collaboratively with her to rewrite the script, thereby affording the project a degree of multivocality she felt she could not bring to the piece alone. She terms this practice as working in the ‘aesthetic of neighbourliness’ (159). Rather than choose to present additional documentary material or ask actors to play numerous roles in an attempt to achieve multivocality, in the reworked version of *Bare Mountains*, Nagel included more ‘voices’ by involving the contributors in the scripting process. The result, as she saw it, was that:

practicing neighbourliness, staying open to the ideas, hopes, and desires of the individuals whose stories I was telling, and not only making them feel included, but truly including them in the creative process, made *Bare Mountains* a richer, more complex piece of art. (165)

The conclusions Nagel draws from her working process not only highlight the similarities in style and content between some applied theatre projects based on interviews with members of a particular community and professionally produced verbatim or documentary plays, but they also reveal Nagel’s understanding of her duty of care as a playwright towards contributors who give their stories to be used in the production. She chose to acknowledge the value of her contributors by involving them in the project far beyond the interview stage, a step again reflective of Pollock’s work, but one which many playwrights do not take in verbatim productions where actors are employed. Nagel’s self-

reflexivity during her working process enabled her to see that ultimately, as an outsider playwright, she could only edit the interviews and produce the play from a single perspective. But since her aim was to represent many perspectives and a multitude of voices from the community with whom she was working, she invited the contributors to collaborate with her in the writing and production process. This production provides an example of an outsider playwright who is so determined to engage in dialogue with those within the community she researched that, ultimately, the production process and final dramatic project are significantly altered in an attempt to include insider voices and perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

In verbatim theatre work, there has been limited discussion among practitioners about the positionality of the playwright, compared to many other disciplines that draw upon interviews with members of communities other than their own. In several of the fields that have addressed this matter, the work conducted is for research purposes and it is generally accepted that the identity and subjectivities of the person who runs the project can impact the content of the narrators' answers and, subsequently, the results of the research. Whilst verbatim theatre processes are not forms of research in the same way and are undertaken for artistic purposes, the wave of post-modernist thinking that informed previous understandings in other areas of work which rely on professionals gathering personal narratives appears not to have impacted the working methods of verbatim theatre practitioners in the same way. This is most notable in more mainstream and commercial productions in the subsidised sector, but is also the case in small-scale pieces. Neither the notion of objectivity that some verbatim theatre makers claim to attain, nor the accepted outsider positioning of the playwright, which has often been privileged in such work, have been sufficiently interrogated. But since many professional verbatim playwrights claim that verbatim theatre work requires a high level of ethical vigilance, due to its reliance on the employment of interview content provided by living people (Soans, in Hammond and Steward, 2008), and others point to the moral obligation theatre makers have to contributors who have undergone forms of suffering (Hare: 2004), it is imperative for their working processes to now be informed by scholarship and practice addressing ethical issues

which has developed in other related disciplines, such as oral history, feminist studies, anthropology, and documentary film making.

Identifying the positionality of the playwright in verbatim theatre is important in the same way as it is in other areas of work which rely on personal testimony because of the inherent power imbalances that occur when researchers, often from a more privileged sector of society, write about a group of people from another community, particularly one that is less powerful. In the 1960s and 1970s, Peter Cheeseman produced verbatim plays drawing upon testimony from working-class contributors, claiming that his documentary shows were created from an objective viewpoint by him and his theatre company members. In the tribunal plays of the late 1990s and 2000s, mainly staged in well-known London venues, theatre practitioners understood their work to be objective, believing that it presented the 'facts', usually about a political matter of concern, to the audience in the form of dramatised trial scripts. The fundamental flaw in this perception of objectivity is that, unless an interview or a trial script is presented in its entirety to an audience, then it is always the case that the material will have been edited from its original form. Furthermore, the subjectivity of the theatre practitioners will inevitably impact the final presentation. This chapter has questioned whether it is timely for verbatim playwrights to identify their own agenda in writing the piece and shaping its presentation, in line with feminist thinking, and it has examined the ways in which the claim to objectivity, still made by some in this field but now unravelled by post-modernism thought, is ultimately problematic.

In applied theatre, the prevalent assumption that an outsider practitioner to a community is better placed to work with participants appears to remain uncontended. In that discipline, theatre makers are seen as interventionists who are well-positioned to draw out stories from a community to which they do not belong. They can work with participants to produce dramatic presentations which are created by members of a community, but which have been made possible by an outsider who looks for ways to reflect the experiences of the participants back to them – sometimes with the promise of renewed understanding and even possibilities of future change. Although the premise of applied theatre work is therefore underpinned by the concept of the 'other', applied theatre practitioners, nonetheless, have adopted feminist interview practices deemed essential when working with the narratives of those who are not from the same community as the

researchers. These include operating with a level of self-reflexivity – or with the ‘thick description’ that McDonnell recommends – identifying and naming power imbalances between project initiators and those for whom the project is intended, providing a space for constructive and open dialogue between all participants, and seeking forms of reciprocity, whereby the theatre makers feel they are able to give something back to the community to which they came as outsiders.

One additional, but related, area of discussion this chapter focusses upon is the insider/outsider terminology used to describe whether the researcher or theatre maker comes from the same community as those whose narratives they employ for their work. Although this definition is occasionally employed in relation to determining positionality, as a binary concept, it is generally regarded as being insufficiently nuanced to fully incorporate the understandings of intersectionality which, again, developed from post-modernist thinking. Feminists’ understanding of intersectionality reflects the realisation that, not only does everyone speak from their own subjective position, but their subjectivities are often complex and multi-layered, and deeply entrenched in power differentials in society. Examples from oral history scholarship demonstrate how interviewers in that field endeavour to identify their own positionality – albeit from a wider spectrum of the basic insider/outsider understanding – in order to broaden the remit of their research. This, I suggest, is something that could be undertaken in all economies of verbatim theatre work and, in the next chapter, I explore my own positionality in the production of a verbatim piece that I wrote, when sharing some, but not all, of the identities of one of the contributors.

As some examples in oral history scholarship demonstrate, outsiders can be well placed to work with a community’s narratives since they are not personally invested in the final dramatic representation and also because they can ask questions to clarify events or opinions about which they have no previous knowledge. In such cases, the responses might be more detailed than between two people in an interview situation from the same community. An insider who gathers interviews from a community, however, can be welcomed by community members who might feel a greater sense of trust towards someone who has had some of the same experiences as them, most especially when that community has suffered from prejudice or oppression. A third option, and one that reflects

Frisch's concept of shared authority, is one where, rather than playwrights seemingly appropriating interviews from people who hold a different identity as them, and who are from a different community, some form of co-creation might be possible, as demonstrated in Nagel's production, *Bare Mountains*.

If verbatim theatre playwrights were keen to explore or even adopt some of the leading tenets of feminist oral history, in terms of identifying positionality and power imbalances in order to mitigate charges of exploitation, the question would inevitably arise of whether such steps should *only* be taken in the creation of productions where the contributors come from marginalised communities, in which the risks of appropriation by theatre makers are considerably higher than in productions where the contributors are from a similar population as the theatre makers. I suggest that since verbatim plays are based on interviews with living people, or even when tribunal plays present trial scripts, in theatre work involving any kind of contributors, practitioners must operate with the same level of ethical vigilance, employ self-reflexivity in their working processes and demonstrate a duty of care towards those whose words they employ in their scripts. This would include identifying the playwrights' positionality and the inherent power differentials in the interview situation and attempting to ascertain the ways in which these factors might impact the contributors' levels of disclosure and trust in the project.

## **Chapter Five. An examination of beneficial opportunities that arise for contributors who share a similar identity with the playwright**

### **Introduction**

Building on discussions addressed in the previous chapter about the positionality of the playwright in relation to contributors in verbatim theatre processes, this chapter will explore this matter with regard to one of my own plays, *Gateway to Heaven*, (based on interviews with twenty-four older lesbians and gay men) and I will examine my positionality, as the playwright, in relation to the contributor 'Eileen'. When I initially interviewed her for the play in 2004, Eileen, originally from Newcastle, but living in London, was in her early sixties. By her own choice, almost all of her interview focussed on her ten-year career in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS or 'Wrens', as it was known) and she spoke in detail about being dishonourably discharged from the British Armed Services in 1970, after she had been accused of, and had admitted to, being a lesbian. As a lesbian, myself, I intend to critically reflect upon some of the advantages that I believe my insider positionality provided for Eileen, both in the interview situation and in relation to her disclosure, her level of trust in me, as the playwright, and in the theatre project as a whole.

The playwright as outsider to a community with whom they work is a position that is generally privileged in applied theatre work and one that can frequently be identified in many verbatim theatre productions, including tribunal plays, and it often is regarded as providing objectivity and critical distance. The argument I propose in this thesis, that a playwright hold an insider positioning in professional verbatim theatre work, especially when contributors are from marginalised communities, therefore diverges from current understandings in practice and scholarship. However, I will turn to feminist theory and examples in oral history practice to demonstrate how, in some cases, an insider positioning can be beneficial both for the interviewer's purposes and for the resulting quality of the narrators' experience within the project. Using the tools of intersectionality, I attempt to define my own insider status whilst also interrogating the use of that term, with the understanding that essentialism can be problematic since it assumes too much of a shared identity.

In this chapter, I place Eileen's personal narratives within an historical context since I suggest that an understanding of the lives of older LGBT people provides greater insight into what may or may not be disclosed in an interview situation. The kind of prejudice that older lesbians and gay men will have encountered during their lifetimes can have a bearing on how safe and comfortable they feel about sharing personal narratives and also on how they might react to seeing their own stories theatrically portrayed. I will therefore extend my initial examination of my own positionality with Eileen into an exploration of the ways in which her shared identity with the majority of the audience members who attended a playreading of *Gateway to Heaven* impacted her experience of seeing the play performed.

Finally, I will employ excerpts from an interview that I conducted with Eileen eight years after her the first interview – six years after the play was produced. The content of this longitudinal interview not only provides insight into her own involvement in the production, but also underpins the argument I expound in this chapter that my insider status as a playwright produced beneficial outcomes for both the contributor and the play.

### ***Gateway to Heaven: the production and Eileen's scene***

*Gateway to Heaven* is based on interviews with twenty-four older lesbians and gay men, and addresses their lives and experiences, from the 1940s to the 1990s, of living in a society in which the majority of people's sexual orientation differed from their own.<sup>15</sup> The play draws its title from the Gateways Club, a famous lesbian bar in Chelsea, London, which opened in 1931 and featured in the film *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), and Heaven, a popular Soho dance club for gay men, which opened in 1980. I wrote the play and it was performed by my theatre company, Artemis. In 2005, a rehearsed playreading, funded by the Arts Council, was presented at Oval House in London, followed by a Question and Answer session with the cast, writer, director, contributors, and invited audience members from various LGBT groups and organisations. The following year, there was a three-week run of the play, also at Oval House (again funded by the Arts Council), followed by two national tours of the production.

---

<sup>15</sup> At times in this chapter, I refer to 'members of the LGBT community', but I employ the terms 'lesbians' and 'gay men' when referring to the older people I interviewed for the play from that population, since they identified themselves using these terms.

In 2004, I sourced older lesbians and gay men to interview; some of whom I had known beforehand, some who were suggested by friends and colleagues, and a few who had a political profile of which I, and others within the LGBT community, were already aware. For my play, the purpose of all the interviews I conducted was to gather information in the form of personal testimonies about contributors' experiences of being gay or lesbian in the UK in the mid to late twentieth century. In this way, although my primary intention was to create a verbatim script, I was able to gain access to historical memoirs which would possibly not have been documented, otherwise. The script runs along a chronological time frame, beginning with the characters/actors delivering – mainly in monologue form – accounts from their childhoods about how and when they first realised they were lesbian, gay or felt, in some way 'different'. The subsequent scenes present narratives relating to the contributors' sexual orientation (scripted in dialogue form, whenever possible) that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s. The play then dramatises memories of incidents in lesbian and gay pubs and clubs, and political acts and actions (such as the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, and the Greenham Common Peace Camp, which began in 1981) which were mentioned in relation to their personal impact on contributors. Throughout the piece, music cues from the periods described were employed during and between scenes, beginning with Doris Day singing 'Once I had a Secret Love' and finishing with the cast taking their bow to The Communards' 'You Are my World'. The action of the play ends in the mid-1980s, when it was generally agreed by contributors that lesbian and gay rights and support had finally made notable gains in the UK.

Eileen joined the Wrens when she was nineteen. She told me: 'my world opened up from there. I had lots of different relationships with women' (Eileen, 2004), adding that 'life became quite rich in that respect because you felt you were part of an inner sanctum with people who understood you and shared your career' (2004). After ten years of service, Eileen became caught up in what she refers to as 'the witch hunts', when some women were accused by their superior officers of being lesbians, sometimes supported by documented evidence in the form of love letters, or by word-of-mouth confessions made by other women. This is an excerpt from her original interview:

I was standing in front of the officer in charge and I could see copies of my letters that were written some time earlier, quite a few years ago, and she charged me with being a lesbian. So,

what do you do? I wasn't going to lie. I thought, 'She's got evidence in front of me', and in that split second it seemed better not to lie. To be called a liar would have seemed worse than being a lesbian to me. She said, 'Do you know what it means?' And I said yes, I did. I suppose I was in shock. I just couldn't believe it, really. It took a while to sink in but basically my career was at an end from that moment on.

I can see myself. I was standing on the steps waiting for my taxi to take me to my bedsit in Earls Court, which was all I could afford, and just still in shock, four weeks on. My uniform had been handed in. I'd had to do all these leaving rounds. You had to go to your pay department to hand back your pay book, your equipment and uniform, and it's like everything was taken away from you. There was tremendous shame involved in that and, of course, I was out without a pension. (Eileen, 2012)<sup>16</sup>

After the interviews for the play were completed and the script was written, Eileen was invited to a rehearsed playreading of the piece and then, a few months later, to the final show. During these performances, she saw me, as a member of the cast, perform as 'her character' in a scene where I narrated her exact words, acting out the scene where she had been interviewed by a superior officer and charged with being a lesbian.

After the tour of the play ended, I stayed in touch with Eileen and we became friends. At one point, Eileen revealed to me what a huge step it was for her to tell me the story employed in the play and then to have watched the scene performed dramatically. She also mentioned that being interviewed about her past experiences had made her look afresh at some of the events about which she had spoken. These comments led me to interview her again in 2012, eight years after her first interview and while I was involved in research for my MA in Applied Theatre, and I refer to this interview as a 'longitudinal' interview. The initial or original interview which I mention is the one from which I took the excerpts which were employed in the script, and what I refer to as the 'follow-up' interview was a phone call I had with Eileen at the end of my scripting period when I needed to secure some additional details for her scene. It is rare for verbatim playwrights to have access to documentation relating to how a contributor has been affected by their involvement and so I am indebted to Eileen for her feedback, upon which I am now able to critically reflect.

---

<sup>16</sup> **Appendix 1**, at the end of this thesis, shows how this interview extract was scripted for the play *Gateway to Heaven*, in the script that was published by Tollington Press in 2019.

## Identifying my own positionality as the playwright

In endeavouring to identify my own positionality in relation to the contributors to *Gateway to Heaven* and, in particular, to Eileen, and to critically reflect upon my own bias or agenda when working on this production, I turn to Tooth Murphy's observation, as a reminder of the importance of these processes in oral history work, when she states:

our ability to engage with and explore both our subjectivities as researchers, and the subjectivities of our interviewees, is vital in understanding what impact these dynamics have on the interview: on what our interviewees do or do not say, and the questions we do or do not ask. (2020: 35).

The second part of this statement, about the level of disclosure by narrators, is as relevant to verbatim theatre work as it is to oral history since scripts are created from the narratives of contributors and dynamics between the playwright and those who are interviewed can affect the level of disclosure or trust. In verbatim theatre work with refugees, (a matter which will be addressed at greater length in Chapter Eight), Isobel Blomfield and Caroline Lenette discuss situations where theatre practitioners have 'a limited understanding of their own biases and frameworks when speaking *on behalf of* people whose experiences they have not previously shared' and they state that, in such a scenario, 'this lack of reflexivity can lead artists to perpetuate narratives of disconnection, further 'othering', abjection, disempowerment, and voiceless-ness' (2018: 323). Reflexivity is therefore an important step in the process of recognising power dynamics in the interview situation which can impact the narrators' disclosure and the level of trust they have in the interviewer (or playwright), and in the project (or production) for which they are being interviewed.

I view my shared sexual orientation with the contributor Eileen as placing me primarily as an insider playwright in relation to her but, employing the tools of intersectionality as outlined in the previous chapter, I also recognise that, rather than only having essentialised, individual identities, as Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge explain, 'individuals can be seen as having multiple "subjectivities" that they construct from one situation to the next' (2016: 124). Although both Eileen and I identify as lesbians, Eileen is from a working-class northern background, and I, from a middle-class southern one; there is an age gap between us of about sixteen years – so, at the time that I wrote the play, I was interviewing 'older' lesbians and gay men – and also, although I never mentioned this to

Eileen, I am not enamoured of the military as a profession, in the way that she most definitely is! But for the purpose of the interview and my desire to secure as much useable narrative as I could solicit from her, we both focused on the shared similarities in our life experiences, rather than on any differences. If Eileen's interview had been conducted for the purpose of an oral history project, the interviewer would automatically state her own subjectivities at the beginning of any written research. Verbatim theatre work differs in this regard, since the primary aim is a theatre production and not a piece of historical research, but I suggest that there are advantages to be gained in reflecting upon the ways my shared sexual orientation with Eileen might have impacted her experience as a contributor in the play – a matter under investigation in this chapter. Although (as discussed previously), the terminology of insider/outsider can prove somewhat limiting, in an exploration of the benefits that an insider positioning produced, both for Eileen and for the play as a whole, this term is still a helpful one.

Since the matter of the positionality of the playwright in relation to contributors is not one that has been discussed in any length in theatre scholarship, I draw upon examples in oral history where lesbians have addressed their own positionality and subjectivities when interviewing narrators who were also lesbians. Jane Traies has conducted extensive research into the lives of older lesbians in the UK, and she concludes: 'my experience suggests that working with older LGBTQ people is an endeavour in which "insider research" is still the most effective strategy' (2020: 76). She comments: 'although the women I interviewed were diverse in terms of class, education and socio-economic status, they were all prepared to welcome me into their homes and lives because they saw me, an older woman and a lesbian, as someone who would understand them' (76). She also contends that what she had in common with them 'enabled them to trust [her] with stories they might not otherwise have told' (76). Shulamit Reinharz, author of 'Feminist Methods in Social Research' (1992) describes how, in 1981, the British sociologist, Ann Oakley, 'posited a contradiction between "scientific" interviewing requiring objectivity, and feminist research requiring openness, engagement, and the development of a potentially long-lasting relationship' (1992: 27). The new model of feminist research that Ann Oakley advocates was one which 'included self-disclosure and "believing the interviewee"' (27). Reinharz explains how: 'a believed interviewee is likely to trust the interviewer and thus likely to disclose "the

truth” (28). In any discussions relating to oral history or verbatim theatre, the concept of truth will always be an amorphous one but, if verbatim theatre work is viewed through the lens of this feminist understanding, it might be the case that *believing* contributors in this way can result in a greater level of disclosure and trust from those who are interviewed which, in turn, can produce richer possibilities for the playwright’s final script.

In the longitudinal interview that I conducted with Eileen, I asked her specifically about whether she had felt more comfortable telling me about her experiences because I shared her sexual orientation than she perhaps would have done with a heterosexual interviewer, and she was adamant that this was the case. She also told me: ‘I was interested in my contribution being recorded in some way’, (Eileen, 2012) and she said she was aware of some of my previous work around LGBT history, explaining: ‘I knew you from where I’d seen you talk and where you’d performed and been involved so I knew where you were coming from and your attitude as well as knowing you as a performer’ (2012). In evaluating whether it was our shared sexual orientation and some of our similar life experiences that afforded Eileen a greater degree of trust in the interview process and the project, I also have to acknowledge, from this comment, that my identity as a public figure clearly played some part in her view of this work. However, arguably, the two angles are not mutually exclusive, since my work is, and always has been, largely focussed on the LGBTQ community. Eileen therefore knew that the production to which she was contributing was created by a lesbian whose previous plays had been performed to audience members who mainly came from the LGBT population.

One of the perceived advantages to an outsider to a community interviewing narrators is noted by Tooth Murphy who, in her article, ‘Listening In, Listening Out: intersubjectivity and the impact of insider and outsider status in oral history interviews’ (2020), describes two of her own projects: one with older lesbians – on lesbian identity and lesbian literature in post-war Britain – and the other, for the Bethnal Green Memorial Project, for which memories were recorded about the bombing of Bethnal Green tubes station in 1943. Regarding the first of these oral history projects, Tooth Murphy describes how her insider status (as a lesbian) ‘was hugely influential, aiding in establishing rapport, building trust, and, as a result, eliciting in depth and richly textured interview responses’ (37). For the Bethnal Green project, however, she outlines some of the advantages she

perceived in her being an outsider to the community she was researching, which included maintaining 'a distance that was beneficial when working in such an emotive area' (42). She states: 'I did not bring with me the agenda of my own story to tell, nor my emotional investment, meaning I was free to listen authentically to interviewee's testimonies' (42). Tooth Murphy suggests that insider/outsider advantages and drawbacks, might be viewed more as 'different possibilities, resulting in different outcomes' (43), but she concludes: 'if researchers are attempting to reach marginalised communities, they must be aware that they *may* be gifted some of those communities' stories, and that they may not' (43).

In identifying my own agenda in creating *Gateway to Heaven*, it is clear that I wanted to secure narratives from contributors which highlight the prejudice that older lesbians and gay men have experienced over previous decades. Since I was not writing up research in the way a sociologist or an oral historian would, this bias was, I suggest, in no way detrimental to the final product resulting from the interview – the play. In much verbatim theatre work, playwrights usually have a strong opinion about the subject matter they wish to address dramatically and it is generally accepted that they will select excerpts from the interview content they procure in order to express their own views or concerns on the matter addressed in the production.

In addition to foregrounding the discrimination that older lesbians and gay men have experienced in their lifetimes, I also wished to add those personal testimonies to the canon of LGBTQ history which has been significantly under-documented. The sociologist Ken Plummer, explains how what he terms 'the slow democratisation of society' (2001: 90) has produced an emergence of 'stories from the margins – writings which start to work at the borders of boundaries and difference' (90). He states: 'one of the clearest of situations where voices have appeared telling their life stories where once there was silence is in the case of lesbian and gay stories' (94). The reason for this silence is mainly because of the danger – both perceived and experienced – that members of this population faced when they had spoken about their private lives in times before homosexuality was legally and socially more acceptable. Older lesbians and gay men in the UK have lived through significant social and political changes, including Acts of Parliament that have impacted their lives, almost beyond recognition. When interviewed about their lives as lesbians and gay

men, oral historians or playwrights ask them to recall times during which they felt significantly restrained, both socially and legally.

### **Interviewing older lesbians and gay men**

Male homosexuality was against the law in England until 1967, when it was only partially decriminalised by the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised private homosexual acts between men aged over twenty-one, whilst, at the same time, imposing heavier penalties on street offences. The law was not changed for Scotland until 1980 or for Northern Ireland until 1982. In the first half of the twentieth century, no laws were passed that criminalised sexual activities between women, but this was largely due to the fact that parliamentarians had deliberately avoided formally discussing the matter. Caroline Derry, writing about lesbian legislation during the 1921 debates on the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, explains how, 'MPs believed that silencing would prevent most respectable British women from even knowing that the possibility existed' (2018: 256). The historical silencing of lesbianism in the UK has meant that, whilst their sexual behaviour was not criminalised in the same way as men's, the visibility of women loving women, and consequently, their political and social agency, have been severely restricted.

In the armed services, regulations in the treatment of lesbians and gay men lagged significantly behind laws passed in Parliament, a fact pertinent to Eileen's experience of being dismissed from the Royal Navy in 1970 with a dishonourable discharge, for being a lesbian. The 1967 Sexual Offences Act did not apply to the merchant navy nor the armed forces. One section of that Act limited its application to the civil arena, with homosexuality in the military remaining an offence under the 1955 Army and Air Force Acts and the 1957 Naval Discipline Act. In 1999, the ban on gays serving in the military was suspended, after the Court of Human Rights declared it to be illegal. The Court stated that the government's policy of sacking all known homosexuals from the armed forces was a breach of their human rights.

For a majority of the lifetimes of older lesbian and gay men, homosexuality was regarded by society as a sickness and, although lesbians were not publicly exposed on the same scale as gay men, their non-conforming lifestyles and identities were often viewed as a problem within society. Emily Hamer, in her history of twentieth century lesbians, states

that during the mid-twentieth century, some lesbians were referred to psychiatrists ‘who sought to cure their homosexuality’ (1996: 147), and it was not until 1992 that the World Health Organisation (WHO) declassified homosexuality as a mental illness. Furthermore, being lesbian or gay has generally been perceived by Western Christian societies as religiously reprehensible. Some, if not all these factors inevitably contribute to how an older gay man or lesbian speaks about their past experiences, when interviewed.

Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (2012), observe that ‘queer oral histories begin with an agreement between a narrator and a researcher to record memories of queer genders, sexualities, and desires’ (2012: 1). They explain that: ‘if there is not a narrator to claim that sexual space of queer historical being and its retelling, and a queer researcher to hear, record, and draw out yet more details, desire and meaning from it, no queer oral history is possible’ (1). Whether for an oral history project or a verbatim play, in common with other oppressed sectors of society, older lesbians and gay men may welcome the opportunity to be interviewed about their lives, especially when their stories might benefit others in the same population. However, because of how they have been treated historically, a tension can exist between their desire to speak out, and their past experiences of either being silenced or suffering adverse consequences after speaking out about their sexual orientation. Unlike members of some other marginalised communities, lesbians and gay men have spent a lifetime deciding whether or not to *reveal* their identity to others; so agreeing to be interviewed is, in itself, an act of ‘coming out’, which, for the narrator, can carry a degree of perceived danger.

Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, discussing oral history and ethics, state that ‘queer’ oral history – as what they perceive to be an emancipatory practice – ‘asks more of both interviewer and narrator’ (2019: 352) and they suggest that emancipatory oral history work ‘is necessarily ambitious because it demands both personal and professional engagement and is interested in documenting marginalised voices as well as the process and politics of doing so’ (352). Boyd and Ramirez also recognise that narrators from this population ‘risk opening themselves up to vulnerability or trauma during an oral history exchange’ (2012: 8) and they state that, for LGBTQ narrators, ‘there is no way of predicting what will emerge in the dialogue and what kind of feelings may be attached to a particular memory’ (8). During my first interview with Eileen for the play, she seemed fully prepared to

talk about one of the hardest periods of her life, that of being dishonourably discharged from a job in the Wrens, which she had loved. However, during a brief follow-up interview that I conducted with her on the phone a few months after the initial one, towards the end of my scripting process, her responses to my questions were not quite as confident as they had been the first time. In fact, I seemed to unsettle her by asking her some additional questions relating to one of the areas of the story she had originally told me. My reason for the phone call was to ensure that the performance would portray the military codes, language and procedure of an internal Naval investigation as accurately as possible. Eileen answered my questions about styles of salute, what rank the officer had been, what both their uniforms looked like (since we would have to hire them in for the show), and who said what to whom in the incident when she was officially discharged from the Navy.

In a longitudinal interview, which I conducted eight years later with Eileen face-to-face, asking about her personal experience of being involved in the production, she revealed that she had found the phone interview to be an extremely difficult exchange, in comparison to the first face-to-face interview. To me, this provides an example of the unexpected emergence of vulnerability and trauma that can occur specifically in interviews with LGBTQ narrators, to which Boyd and Ramirez refer. Below is a transcribed portion of the interview relating to this incident which I cite in order to underpin my argument that, when narratives are disclosed which relate to periods of suffering due to prejudice, having an interviewer who shares the same identity as the contributors can provide a sense of understanding and support for them. I have included my own questions as well as Eileen's comments, thus addressing the oral historian, Portelli's concern that 'when the researcher's voice is cut out the narrator's voice is distorted' (1998: 71). Discussing the matter of the follow-up phone call, our conversation went as follows:

CLARE: I think I said: 'What were the words, what was the rank, what would they have called you?' I don't know if you remember that?

EILEEN: I do, yes I do. Do you know, I think I had a resistance to that.

CLARE: Did you really?

EILEEN: Yes, I think I did.

CLARE: Perhaps it brought home what I was really going to do with the scene in a way that maybe the first interview hadn't.

EILEEN: Yes, I think I did. I was quite puzzled why you wanted to know all those details. But I wasn't puzzled really when I thought about it – it was resistance.

CLARE: And why was it resistance?

EILEEN: Well, it was activating all the associations with the uniform, the time, the climate, the accent, the people that were around. What did she say? What did I say? The whole regulation part of it, and it activated all the finer detail of the memory and I didn't want to go there, probably. It was the usual in-built resistance, you know, that I think we all have. In my experience, most of us have that in our community really. Most people don't go there. They won't be interviewed ... in the lesbian and gay community. (Eileen, 2012)

Eileen's comments demonstrate that she found being questioned about the precise details of the time she had been discharged from the Navy far more difficult than our initial interview had proved to be. This could be to do with the fact that she was unprepared for the conversation, or because my questions were asked during a phone call, or because the questions were so specific, or a combination of these factors. She uses the word 'resistance' to describe how she felt and explains that the details she was being asked about re-triggered a whole range of feelings she had experienced at the time of her dismissal.

This exchange encouraged me to examine ethical considerations relating to my interviewing someone on a phone call for the purpose of obtaining information that I had not secured in the initial interview. However, I am now of the opinion that her discomfort was not so much due to my unannounced intrusiveness, but more to do with the fact that the details I was asking her about brought up deeply buried feelings of shame and triggered other old wounds from the time when her career had been forcibly terminated because of her sexual orientation.

### **Historical shaming of lesbians and gay men**

Groups in society that have suffered prejudice and stigma have often also experienced shame, as well as shaming. Gershan Kaufman and Lev Raphael in, 'Coming Out of Shame:

Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives' (1996), claim: 'when we are shamed, our attention immediately turns inward, and we become suddenly impaled under the magnifying gaze of our own eyes. Now we are *watching* ourselves and we feel excruciatingly exposed, revealed as lesser' (1996: 155). This comment appears to reflect Eileen's experience of the phone call interview, when I asked her several detailed questions about her dismissal from the Navy.

In her original testimony, she had employed the phrase 'I can see myself' when speaking about the day she was sacked, which suggests that the initial interview enabled her to take the position of looking back at her younger self; but, arguably, the phone call accentuated her sense of exposure. A phone conversation is quite different from a face-to-face interview, where interpersonal space allows for expressions of verbal and non-verbal signals, which can reassure the narrator. Paul Gilbert and Bernice Andrews have observed that shame is often defined as 'acute arousal or fear of being exposed, scrutinised, and judged negatively by others' (1998: 6). During the phone call, therefore, it is possible that Eileen felt less supported and more alone with her memories than in her first interview, when I, the interviewer, was with her in person. Consequently, the feelings of shame associated with her dismissal from the Navy came to the fore.

Gilbert and Andrews understand shame as 'an involuntary response to an awareness that one has lost status and is devalued' (30). Far from claiming that any older lesbian or gay man would automatically feel a sense of shame about their sexual orientation, I suggest that Eileen's story, as well as her experience when interviewed, can be better understood by examining how the concept of shame may have previously impacted her life and that of other older lesbians and gay men. Kaufman and Raphael observe how: 'a sense of belonging grows only through positive identification with others. Any specific minority group – ethnic, racial or sexual – will inevitably be confronted by negative cultural images that, once internalised, obstruct the development of a coherent minority identity' (1996: 79). Whilst substantial legal gains and advances in societal understanding have made it much easier for people to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender in the present day, some older lesbians and gay men narrating stories about their past not only have memories of being shamed by others, but have also battled with internalised homophobia, over their lifetimes. In the longitudinal interview, speaking about her own sexual orientation, Eileen told me:

as much as we might put it out there politically, and anger, and

all that sort of thing, there's always that little wound, that little bit that niggles away, that internalised homophobia, that it's wrong somehow. I know it isn't, but there's always that little bit... if you've come through my generation of time. (Eileen, 2012)

And in that interview, after Eileen first mentioned the shame she felt at being dismissed from the Wrens, I took the opportunity to ask her to expand on that concept, in relation to her own experiences. She explained:

I think that shame is internalised homophobia. That's part of it, it's not the whole of it, but it is part of it. So, I think the shame was there anyway as part of the internalised homophobia, as well as all the other things that I've described, and the interview would have opened that up, which I would have preferred not to have. But, with hindsight, I know that it was a good thing for me because it's opened it out. (Eileen, 2012)

Kaufman and Raphael suggest that silence reinforces shame, arguing that 'silence is the distinctive way for the wider culture to oppress lesbian and gay men' (1996: 8). In agreeing to be interviewed for the play, by a sympathetic listener who was also a lesbian, with the understanding that the personal stories she shared were going to be made public to a predominantly LGBT audience, Eileen broke that silence.

### **A path from shame to pride**

Kaufman and Raphael contend that, rather than staying in a place of shame about being gay 'the path to gay pride also requires positive identification directly with other gay men or lesbians, not only separately by sex but also together as people bound by shared experience' (1996: 181). I suggest that, for Eileen, such a transition was achieved not only through telling her testimony to a sympathetic listener who shared the same sexual orientation, but also by the presentation of her dramatised story to other members of her own community.

At the rehearsed playreading which Eileen attended, the audience comprised of, predominantly, members of LGBT groups and organisations who had been invited by the theatre company. During the longitudinal interview, she told me that seeing 'her' scene enacted that night had made her cry – 'the first time I'd really cried about it' (Eileen, 2012) – and she said that, when the play ended, 'I'd never felt so lonely in all my life. I can still feel it now. I felt that really deep sense of aloneness' (2012). This comment, which undoubtedly

reflects her past feelings of isolation, had been triggered by revisiting a traumatic period of her life. However, she added: 'I did have a lot of sympathy that night. I remember that. It was there in the audience' (2012). Seeing her story staged had a profound impact upon Eileen. Stuart Fisher, writing about verbatim theatre created from interviews with vulnerable narrators, proposes that:

the enactment of the verbatim subject's story by a professional actor can facilitate a moment of recognition and a positive process of empathetic identification which, if handled carefully, can be beneficial or even therapeutic for the verbatim subjects who offer up their stories in this way. (2011a: 193)

Eileen's story, which focusses almost entirely on the prejudice she experienced on account of her sexual orientation, was performed to an audience of empathetic and supportive members of the LGBT population, many of whom were also older lesbians. Furthermore, the play was staged at a time when discriminatory laws against lesbians and gay men in the armed services had been repealed. On the night Eileen first saw the piece, events from her life history, rather than being adversely judged, were instead, celebrated – arguably affording her the possibility of moving from a place of silence and shame around the memories she had shared, to one of validation and pride.

One understanding of this account provided by Eileen is that, in addition to the playwright sharing her sexual orientation and affording her a greater degree of trust in the project, because many audience members were also from the LGBT population, her sense of safety and well-being at the performance itself was also increased. This example demonstrates that a deeper level of research is needed in verbatim theatre practice and scholarship into the importance of the positionality of the playwright in relation to members of the community that they interview. It would also be valuable to document the experience of the contributors who have watched a play being performed in order to determine how the positionality of the audience impacted their experience.

## **Conclusion**

In verbatim theatre scholarship, there has been limited discussion about a playwright's positionality but prevalent practice and opinion appears to favour the playwright holding an outsider position. In response to this understanding, I have outlined some of the advantages

which I claim can be attained in verbatim processes when the writer is an insider, by presenting an analysis of the experience of a contributor to one of my own plays. Comments from interviews conducted with Eileen eight years after her first interview clearly demonstrate that her knowledge that the playwright was also a lesbian increased her trust in the project and contributed to her willingness to participate. Furthermore, I have detailed certain historical events and prevailing social attitudes which, I suggest, can impact an older lesbian or gay man who is interviewed. The previous chapter discussed why some playwrights view the objectivity of a playwright creating plays based on interviews as beneficial; but in this chapter, I have examined the importance of a playwright's subjectivity and addressed some of the benefits a playwright's insider positioning can bring to a contributor.

I contend that when a playwright comes from the same population as a contributor, there can be greater disclosure in an interview and a deeper level of trust in the overall project, especially when the contributor knows that the play will be performed to members of the same population. This may be the case for other insider playwrights and contributors who share gender, race, age or other commonalities; but in the production of *Gateway to Heaven*, the fact that both Eileen and I are lesbians mean that we not only have a shared sexual orientation, but also a shared understanding of how people have suffered in society on account of their sexual orientation. There is a mutual recognition that the prejudice meted out by others in society, historically and to the present day, can result in lesbians and gay men being shamed, feeling ashamed, and experiencing internal homophobia. All these factors support my argument that it is not simply a shared sexual orientation that can enhance a contributor's involvement in a verbatim play about lesbians and gay men, but shared experiences specifically as members of a community who have suffered prejudice and discrimination.

Whilst still feeling extremely proud of her service in the Navy, Eileen knew that an organisation of which she had once felt strongly a part had, at a later point, expelled her. Her interviews for the play afforded her the opportunity to reflect upon those experiences with a lesbian interviewer and then watch them being performed to a predominantly LGBT audience. At one point, she told me: 'it's telling your story to your family, isn't it?' (Eileen, 2012) and she then commented, 'your interview was really a catalyst for that. It started me

on another journey' (2012) – that other journey increasingly involving her with the LGBTQ community, her new 'family', as a valued and celebrated member wherever her story was told and shared, thereafter.

The drawbacks to analysing only one contributor's feedback about her involvement in this play are many and include the fact that Eileen's account is clearly a personal and subjective one and other contributors to the same show may have had different views as to whether or not it enhanced their own experience to know that the playwright shared their sexual orientation. But longitudinal interviews conducted with contributors, asking them about their personal experience of verbatim theatre production provide a new form of knowledge that can inform scholarship and practice. Similarly, discussions about the playwright's positionality in relation to contributors allow for an interrogation into the ways in which a shared identity or experience between theatre makers and contributors can produce beneficial results. When playwrights document their practice, as I have done in this chapter, a deeper understanding of verbatim processes can occur, even though the account and analysis is an subjective one. But, as Reinharz notes, "'starting from one's own experience" is an idea that developed in reaction to androcentric social science' and it 'violates the conventional expectation that a researcher be detached, objective, and "value neutral"' (1992: 261).

Although this chapter has highlighted benefits which, I suggest, were afforded to Eileen through her involvement in *Gateway to Heaven* because the playwright and many audience members shared a similar sexual orientation, I am not suggesting it is always a requirement for playwrights working with members of marginalised communities to share the same identity or experiences as their contributors. Documented examples exist of plays created by outsider verbatim playwrights, such as Nagel, Stuart Fisher, Jeffers and Maedza, who employ a high level of critical reflection and ethical integrity in their work. And, in regard to issues of positionality, Alcoff states: 'it is not *always* the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off, or that when we speak for others they end up worse off' (1991-1992: 29). But nonetheless, verbatim theatre work where interviews are sought from members of a marginalised community, particularly when they have been historically shamed or silenced, is open to accusations of appropriation or exploitation of contributors by theatre makers who might come from a different community

as the contributors. In such cases, any steps the theatre makers can take to mitigate such risks – including the employment of a playwright who has shared experience with those being interviewed – will make the production methods more ethically robust. These steps can also enhance the level of disclosure by contributors and ultimately create a stronger script and final performance, due to an increased feeling of trust by contributors in the projects for which they are interviewed.

## **Chapter Six. Ethical challenges in creating theatre from interviews with vulnerable contributors**

### **Introduction**

Verbatim theatre work is ideally suited to dispersing narratives from members of populations that have previously been overlooked in the historical record, some of whom could be categorised as vulnerable. There is limited scholarship, however, on the ethical challenges playwrights face when creating plays from interviews with such contributors but, since the concerns are inevitably heightened in such productions, this chapter will address research questions pertaining to the production of verbatim theatre from narratives provided by one particular group of contributors who would be considered vulnerable, namely, those who are mentally ill.

Heddon suggests that some playwrights see verbatim theatre as giving ‘a voice to the voiceless’ (2008: 128), but in the case of contributors whose voices or stories are frequently doubted or quite simply dismissed because of the perceived unreliability of the speaker, when playwrights do produce dramatic works which include their testimonies, to what extent are the narrators’ accounts even believed? Furthermore, there is always a possibility that playwrights will appropriate these stories for their own purpose or political or ideological agenda, rather than only use the dramatic portrayal of interview content as a means by which the voices of those who are mentally ill are ‘voiced’ or dispersed to a wider audience who might never have otherwise heard their stories. If this is the case, should the main focus of the theatre makers’ work be on minimising the risk of exploitation of the contributors, and is it still possible that contributors might benefit from participating in the production of plays based on their narratives and, if so, what could those benefits be? This chapter will also question when and how it is appropriate for a verbatim playwright to interview contributors who have severe mental health issues. Additionally, it will examine how the positionality of the playwright in relation to contributors who are mentally ill impacts the level of disclosure and the degree of trust in the project by those who are interviewed.

Some existing verbatim theatre scholarship includes accounts of the impact creating theatre from interviews can have upon contributors who have suffered trauma and prejudice (Beck, 2016; Stuart Fisher, 2011a), and this subject will be explored more fully in Chapter Eight in relation to plays based on narratives provided by asylum seekers and refugees. But since there is limited documentation of verbatim theatre processes which involve people who are mentally ill, in order to address the research questions stated above, I will critically reflect upon one of my theatre company's own productions, *Hearing Voices*, which toured theatres in the UK in 2010. The analysis I present is not in the form of Practice as Research (PaR), since the piece was produced several years before this thesis was written. However, because of my involvement in the play, as the writer, director of the playreading (not the full production), and my role as an actor in the piece, combined with follow-up documentation I procured by way of interviewing one of the contributors in a longitudinal interview three years after the show was performed, I suggest that the play and my documentation of it, combined with my critical reflections upon the working process go some way to filling a gap in knowledge in verbatim theatre scholarship about the creation of plays from interviews with contributors who are vulnerable, and in particular those who are mentally ill and have experiences of the psychiatric system.

### ***Hearing Voices* – the production, the tour and the contributors**

*Hearing Voices* is a play primarily based on interviews with five other patients about their experiences of being mentally ill and of being hospitalised on a secure psychiatric ward in the UK, which is where I had met them, after I had been admitted to the same ward myself. It also includes some of my own personal accounts of my hospitalisation, and excerpts from interviews with some professional contributors who work in mental health. In 2009, with Arts Council funding, my theatre company presented a rehearsed playreading of the piece at the Cochrane theatre, London, which I directed. A year later, again with Arts Council funding, the production toured to ten theatres (with seating capacities of between one hundred and three hundred) around England in April and May 2010, with one, two or three performances at each venue. Theatres included the Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield; Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton; the Mumford, Cambridge; the Brewery, Bristol; and Lighthouse, Poole. The shows were all well attended and they frequently sold out, reflecting – I believe – the high degree of general interest in the subject matter covered in the piece.

My own personal history, which led me to address the subject of mental health was that, a few years prior to the production, I suffered a mental breakdown triggered by the ending of a long-term relationship, but ultimately the result of deep-rooted childhood trauma. In the two years that followed, I experienced severe depression and suicidal ideations, both symptoms of PTS (Post Traumatic Stress), and finally, I took an overdose and was admitted to a central London hospital. I stayed on a locked psychiatric ward for two months and, during that time, I met some other patients with whom I became close. I heard many of their stories and they heard mine, and we built up friendships that sustained us during that difficult period and continued after we were discharged from hospital.

Even though I was quite ill, as someone who has, for many years, worked in the field of gathering interviews to be employed in verbatim plays, I immediately saw theatrical possibilities in the material (as I viewed it) that I was coming across on a daily basis, in the form of rich and moving personal narratives from the other patients. I decided that as soon as we were discharged from hospital, I would ask permission from the friends I had made to interview them about their experiences. Talking therapy was not offered on the ward or at any stage during our treatment and so, when I eventually wrote the play, I decided I would call it *Hearing Voices*, not because it focused on schizophrenia, but because no-one working within the psychiatric services appeared to want to hear the 'voices' or the stories of the patients, and my intention was to somehow address the balance.

In addition to the lack of talking therapy, and personal disclosure of any kind being strictly discouraged by the staff there was also, in my opinion, an extremely poor level of care and competence demonstrated by the nurses on the ward. Over the previous couple of decades, between acting and writing jobs, I had worked for many years as a care assistant for Mencap<sup>17</sup>, and I had some understanding of what it means to do a shift, do a handover, and be a carer for people who are mentally frail. Even though I was ill, I knew that I was assessing the nurses' work from a professional point of view, as well as from my own perspective as a patient. My view was that the treatment patients received, both inside the hospital and afterwards at the hands of the psychiatric services, was of a deplorably low standard and my aim was to reveal to a wider public some of the more shocking incidents I

---

<sup>17</sup> The Royal Mencap Society is a charity based in the UK that works with people with a learning disability.

had witnessed in hospital by creating a verbatim theatre piece based on interviews with the patients themselves.

I also interviewed four, what I term 'alternative' professionals for the piece: people who also work in the area of mental health – not necessarily within the psychiatric system, but in ways which I regard as kinder and more humane. One of these contributors ran a sanctuary for the suicidal, called Maytree; one was a psychiatrist in the National Health Service (NHS) working with schizophrenic patients in non-medical ways; one had worked as operations manager for The Samaritans and had been involved in writing reports about self-harm, and the fourth was a doctor who had been hospitalised many times herself, on psychiatric wards. By including excerpts from these interviews in the script, I intended to demonstrate that there are more effective ways of treating people in mental distress, other than those currently offered by the NHS psychiatric system. The purpose behind writing a piece of verbatim theatre about the experiences of mental health service users, whose stories of poor treatment are often either denied or ignored by the NHS, was to use theatre to expose a matter of social and political concern. In this way, I was building upon the existing body of documentary and journalistic drama created since the 1970s. One of the main differences between myself and other playwrights is that I was writing about what I had witnessed first-hand. I could make no claim to objectivity when describing how I and other patients had been treated – nor did I intend to; but I hoped that my personal experience might be advantageous in accurately conveying, through dramatic presentation, the poor treatment provided by the NHS psychiatric services to people suffering mental distress.

Two of the friends I made in hospital were Alison and Mary, who had both been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Neither of them had worked for many years, but they used to hold down full-time jobs in local government and teaching, respectively. I also met an Irish woman called Eilis who had been hospitalised on psychiatric wards more than twenty times over a five-year period after taking overdoses, and I became very close to a young Hindu man named Tony, who frequently self-harmed to the point of endangering his life. Another patient I met while I was in hospital was Debbie, a mother of five and a singer-songwriter, who has been diagnosed with bipolar. Debbie is the contributor's real first name, which I have used because she wanted it to be employed in the production but, at their request, I

have employed aliases for the four other patient contributors to *Hearing Voices* mentioned in this chapter. The real names of all four 'alternative' professionals were employed in the published script and performances of the play.

A little while after I was discharged from hospital, I met up individually with my five friends and interviewed them individually for the play and I also secured interviews from the 'alternative' professionals. I then created a script from the interviews and obtained funding from Arts Council England to stage a rehearsed playreading at the Cochrane Theatre in London, with my theatre company, Artemis.<sup>18</sup> Professional actors rehearsed for a week and then performed the script as part of a research and development project. For this event, I was the director and producer, and an actress was employed to play the part of me, in the piece. I invited all the contributors to the playreading and offered to cover their travel costs if required, since I did not want anyone to be deterred from attending due to financial concerns. The playreading was advertised widely to the general public; in particular, to mental health professionals working both within and outside of the psychiatric system. The event was free and the audience numbered more than two hundred and fifty. For the post-show discussion, I asked two of the contributors, Debbie and Tony, to join the actors and myself on stage to answer questions from audience members about the production. The discussion lasted over an hour and a half, and could have continued for twice that amount of time, had it not been for the theatre needing to close for the night.

The discussions that took place were intense and, at times, conflictual. Although I felt strongly about the issues the play addressed and was committed to writing and touring the piece in order to give the wider public insight into what actually occurred on locked psychiatric wards, I had (perhaps naively) not realised beforehand that the subject matter would be so contentious. Some of the feedback provided by audience members indicated a sharp divide between those who had experienced poor treatment from the psychiatric services as patients, and those who worked within that profession who denied that the dramatised incidents they had witnessed could possibly occur. There were also several audience members who were professional carers – mainly psychotherapists and counsellors

---

<sup>18</sup> The playreading took place at the Cochrane Theatre on 10 January 2009. A year later, Arts Council England funded a national tour of the production, which was made into a film, excerpts of which can be found on YouTube. <http://www.hearingvoicesplay.co.uk/>. The script of the play was published in 2010 by Tollington Press.

– who expressed a strong desire to improve existing methods of treating those who are mentally unwell. Additionally, there were audience members who did not have first-hand experience of the mental health system who also contributed to the general debate.

### **Theatrical portrayals of the mentally ill and the psychiatric system**

Two main issues fueled the impassioned debates that occurred after the playreading. Firstly, in recent years, psychiatric practice has come under a great deal of criticism as not necessarily being the most effective way of treating those who suffer from mental illness; and, secondly, the feedback in different forms provided by those who have experienced mental illness and psychiatric services has often been dismissed as non-empirical and, at times, invalid because those providing it have (or have had) diminished mental capacity. Both of these matters are relevant to a discussion about verbatim theatre productions created from interviews people who are mentally ill, since they concern the experiences of contributors who provide their stories for theatrical representation and the degree to which their testimonies are believed, valued, and validated.

Anna Harpin, in *Madness, Art and Society*, contends: ‘it is reasonable to suggest that the state of mental health care is inadequate, too reliant on pharmacology, and experienced as coercive, punitive and dehumanising by a significant proportion of the population with a mental health diagnosis’ (2018: 49). She suggests that ‘if psychiatry can be experienced as brutal or brutalising for a sizeable group, then artistic practice may yield valuable insights for both care and personhood’ (9). The theatrical representation of the mentally ill and the kind of treatment they receive from the psychiatric services would therefore seem to be an effective way to convey patients’ experiences and provide valuable insight to the work and conduct of psychiatric professionals. However, Harpin cautions that: ‘creative practices are all too often marginalised as the soft distraction from hard science, overlooked as of anecdotal interest but of no real clinical value, or simply jettisoned entirely from the debating chamber’ (4).

Other than by creating dramatic portrayals, forms of documenting experiential data from mental health survivors can be found in sociology scholarship and, from that field, Angela Sweeny explains the ways in which testimonies of survivors of the mental health system have been disregarded and invalidated. As a survivor herself, Sweeny observes that:

while many marginalised groups have had their experiences explored and represented by academic sociologists [...] for mental health survivors, this can be particularly noxious and damaging. This is because, historically, our experiences have been disbelieved or dismissed, while our distress has been reduced to symptoms of a psychiatric condition. (2015: 5)

Peter Beresford and Kathy Boxall, who examine services users' knowledges in relation to professional and academic understandings of knowledge, state: 'psychiatric knowledge has been based on the "knowledge claims" of others about the experience of mad people and mental health services users' (2015: 71). They contend that this is also the case for 'a wide range of disabled people, including people with learning difficulties, people with physical and sensory impairments, and older people' (71).

Harpin's arguments, as outlined in *Madness and Art*, combined with the research of sociologists such as Sweeny, Beresford, and Boxall collectively underscore the reasons why those suffering from mental illness have such a critical need for their experiences to be shared, heard and valued. These writers also explore reasons why there is often a reluctance for those experiences to be taken seriously. The production of *Hearing Voices* was my attempt to address both of these issues: to share the stories of people whose experiences and opinions are given little if any attention within society, and also, to shed light on the poor practices employed by psychiatric staff on a NHS ward. However, in employing the phrase 'shed light', I am mindful of Heddon's comments about verbatim theatre playwrights who claim that their purpose is to somehow cast light on particular social or political concerns. She states:

the effect of this rhetoric of 'light' and 'visibility' is that it suggests that something already exists (albeit in the dark) and is simply waiting to be found. What all of this denies is that any so-called 'reflection' is a creative construction and what is reflected or made visible is the practitioners' perspective. (2008: 137)

Heddon also asks 'whose voice is spoken in verbatim productions?' (129), a particularly poignant question when theatre makers tackle a matter of social concern which is a controversial one, since the 'reflection' on the subject matter, and the ensuing production, will be informed by the playwright's personal and political agenda. If this is an inevitable outcome in verbatim theatre processes, then to what extent is the contributors'

involvement diminished, and might benefits still be available to them when their own words are employed by a playwright in the creation of a script?

### **The playwright's agenda and the contributors' agency in *Hearing Voices***

Debbie was discharged from the ward a few weeks before I was and, even though I knew I wanted to interview her for the play I intended to write, I was too ill to visit her for quite a while after I left hospital so there was a period of about four months before I contacted her. During the initial phone call, when I asked her if she would agree to contribute to the play, we set a time and date for me to visit her for an interview. When I went to her home, a couple of her children were playing in different rooms, and her partner, Sean, was also there. Because of her bipolar condition, Debbie varies mentally, from calmer to more agitated states: 'high' and 'low' are the (rather limited) terms used by the psychiatric profession and these moods are often determined by the regularity of her lithium intake. On that visit, it was apparent that she was not on an 'episode', since she was not displaying the intensity of behaviour (in the form of shouting and manic activity) that I had witnessed when she had been in hospital. For the purposes of the interview, I felt that in this calmer state, she would be able to talk to me with a clear head about her thoughts on her own condition, her personal history, how her family felt about her illness, and her views on her treatment by the psychiatric services.

After an initial conversation about how we had both been, health-wise, I explained the work I did when I was not ill – writing plays from interviews with people about a particular subject or theme. I then told her that I wanted to create a piece based entirely on stories of people who had experience of the psychiatric system, myself included. Heddon observes that 'in addition to sourcing and selecting interviewees, verbatim practitioners also construct the questions that are then posed, arguably thereby prompting certain answers' (130). My interview had two key aims: to question Debbie about her own experiences of being mentally ill, inquiring as to how she and her family dealt with her condition, and to ask her how she thought the psychiatric system had treated her over the years she had been unwell. The questions I asked her regarding the first of these matters were 'open' questions, in that I had no idea what she would say and was not seeking any particular kinds of responses. Also, I had no previous knowledge of how Debbie had navigated life as someone

with serious mental health issues. But as far as my questioning Debbie about her views on the psychiatric system in general, I am fully aware that her answers might partially have been informed by the fact that she already knew that I thought quite badly of the treatment I and other patients had received in hospital. An examination of the transcription of the first interview I conducted with Debbie reveals that, at certain points, I did express views regarding the low standard I believed the psychiatric consultants and nurses displayed in their care of patients. But in the interview, Debbie also expressed very strong opinions about what she had experienced as poor treatment, not only during our shared hospital stay, but at other times when she had been hospitalised, sometimes forcibly. She states:

it seems to me they can do anything they want in there and they're not there to care for sick people. They're there, it's almost like they're there to punish you, you know, for having a few more screws loose than them. They've got all their marbles, they've got a good job and you're in here, it becomes almost like a prison, a prison situation. There's no caring. (Debbie, 2007)

Debbie's comments helped me consolidate my own ideas about the general direction the final theatre piece was to take: to demonstrate, through personal narratives, that psychiatric patients in secure wards can sometimes be treated less as mentally frail people in need of help, and more as prisoners who have, in some way, transgressed society's laws and moral codes, and should not expect to receive either sympathy for their illness or a high standard of caring when they are hospitalised.

Debbie and I are not alone in holding such views. They are supported by Christina Katsakou *et al*, whose research concludes that:

various experiences, including not receiving sufficient information, not being involved in treatment decisions, perceiving professionals as having power over patients, and experiencing coercive measures contributed to the patients feeling out of control during their hospitalisation. (ctd. in Harpin, 2018: 9)

Between Debbie's comments and my own experiences, a play was already forming in my mind which would present a harsh indictment of the psychiatric system. However, I concur with Heddon's suggestion (as stated above) that interview questions can be leading and asked with the intention of the contributor responding in a way that confirms and supports the views of the playwright, and I recognise that this analysis is applicable in the case of my own play. In defense of my employment of excerpts from Debbie's interview which

supported my own opinions about our treatment on the ward, I can only add that I already knew, from hearing her own opinions stated loudly and frequently in hospital, that we held many similar views on this matter.

Often, pieces of verbatim theatre tackle issues which might be regarded as politically or socially controversial and they are sometimes produced by theatre makers with firmly-held opinions who see no particular need to strive towards objectivity in their scripts. Ice and Fire, for example, state on their website: 'it is our mission to inspire artists and audiences to create positive change in the world through human rights' (Iceandfire.co.uk [n.d.]). But, it is arguably the case that even when playwrights have a declared agenda and approach their work from an openly subjective viewpoint, they can still employ a reflective awareness and endeavour to ensure that the questions posed to contributors during the interview process are not heavily weighted so as to secure particular responses.

For *Hearing Voices*, as well as having a clear idea about the message that I wished the play to convey, as the writer, I was in the position of selecting excerpts that supported my intended agenda and crafting the interview content in a way that may not always have conveyed the entire range of views held by each contributor. This is another area that Heddon highlights as a matter for concern and ethical scrutiny. Whilst recognising 'the political motivation behind much verbatim work' (2008: 129), she also observes that: 'as the interviewer is often invisible in the subsequently represented interview, we are unable to witness the extent to which the speech statements are jointly authored, the creation of a collaborative or interactive process [...] rather than unprompted and unmediated reflections' (131). Some playwrights creating scripts from interviews, such as Moisés Kaufman, have sought to address this lack of contextual information by occasionally including the voice of the interviewer in the text and citing references within the script itself to indicate the wider context of the interview situation. *The Laramie Project* provides one example of a verbatim theatre playwright employing this method as an engaging dramatic device, which also serves to remind the audience that the content of the play is not fictional but has been created from transcribed interviews with living people.

The following excerpt from the script of *Hearing Voices* (published by Tollington Press, 2010), demonstrates how I included some of the questions I had asked Debbie during my initial interview with her own responses:

CLARE: *(Direct to audience)* Debbie told me that over the years she'd learnt a few things:

DEBBIE: On the wards you've got the glass door and they're on the other side of it, the nurses, the doctors, and that's where I learnt my trick which is *(Shouting)* 'Nurse ... Nurse'! Bang, bang, bang, on the window.

NURSE: What is it Debbie? What is it?

DEBBIE: *(To CLARE)* That's the only way they come running out. I learnt it from this girl who used to do it just like that. Kicking and banging and they would come running out and I thought, 'I'll do that' and that's how I used to get seen. Because otherwise they'd just let you stand there politely knocking for hours and acting like you're not there. I always used to go and check who my nurse was for that day because they're assigned to you and they've got to listen to you.

CLARE: But you could do that because you knew the system?

DEBBIE: That's from years of coming in and out.

CLARE: What was it like when you went into hospital for the first time?

DEBBIE: It was quite frightening... because it was full of nutters! It really was! It was men and women together on the ward at The Maudsley in those days, and there were some crazy guys and girls there, so it was quite full on. (2010: 40)

The decision to situate myself as an interviewer within the script (as well as a character who was also on the ward), addresses some of the ethical issues raised by Heddon about what she perceives to be lack of acknowledgement of co-authorship occurring within verbatim theatre processes. But she raises valid concerns about the lack of transparency in respect to whether or not the creation of a verbatim play is a collaborative process, and how the contributors' original interview content is edited. Providing such information, she contends, is of particular importance in a verbatim play, and she suggests that 'the use of the term "verbatim" deliberately aligns it with some notion of the "authentic" and "truthful"', (2008: 130). Heddon states: "'verbatim" and indeed "documentary", as signifiers, operate like

“autobiography” proposing a relationship of veracity to the supposed facts’ (130). The ‘facts’ referred to by Heddon appear to extend beyond the exact content of the transcribed interviews, and might also include revealing who the contributor was speaking to, which (if any) leading questions have been posed, the interviewer’s own opinion on the making of the play and the intention behind its production. These are all steps which are employed in feminist interview practice that encourages critical reflexivity by the researchers on their working process.

Since verbatim theatre is not merely a research process, but ultimately a dramatic representation of narrators and issues relating to their lives, it may be problematic, if not impossible, for detailed information about the interview situation to be included within the text of a script. But greater documentation of working practice by verbatim theatre playwrights, whether in theatre scholarship, published scripts, or even in programme notes, might go some way towards assuaging concerns about appropriation and lack of transparency. Furthermore, it could allow theatre makers to offer a more robust argument that the voices of those who have been interviewed, particularly those who have historically been silenced, are being accurately re-told and by the actors, on behalf of the contributors.

### **Implications of the playwright’s positioning in theatre created from interviews with contributors who are mentally ill**

As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, the matter of the playwright’s positionality in verbatim theatre work is of particular concern in the creation of theatre based on interviews with members of marginalised communities. The further the group of contributors are from the hegemonic sectors of society, the greater the possibilities of exploitation by outsiders – whether they are academic researchers or verbatim theater makers – who mine stories which they can then employ for their own political purposes or personal career advancement. It might well be the case that the agenda of the theatre makers is one that aligns with that of the contributors – for example if a production was about unlimited detention of lawful asylum seekers in countries which sought to deter further claimants. But, it is also true that verbatim plays are frequently created by those who hold far more power in a society than those whose stories they seek to present dramatically. The ethical concerns about exploitation are therefore particularly prescient in these situations and, in

plays which draw their content from interviews with extremely vulnerable contributors such as those who are mentally ill, an even higher level of self-reflexivity and ethical vigilance by the theatre makers is required to mitigate charges of appropriation and exploitation.

Beresford and Boxhall (as cited previously) both state that mental health services users' experiences are rarely regarded by those working within the medical profession as reliable records of research, and theatre scholars, such as Harpin, caution that artistic portrayals of mental illness may be dismissed as insufficiently factual to contribute to a body of academic or medical knowledge. Nonetheless, within the arts, historically and to the present day, there have been numerous representations of personal accounts of mental illness and depictions of the treatment of patients in the psychiatric system. Well-known examples of the inside workings of psychiatric hospital wards in film and fiction include the novel, *The Loony Bin Trip* by Kate Millett (1994); the novel and film, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* by Hannah Green (1964 and 1977), and the film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), based on the novel by Ken Kesey. All three of these iconic works were written by authors with direct experience of mental health institutions and the psychiatric profession, and Millett's book is entirely autobiographical. Similarly, there is a vast array of theatrical representations of people suffering from severe mental distress, scripted by writers with personal experience of the matters addressed in their plays.

One notable example of a piece based on, and informed by, the personal experience of a playwright who suffers from mental health issues is *4:48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane. This was her last work, first staged at the Royal Court in 2000, nearly eighteen months after her death. The play is about someone, or possibly many people, struggling with severe depression, as Kane herself did, and the play addresses depression, suicide, medication and self-harm. Another important piece co-authored by a playwright with personal experience of the mental health system is *The Eradication of Schizophrenia in Western Lapland* (2014). This play was created by the London-based company Ridiculusmus, written by the company's co-founders, David Woods and Jon Haynes, and is an ongoing show in production. The script is informed by a treatment for psychosis that has seen remarkable results in Western Lapland where, since Finland's implementation of Open Dialogue Therapy, only two or three new cases of schizophrenia appear each year – a ninety percent drop since the early 1980s (Harpin, 2018: 39). Haynes had been sectioned in the mid-1980s,

and spent six months in the London Maudsley psychiatric hospital, thereby giving the playwright an 'insider' angle. These two pieces might suggest that playwrights writing about mental health matters are well placed to create dramatic representations if they have had personal experience of them. But neither of these productions were created using verbatim theatre processes, whereby contributors with experience of the mental health system were interviewed and their own words included in the script. Furthermore, although the content of these plays was informed by personal experience, they are fictional pieces of work.

In identifying my own positionality as the playwright in *Hearing Voices*, I can see that I was in a highly unusual relationship to both the subject matter and to the contributors, which I shall attempt to critically analyse through an intersectional lens. I view my own positionality predominantly as that of an insider, since I shared the experiences of being on the same locked psychiatric ward as the other patients I later interviewed for the play. I also had a shared experience of being extremely mentally unwell, although we were not suffering from the same conditions. My understanding at the time that I researched and wrote the play, and one that I still hold, is that these shared experiences gave me 'permission' as a writer to conduct interviews with people from an extremely marginalised and vulnerable sector of society, who I would certainly never otherwise have approached. But there are clearly other factors which must be considered in defining myself as an insider in relation to the other patient-contributors. For example, by the time I wrote and produced the play, I was mentally much stronger than I had been when I was in hospital. I was able to draw upon my previous experience of theatre writing and production, my reputation in securing an audience for a play and my knowledge of funding bodies and how to write a grant application, to make the project possible. I was an insider in some respects, but I also had the benefits of being an outsider, by knowing the UK funding systems and having the wherewithal to employ a theatrical team to create the full production and national tour. In short, I had sufficient mental health, clarity and capacity to achieve all these steps, which a long-term mental health sufferer might not possess.

My development of the script and then my work on the full production of *Hearing Voices* occurred because I had some shared experiences with those whom I interviewed and I am convinced that it was because of this that the contributors were willing to be interviewed by me. But, even though much of the script contains accounts provided by

mentally ill contributors about their own experiences, this piece cannot be regarded as a co-creation in the feminist understanding of that term, or in the co-production of knowledge sense which Frisch offers as a concept. My heightened subjectivity, that was the result of my own experiences in hospital, clearly informed the way the interview content from the contributors was presented and my personal and political agenda steered the direction of the representation of all the characters in the play. My intention from the outset was to bring what I perceived to be an appalling level of treatment of extremely ill patients to the attention of a wider audience and also to validate the experiences of those audience members who had suffered at the hands of the psychiatric services in a similar way. However, although my subjectivity as a writer and a producer was indisputable, I also suggest that my patient status alongside the contributors placed me in a far stronger position, ethically, than an outsider wishing to secure stories from mental health service users for a theatrical project. But, again, such an assertion is entirely formed from a subjective viewpoint and this conclusion is also one that is open to debate.

### **Ethical considerations in employing interview content from contributors who are mentally ill**

In the creation of *Hearing Voices*, several questions worthy of consideration from an ethical perspective arose, which I will now explore in this section. Some of these concerns are only of relevance to working processes with contributors who have serious mental health issues, and some extend to other populations which could be also be considered as vulnerable, who have been historically silenced, and whose stories have been previously excluded either from public record or dramatic representation.

One of the most important decisions that I, as a playwright, had to make during the production process was deciding which of my fellow patient friends I would interview for the piece. While I was still in hospital, I was already thinking about who I intended to approach after we were all discharged from the ward but the choices I finally made were based on two criteria: an ability to talk coherently about the issues addressed by the play – namely, the narrators' own personal experiences of mental distress and their views of the psychiatric system – and their ability to sufficiently comprehend what it was that I intended to create from those interviews. Concerning the latter, I refer to the oral historian Jan

Walmsley's question: 'how many people invited to take part in any research really know what is going on? Perhaps it is not just people with learning disabilities who are confused by this esoteric activity' (1998: 131). As discussed in Chapter Two, without any existing guidelines available in this work, verbatim theatre playwrights frequently rely solely upon their own ethical compass when deciding who to interview for their projects and the manner in which those interviews are conducted. In *Hearing Voices*, as with my other verbatim theatre and oral history work, I held the view that the particular circumstances of each of the contributors should be considered individually when determining if I thought it was ethically appropriate for me to interview them. Mary was one of the contributors and a fellow patient, about whom I made such a decision.

One day, during my hospitalisation, Mary came into my room and talked to me at some length about the angels she told me she was able to see. I was fascinated by her comments and, after she had left, I wrote down as much as I could remember of our conversation. I thought her vivid descriptions gave a remarkable insight into how someone experiences other realms of reality. However, during the scripting process, it was clear to me that employing my written account of those spoken words in the play would clearly be unethical, since the information had been imparted by someone who was, at the time, quite seriously mentally disturbed, and who was a patient on a psychiatric ward. I consequently decided to interview Mary at a later date in her own home and, when I did, I asked her once again about what it was like for her to see angels. On that occasion, she gave me an extremely lucid and interesting account of times when this had happened to her, which I included in the script. This is a section of her narrative:

When I was little, I saw an angel, but there are a lot of psychics like me that have this problem with the mental health system, we don't fit in. Because, 'I heard this voice say to me', well, that's like a red rag to a bull for a psychiatrist, and they'll say 'Right, you're hearing voices, double the medicine!' So, I've learnt not to tell psychiatrists much about what I'm thinking or hearing. Don't trust them. (2010: 71)<sup>19</sup>

Mary's concerns about revealing what she sees and hears to medical professionals are not only based on previous reactions she has encountered, but also relate to contemporary thought and understanding around symptoms of mental illness. Daniel B. Smith, an

---

<sup>19</sup> This quotation from 'Mary' (not her real name) was included in the script of *Hearing Voices* (2010).

authority on auditory hallucination, states: 'the divine voice runs like a steady trail through Christian history' (2007: 13). He explains that: 'somewhere around the eighteenth century, the culture's way of thinking and talking about unusual experiences altered markedly. What was once revelation and inspiration became symptom and pathology' (14). This historical contextualisation, of how understandings of hearing voices shifted from the divine to the pathological, is of interest when ascertaining how, and in what circumstances, mental health sufferers speak out to interviewers about their experiences. Mary viewed me as an insider, a patient on the ward at the same time as she was, and her comments suggest that I was a person who she trusted and to whom she could speak safely.

As well as describing the angels she saw, Mary also presented an eloquent argument as to why she objected so strongly to the medication prescribed to her by consultants. Her contention was that the pills effectively blocked access to a visually and mentally exciting world, and she consequently resented what she saw as medical interference. I was keen to include Mary's views on the medication that she was forced to take as benefiting pharmaceutical companies more than her own mental health. I wanted this argument to come across as coherently as possible in the script, and when conveyed by the actress who portrayed her on stage. The recording I made in Mary's home represented her opinions in a far more measured fashion than when I had spoken to her about the same subject in hospital. These comments delivered by Mary in a relatively stable mental condition were transcribed and finally scripted and then narrated by the actress who played her in the production.

At the time that I interviewed them, all of the patient-contributors for *Hearing Voices* appeared to me to be a lucid state of mind and they provided thoroughly intelligent and coherent accounts of their life stories. I would certainly not have employed testimony of anyone with mental health issues who I judged could not understand the purpose of my interview. However, in the UK, the 2005 Mental Capacity Act provides legal protection for those who have a limited mental capacity, whether temporarily or permanently, by illness, accident, disability or another disorder or trauma. In these instances, 'mental capacity' refers to the narrator's ability to understand and retain information, weigh it as part of decision making, and communicate their decisions. Marella Hoffman, writing about oral history work with public policies and programs, argues that oral history interviews should

generally not be conducted with such people as they cannot give fully informed consent, except in circumstances where 'the medical and legal authorities responsible for the person's well-being have authorised that some form of oral history interaction would be beneficial for the person' (2018: 67). But none of the narrators to *Hearing Voices* were patients in hospitals at the time I interviewed them. If they had been, in my mind, there would have been no question of my interviewing them for a play but, as people who had been hospitalised in the past, and who I knew quite well personally, I was keen to hear their stories and share their experiences of the psychiatric services in the UK, and present their narratives in a theatrical form.

### **Seeking permissions**

In hindsight, I deeply regret what I now regard as my negligence in not employing written consent forms for my contributors to *Hearing Voices*, even though I asked for their verbal permission on tape and have secured written consent for all my verbatim productions, since. I also attained Debbie's written consent for employing her longitudinal interview content in this research. But at the time I conducted the original interviews, although I had some idea of what I hoped to produce dramatically with the interview content, it is very possible that I viewed the contributors more as personal friends rather than as verbatim theatre narrators. Moses observes: 'how strictly ethical frameworks are enforced in relation to verbatim theatre depends on the context of which the play is written' (2009: 258). Because of my personal relationship with the contributors, and because of our shared experience, I do not think that I acted as professionally as I should have. But I also believe that this blurring of the lines in regard to our professional and personal relationship is one that, in addition to having some drawbacks, also produced certain advantages, particularly in the area of contributors having a greater degree of trust in my work and consequently providing a high level of personal disclosure in the interview situation.

With oral histories gathered from people with learning difficulties, there is almost always a named guardian or advocate – and sometimes more than one – whom the project coordinator is expected to approach before conducting an interview. Although the contributors for *Hearing Voices* were suffering from mental health issues, rather than having learning difficulties, when I interviewed them I thought carefully about whether or

not it was necessary for me to seek an advocate for some of them. In Debbie's case, I weighed up the option of approaching her partner, Sean, (whom I had met) as an advocate, but I decided against this, because I thought Debbie might view such a step as insulting. I believe it would have also placed me in an odd position in relation to her, whereby I could not, in that case, claim we were co-authors or even collaborators in the creation of a play. Instead, I would be making the decision about whether Debbie could take responsibility for her own actions or not, and consequently, my attempt at approaching her, to some extent as an equal, based on our shared experiences, would be rendered futile. This dilemma highlights the exceptionally unusual position I held in relation to the contributors for this play. Although I wanted Debbie to feel that she and I were partly co-authoring this piece of theatre which was based on some of our shared experience, I was also aware of the unequal power dynamics between myself as playwright and Debbie as a contributor.

Winslow and Smith, writing about the challenges of shared authority when gathering interviews from medical patients, state: 'an oral history usually involves on one side, a healthy interviewer in paid employment who has a lifestyle independent of clinical needs, and on the other side, an interviewee with an illness that may be life-limiting' (2010: 9). Although this observation is about physically ill patients rather than psychiatric patients, I refer to it in order to highlight the fact that such a clear-cut definition did not apply to the interview situation between Debbie and myself, since I was also still unwell and, although I was later able to secure funding for the play, I was not, at that time, in any form of paid employment. But nor could it be suggested that Debbie and I were equals in the sense of co-creators, since the production was entirely my idea and was initiated as a result of my own personal and political agenda.

### **Naming of contributors in scripts**

One further matter of ethical consideration in producing verbatim theatre with vulnerable contributors relates to choices faced by playwrights about the employment of characters' names in the script. Questions arise such as when should theatre makers use the real name of someone interviewed for the play and might they just use the contributor's first name, or do they change the name entirely? Verbatim theatre processes are perfectly suited for contributors who may wish to remain anonymous but still have their story shared with a

wider audience. For narrators from vulnerable communities, for example, asylum seekers or some members of the LGBTQ population, anonymity is often welcomed by those who disclose personal or traumatic stories. Also, many verbatim plays are created from the narratives of people within a relatively small community, either a community of interest (such as disabled narrators or people suffering from forms of addiction), or a geographical locality. If the play is performed to an audience within a small or even a closed community, the possibility increases that the 'real' people who gave their stories might be recognised from lines spoken in the script. In such a situation, those who have shared their experiences with theatre makers might also appreciate not being personally named.

Academic institutes generally provide their own guidelines in regard to interview processes. At Royal Holloway University of London, for example, ethical guidelines state that 'signed consent forms should be stored separately from the research data, to preserve anonymity' (royalholloway.ac.uk, 2019). These guidelines are for academic research and do not apply for verbatim theatre processes which are not academically related. Moreover, oral history practice diverges slightly from some other interview-based research methods in that there is now an accepted understanding in that field that narrators should not automatically remain anonymous. Writing about international ethical and legal guidelines in oral history, Graham Smith explains that 'drawing on a commitment to shared authority these codes stress the rights of the interviewee' (Smith, 2008). He states:

in spirit they are different from ethical guidelines in other areas of the social sciences. So, for example, oral historians would be unlikely to argue that interviewees should be automatically made anonymous in writing up research. Rather as part of shared authority the decision would at least be informed by the views of interview partners who may feel that they should be named as historical witnesses. (2008)

Shared authority might be the intention of oral historians, and some verbatim theatre practitioners may seek ways to attain a form of co-creation in their work but such aims can be curtailed by ethical and practical concerns. For example, vulnerable contributors may not wish to be identified, and other contributors might not want to extend their involvement in the production beyond the interview stage, but consulting contributors about how they would like to be named in a script is something that is easy for playwrights to do.

One other factor that can impact playwrights' decisions around the use of the real names of contributors with mental health problems is that, as previously noted, their voices have historically been silenced. The anonymisation of identity, combined with their historical silencing, means that people with mental health problems are even less likely to have their stories told and their voices heard than those from other marginalised groups of society. The ethical implications of employing stories in contributors' own words in a play, then renaming them in the script, are therefore particularly problematic. What I usually offer contributors to my own plays is the choice to be called by their real name in a script, or to have another name assigned to them for the purpose of anonymity; a practice I also follow when working on oral history projects.

### **Debates within oral history on working with vulnerable populations**

In this final section of the chapter, I turn to oral history scholarship in order to explore discussions that have taken place in that discipline which have relevance to verbatim playwrights who wish to secure testimonies from vulnerable contributors. Oral history projects conducted with people who have mental health problems, learning difficulties, or patients receiving medical treatment, greatly contribute to increasing historical and present visibility of members from those populations. But such work inevitably raises ethical questions in regard to how vulnerable people, and those with any kind of diminished mental capacity, can record their own experiences through interviews – questions which are also of pertinent to verbatim theatre practitioners working with such contributors.

Some oral history scholarship has focused on projects conducted with and about physically disabled people, as well as people with learning difficulties and there is a large body of oral history work which has been undertaken to examine and improve medical treatment. But there is a notable lack of documented analysis about oral history projects conducted with or about those who suffer from mental health problems. The reason for this disparity is unclear. It may be connected to Sweeney's theory that 'survivors' views are disregarded where they do not coincide with professionals' views' (2015: 4), or it may reflect what she terms 'the silencing and exclusion of services user and survivor voices from mainstream research' (5). But whatever the reason, it is problematic that oral history, as a

discipline, is not taking full advantage of its suitability for gathering experiential data from mentally ill narrators.

One of the few existing oral history projects directly aimed at mentally ill narrators has been conducted by Kerry Davies, who recorded interviews from twenty-four mental health patients over the second part of the last century. Davies states that she 'seeks to demonstrate how patients' oral history testimony can usefully contribute to – and challenge – the history of mental illness in the second half of the twentieth century, through the use of the concept of narrative frames' (2001: 267). She explains that one of the outcomes of her research was a revelation about 'the ways in which mental illness has been constructed and experienced' (267), and she argues that:

debates within the ethics committee to which the proposal was submitted as to whether or not tapes (and therefore voices) should be destroyed at the end of the project, the role of gatekeepers in accessing potential participants, and the lack of any significant snowball effect in finding interviewees, all illustrate the concerns and ambiguities still surrounding what psychiatric patients have to say. (271)

Davies' comments point to a critically important area of concern in projects where mentally ill people are interviewed, whether for oral history or for verbatim theatre processes, in that the 'ambiguities' to which she refers are less related to what psychiatric patients have to say, and more to do with who is prepared to let them speak and who will *listen* to what they have to say.

Some oral history interviews have been conducted with vulnerable and disempowered narrators – for example, in the area of medicine; but historically, those projects have been initiated by people in positions of authority (doctors, nurses and psychiatrists). The intention behind such work has been primarily to attain information from patients that is intended to improve the services they receive. Although ethical guidelines are now in place for oral historians interviewing vulnerable people, including patients and people with learning difficulties, there are noticeably far fewer projects within the area of mental health in which the interview content is of an experiential nature, and I have sourced none in which the interviewer has not been an outsider. It would appear that in both oral history work and verbatim theatre processes, people from some vulnerable groups, including the mentally ill, still struggle to represent themselves by narrating and

dispersing their own views, rather than by having their experiences researched and analysed by outsider professionals.

## **Conclusion**

The creation of a piece of verbatim theatre from interviews with people who are mentally ill involves substantive ethical challenges and there is a notable lack of scholarship to which practitioners can turn in order to inform their working processes. The reason I have provided documentation about my own production, *Hearing Voices*, has, therefore, been to highlight some of the issues that arise in plays where the contributors are mentally ill. Historically, whether in theatre or forms of research where members of this population have been interviewed, there has been a sizable degree of doubt cast upon experiential narratives. As Harpin explains, theatrical depictions of mental health survivors are often regarded as having no value in a clinical sense, and Sweeney contends that the experiences of those who are mentally ill are generally disbelieved or dismissed. Producing verbatim theatre which employs the exact word-for-word narrative accounts of patients on a secure psychiatric ward is therefore, arguably, as important as it is ethically problematic.

By declaring my insider positionality, as someone who has shared some of the experiences, and also held similar views as the contributors, my subjectivity is obvious, but I suggest that this very subjectivity has the possibility of increasing the credibility of the verbatim accounts presented in the play. By laying no claim to objectivity, the impact of the piece upon audience members who had little or no previous knowledge of how psychiatric patients are treated might possibly have been far greater than if the play had been scripted by an outsider, from a more journalistic perspective. Furthermore, the matter of identifying my positionality is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. As a fellow patient on a psychiatric ward at the same time as those who I later interviewed, I have described how I felt that this shared experience gave me 'permission' to write a play based on their stories, interspersed with my own account of my breakdown and hospitalisation. But following feminist practice, and employing the tools of intersectionality, by interrogating my subjectivities and positionality more thoroughly, it is also clear that my position as the playwright was an exceptional one. Although I was exceedingly ill at the point when I met the contributors, I later recovered sufficiently to interview them, secure funding for a tour

of the show, write a script (and at a later stage, create a film version of the play) and now, employ critical reflexivity upon the ethical issues that arose during the production process. All of which demonstrates, as Hill Collins and Bilge explain, that ‘individuals can be seen as having “multiple” subjectivities that they construct from one situation to the next’ (2016: 124).

Verbatim theatre work created from interviews with contributors who have not initiated the production is rightly open to accusations of appropriation and, more seriously, exploitation. These criticisms have been expressed by scholars such as Heddon, who correctly suggests that greater openness about the theatre makers’ scripting and interviewing choices would go some way to addressing such concerns. In verbatim plays which draw their content from interviews with members of vulnerable populations, such as the mentally ill, some stages of that work require additional ethical scrutiny. These include: how theatre makers make decisions about who they interview and whether the contributors are able to provide informed consent, and in what way consent is attained from narrators. Although academic establishments lay out ethical guidelines in regard to interviewing, and other institutions which house the vulnerable will have their own regulations about interviewing residents, the question is raised about what happens when, for example, verbatim playwrights wish to employ narratives from people who were mentally ill, or who still are, but who are presently not ‘in care’ and who are living in their own homes? Theatre practitioners wishing to operate with best practice might find some answers to important questions such as these by turning to oral history, where such matters have previously been debated and ethical guidelines are provided on websites and in publications. But, there is a strong argument to be made that verbatim theatre makers who interview vulnerable contributors could also greatly benefit from a collective discussion, resulting in the creation of ethical guidelines for those working in this area.

## Chapter Seven. Reflective and reflexive opportunities afforded to contributors in verbatim theatre processes

### Introduction

The focus of previous chapters has largely been on the ethical challenges faced by verbatim theatre practitioners, examining some of the ways in which risks to contributors might be mitigated in work that is essentially appropriative. This chapter will explore some of the potential benefits for contributors to productions based on interviews. There is a notable gap in scholarship directly addressing the experience of contributors with only a few publications in existence which discuss how the involvement of those who are interviewed impacts them, either during the interview situation, or when they see their stories dramatically portrayed by actors. A greater body of documentation by practitioners who critically reflect upon their working processes as well as the experiences of their contributors would inevitably enhance verbatim theatre practice and scholarship, but I suggest that only recordings with, or documentation provided by the contributors themselves, can productively inform research on their experiences. Additionally, the creation and dissemination of such documentation would go some way to addressing the potential exploitation of those who are interviewed, from whose narratives and experiences playwrights are able to create their productions.

In this chapter, I draw upon feedback attained from Debbie, one of the contributors to *Hearing Voices*. This was acquired from one on-line review that she posted about the rehearsed playreading; one email, written to me, also after the playreading; and one longitudinal (or follow-up) interview that I conducted with her four years after the production had toured nationally. I employ excerpts from these forms of documentation in order to reveal and analyse Debbie's thoughts on her initial interview, on when she saw 'herself' portrayed on stage, and also on the whole experience of being involved as a contributor in the production. In addressing ethical concerns about the appropriation of contributors' stories and the employment of interview excerpts by playwrights seeking to advance their own personal and political agenda, I am not unaware of the irony in presenting selectively chosen comments from Debbie's feedback to underpin my own

arguments and support my research. Since Debbie is only one contributor to one particular verbatim play under examination in this chapter, in an overall study of contributors' experience to verbatim theatre, her account is one that, however enlightening, is highly subjective and no broader assumptions or general conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of its content. However, I focus on her feedback in this chapter because it points to her experiencing several beneficial outcomes and attaining significant insights as a contributor. My decision to critically reflect upon Debbie's involvement has therefore been taken partly to add to the limited documentation of verbatim theatre working processes, partly because I possess a substantial amount of recorded information about her experience as a contributor, but also because I suggest that her feedback demonstrates the potential of verbatim theatre to influence how contributors see themselves, not only when they are portrayed on stage, but as others see them. I aim to demonstrate that their involvement in verbatim theatre work can afford contributors the capacity for reflexive self-awareness and opportunities for future insight and perspicacity.

### **Attaining feedback from the patient-contributors to *Hearing Voices***

Purely from personal interest, and not for any scholarly purpose at the time, in order to reflect upon my own working practice and enhance my understanding of the experiences of contributors to *Hearing Voices*, I decided to ask all of the patient-contributors (but not the 'alternative' professionals) about their experiences of being interviewed for the play and then seeing actors portray their 'characters' and deliver lines that were, word-for-word what they had told me. After the show had toured nationally, and when they were all living in their own homes, I therefore sent five of my fellow patient-contributors a form consisting of several questions about their involvement in the production. I wrote a covering letter, explaining why I was interested in hearing their views, and enclosed a stamped addressed envelope. Of the five letters I sent out, I only received two replies. One was from Debbie, whose answers were exceedingly brief, and the other reply was from Tony. However, I believe the answers on his form had actually been filled in by his partner, whom I also knew, and my hunch was that Tony had dictated his responses to him. If this were the case, it suggested that Tony had perhaps not felt confident in his own literary skills. But the fact that Tony (or his partner) wrote so little on the form, combined with my receiving only one

other reply, led me to believe that asking people for written feedback is not always the most effective strategy for contributors with mental health problems, or at least, not with the contributors to *Hearing Voices*. It occurred to me that I would probably have gained a far deeper level of disclosure by interviewing them again, rather than by sending them a form, since they might have felt more confident in providing verbal rather than written feedback. This speaks to the importance of oral histories, which can secure experiential accounts of lives or events which have not been previously documented in more traditional historical forms, and it also highlights the capacity of verbatim theatre to work in a similar way by securing and then dispersing narratives which are seldom heard by the wider public.

The brevity of the answers I received from the two contributors who responded also confirmed that written questions, in this case, did not elicit particularly informative answers from contributors who might have been somewhat intimidated by this slightly formal approach. In hindsight, I also see that the questions I asked were probably too long and maybe too detailed. They included questions such as: 'When Clare asked to interview you about your own experiences, what was your initial reaction?', to which Tony had replied "I was happy to do it". I can also now see that using the third person pronoun 'Clare', rather than saying 'I' might have come across as a somewhat official way of presenting the questions or may have suggested to the contributors that someone else might be involved in the analysis. Another question I asked was: 'How did you feel about seeing yourself and your words being spoken and portrayed by a professional actor?' Tony had replied "It was good. I was pleased that you/they got it quite spot on". The replies written were all positive in nature, but they were minimal and not particularly informative.

Although the written feedback forms I sent to contributors did not produce any detailed accounts of their experiences, I managed to secure additional information about Debbie's experience of her involvement in the production in other ways. From the time of my initial interview with her, she appeared to be extremely interested in the play and, when she attended the rehearsed playreading, she seemed both engaged and excited throughout the evening. Speaking on stage during the post-show discussion, she answered questions about her own experience as a mental health service user with passion and eloquence, telling audience members that she thought the scenes in the play accurately represented the patients' poor treatment whilst hospitalised. A few days after attending the playreading

(presented in 2009), and participating in the post-show discussion, she sent me an email entitled 'Review', which she had posted online, in which she wrote about her response to seeing the performance. This feedback was far more detailed than anything she had written in the more official feedback form I sent all the contributors. It began: 'A freezing cold night in January. The moon looked full and luck was on our side as we found a parking space real quick' (Debbie, 2009), and continued:

the play was called *Hearing Voices*, written by a friend I had met in a psychiatric ward, what I call the nut house. [...] She really captured how it was. A real 'Them and Us' situation with the staff [...] Please see this play! It's got humour and it's funny to see the way the NHS staff acts like prison wardens with no offers of therapeutic help. 'What is your mood? High or low? Take these drugs. See you on the next ward round'. (Debbie, 2009)

The following extract from the review Debbie wrote was about seeing a version of herself portrayed on stage by an actress speaking the exact words she had said in her initial interview:

I was a character in this play and it was really good watching the actress play my bits. Because the play was written from recorded interviews it was my words being said, and I was pleased with what I had said and the way the actress portrayed me. It was really funny and it made me shake. Clare played my song in the interval. That was a buzz, but I was too busy talking to a couple of friends that just happen to have jobs as carers who were confessing to feeling a bit guilty after seeing life from a patient's point of view. (Debbie, 2009)

When I read this, I was mainly just relieved to see that Debbie appeared to be content with her portrayal by the actress who played her and I was also pleased to see that the fact that I had chosen to play a recording of one of her original songs as interval music, was greatly valued by her.

A year later, in 2010, after Debbie had seen the fully-staged production of the play, again at the Cochrane Theatre, she sent me an email about her thoughts about the show. In this communication, she made some further observations on what it was like seeing herself portrayed by an actress who, unlike the actress employed for the playreading, bore a strong

physical resemblance to Debbie this time, and sang one of Debbie's songs during the show in Debbie's own singing style, in real life.<sup>20</sup> She stated:

the play was great, a really good job done really well. I love the woman who played me. It was so funny and very moving and emotional and weird to see someone play me on a manic episode. OMG, I can be a real nut-nut lady! (Debbie, 2010)

Debbie explained that seeing the play had made her reflect upon the treatment of patients in general. She wrote: 'Your play makes me think about what could be done to improve the system as it has deteriorated even more since you were inside', and she added, 'I hope *Hearing Voices* gets a lot more chances to get out to an even wider audience so more people can see the grim realities of the mental health system' (2010). Like her review, these comments were also unsolicited. By writing down her thoughts about the playreading, then the full production, and her reactions to its content, as well as outlining some reflections on her own treatment, Debbie's review and email showed me some ways in which theatre makers could attain contributors' feedback about their experience in verbatim theatre processes, thereby informing and enhancing future practices.

During my initial interview with Debbie in 2009, she told me about the time she first started experiencing symptoms reflecting her bipolar diagnosis – how frightening that had been, and that she had not been given an official diagnosis for many years. She also recounted occasions when she had been on episodes and behaved in very antisocial ways and told me how her own family had reacted to those incidents. She talked about being hospitalised many times and forcibly sectioned when she did not want to go voluntarily. After I had transcribed her interview, I could immediately see that it offered many dramatic possibilities. The purpose of my longitudinal interview with Debbie, which was undertaken in 2012, three years after the original one, was to ask her, since she was a particularly eloquent contributor, about her involvement in a verbatim theatre production.

At the time of this longitudinal interview, I was working on an MA in applied theatre and intended to employ some of Debbie's reflections in my academic research. When I explained this to Debbie, she appeared very respectful of my work and the interview

---

<sup>20</sup> Victoria Jeffrey played the part of Debbie in the full production of the show, which toured for five weeks to theatres around England, from 27 April – 31 May 2010, funded by the Arts Council.

process itself and she gave her answers in a far more measured way than she had done in her original interview for the play. This might have been because she knew that I was now working on an academic piece of research, rather than on creating a play about our shared experiences and it is possible that because of this change in our circumstances, the power dynamics between us had shifted since the first interview. I had been getting mentally stronger for quite a while, whereas Debbie's level of mental illness had, it seemed, remained more or less the same as when we first met. From what I considered to have been my earlier insider positioning, as someone who had recently shared some experiences with Debbie, in this later interview situation, it appears that the power dynamics between us were more evident. It perhaps illustrates an example of Patai's concern about inequalities in feminist research between 'the average U.S. female academic – white, and middle class' (1991: 137) in contrast to the average narrator who is not from a similar background. Patai explains that:

although exploitation and unethical behaviour are always a possibility when research is conducted with living persons, this danger is increased when the researcher is 'interviewing down', that is, among groups less powerful (economically, politically, socially) than the researcher herself. (137)

Debbie is from a working-class background, is not financially well-off, and has been afforded far fewer educational opportunities than I have had. The longitudinal interview was notably more stilted and less informal than the initial one and Debbie's responses to my questions were carefully considered and her sentences more grammatically correct. Nonetheless, it revealed some extremely interesting insights in regard to her participation in the theatre-making process and the impact that watching an actress perform her words had upon Debbie and, from her comments, I identified some potential benefits that, I suggest, were afforded to her during the course of her involvement in the production.

### **An exploration of potential benefits for mentally ill contributors to verbatim theatre processes**

There are undoubtedly many different reasons why contributors agree to be interviewed for a verbatim theatre production but until research is conducted with individuals who share their feedback about their involvement, we only have a limited amount of documentation upon which to reflect concerning this subject. When I asked Debbie about her own reasons for participating in the play, she replied: "I don't know! Why did I let you do it? I suppose it

was my own ego that drove me to actually let you do it. [...] Somebody wants to know my story” (Debbie, 2012). In some ways, mental health service users are familiar with talking about their own symptoms, since anyone receiving treatment from the psychiatric services has been given a diagnosis from a consultant after a psychiatric evaluation. But, unless they have been recipients of individual psychotherapy sessions (a resource seldom, if ever, available from the NHS)<sup>21</sup>, mental health service users rarely have the opportunity to talk at length about their life experiences, particularly in regard to how they understand these to have contributed to their mental distress, or how their mental health problems impact their life in general – and that of their families and friends.

Harpin suggests that psychiatric professionals’ lack of focus on talking therapy with those who are mentally ill and the reliance, instead, on prescription drugs to treat mental distress, is a deliberate consequence of those in positions of power within society averting their responsibilities to face up to and treat deep-seated, underlying social problems. She contends that ‘governments in both Britain and North America are invested in the biological framing of psychiatry, in part, because faults in brains are less complex political issues to solve than systemic social inequalities’ (2018: 101). She also suggests: ‘chemicals are, in this sense, less volatile material than child abuse, domestic violence, racism, LGBTQ+ oppression, poverty and so on’ (2018: 101). Such arguments partly explain why psychiatric consultants are often not primarily concerned with learning about the ‘back-story’ of a patient’s illness or hospital admission, since they regard the ‘illness’ through the lens of the medical model. Even if a consultant does take the time to listen to a patient’s story, a playwright gathering interviews from someone who is mentally ill is in a position of listening out for different elements in the interview situation than someone working within the psychiatric system. In the case of *Hearing Voices*, one of my aims in creating the piece was to show how poorly the psychiatric system treated those in its care, and the other angle was to seek experiential and informative narratives that lent themselves well to theatrical representation.

---

<sup>21</sup> ‘A coalition of leading charities and medical professionals report that one in ten patients are waiting for more than a year just to be assessed for treatment’. (Cooper, 2104)

When I asked Debbie, in the follow-up interview, if what she had told me in the initial interview was something she had often spoken about before, she said that was not the case, adding: ‘the whole thing felt like therapy, that, talking to you. I won’t forget it because it was very therapeutic and no-one in the business, the mental health system, has done that for me’ (Debbie, 2012). She then commented: ‘everyone should have a go at it. It actually helps’ (2012). Debbie’s use of the words ‘therapy’ and ‘therapeutic’ indicate that she felt that talking to someone about her life was a positive and helpful experience for her. Oral history scholarship has addressed the degree to which interviewing someone provides therapeutic benefits. The current consensus in that discipline leans towards Winslow and Smith’s understanding that: ‘recall in interviews can have a therapeutic impact, but there is a difference between “therapeutic” and “therapy”. Therapeutic reflects the beneficial process of talking at length with an empathetic listener, while therapy is an intervention that intends a health outcome’ (2010: 381). During any interview process, a degree of skill and sensitivity is required by an interviewer, when carefully listening to, and respectfully honouring the disclosure of people sharing difficult or sometimes traumatic experiences – whether the interview be for an oral history project or a verbatim theatre piece. But since the purpose of a playwright interviewing a contributor is ultimately to source material for inclusion in a script, any therapeutic value that might be noted is, arguably, a by-product of the process, and not its main purpose; aside from the fact that the playwright is not (usually) a trained therapist.

In my longitudinal interview with Debbie, I was interested to know her views on her own experience of verbatim theatre and I asked her that question, suggesting that an alternative way of writing the play would have been for me to have ‘fictionalised’ her and everyone else on the ward. She responded:

but then it wouldn’t have been the same [...] Like the thing about the play, the reading, it was verbatim, and that’s what made all the difference. That’s why it was definitely us. It wasn’t your characterisation of us, it was our words, coming back to haunt us! (Debbie, 2012)

These comments appear to reflect the sense of agency that Debbie felt she held in the production. Although I was the one who had selected certain parts of Debbie’s interview for inclusion in the script and had not consulted her again in the period between the interview and the rehearsed playreading, the close relationship I had with her and my other

contributors, arguably, produced a feeling of co-creation between us. It is therefore possible that some of the gains and benefits afforded to a contributor from their participation might be more easily identifiable within this particular theatre production than in ones where the relationship between the playwright and those interviewed is not so close.

Debbie saw the value of having her experiences listened to on a profound level, being invited to the playreading and asked to participate in the post-performance discussion, debating the issues addressed by the piece. At the fully-staged production, she saw her own stories and her character performed, with an actor speaking the exact words she had spoken, and her own experiences and opinions being shared with, and heard by a far wider public than she could have otherwise reached. Furthermore, in Debbie's case, her involvement in the play gave her the opportunity to *speak back* to the perpetrators of the forceful treatment she had experienced within the psychiatric system over many years. In the follow-up interview, she said that the play:

took me to a place where I would never in a million years have been to, and I had a voice, you know? And to actually have a bit of a voice that goes to the NHS, that goes back to them – whether they like it or not. [...] On the night of the play, and then the question and answers, I just felt we were going to rule the world, you know, because they were hearing us. They were hearing it. They were listening. (Debbie, 2012)

On the night of the rehearsed playreading, the portrayal on stage of Debbie's intensely personal experiences of coping with a serious mental health condition and the voicing of her views on the inadequacies of the psychiatric system allowed her to participate in a form of dialogue with professionals working within that area. At the very least, it gave her the opportunity of 'speaking truth to power'. And in this way, Debbie's enthusiastic engagement in this process provided another benefit from her involvement in the production, in the form of giving her access to a public platform from which her views could be respectfully heard and discussed.

### **'It did shudder me': Possibilities of reflection and reflexivity for a contributor**

The feedback Debbie provided in her longitudinal interview about her involvement in the play, led me to explore some of the opportunities she gained for reflection, and possibly also for reflexivity, by sharing her story to be used in a play, and from watching an actress

speak her words on stage. To examine possibilities for reflection and reflexivity, I reference Gillie Bolton's description of those terms. Bolton defines a person who reflects as one who 'attempts to work out what happened, what they thought or felt about it, why, who was involved and when, and what these others might have experienced and thought and felt about it' (2010: 13). Writing about the meaning of reflexivity, she suggests that: 'reflexivity is making aspects of the self strange: focusing close attention upon one's own actions, thoughts, feelings, values, identity, and their effect upon others, situations, and professional and social structures' (14). The purpose of Bolton's publication *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development* (2010) is to enable professionals to reflect upon their own practice. For her, reflection involves looking at what has happened and how it happened, but her understanding of reflexive evaluation is that it involves an attempt to become somehow separate from the process and to examine it, and one's part in it, from the outside. It also involves a deep questioning of one's working methods, brought about by a degree of distancing and even a re-evaluation of one's value systems.

At this point, I turn to the writing of Barbara Myerhoff, who worked with Jewish elders in what she terms 'Life Histories', whereby participants share and perform culturally-specific stories with one another. I suggest that this kind of performance and sharing of personal stories bears a relation to verbatim theatre in the opportunities it creates for reflexivity by the participants. In attempting to demonstrate this, I also refer to the chapter entitled 'A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology' co-authored by Myerhoff and Jay Ruby in Myerhoff and Marc Kaminsky's work, *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling and Growing Older* (1992). In this publication, Myerhoff and Ruby examine reflexiveness (a term they use interchangeably with reflexivity) in the lyrics of popular songs and music performances, in the Modernist movement in art, in journalism, and in anthropological studies.

The group of elderly Jews with whom Myerhoff worked had emigrated to the US from Eastern Europe, and she describes them as 'an invisible people, marginal to mainstream American society, an impotent group – economically, physically, and politically' (1992: 233). She explains how, 'from delicate and oblique allusions through fully staged dramatic productions' (233), the elders 'tell stories, comment, portray, and mirror' (233). She states: 'like all mirrors, cultures are not accurate reflectors; there are distortions,

contradictions, reversals, exaggerations, and even lies. Nevertheless, self-knowledge, for the individual and collectively, is the consequence' (233). Myerhoff worked in classes where personal narratives were shared amongst the elders, who were also encouraged to bring in offerings which subsequently emerged in the form of dreams, recipes, folk remedies, daily logs, songs, and dancing. She observes how:

a story told aloud to progeny or peers is, of course, more than a text. It is an event. When it is done properly, presentationally, its effect on the listener is profound, and the latter is more than a mere passive receiver or validator. The listener is changed. (245)

The 'listener' referred to here is not just Myerhoff herself, but other group members who also witness the testimonies. Myerhoff states that 'having witnesses to this work proved essential' (245), and she suggests that the Life Histories provide 'opportunities to allow people to become visible and enhance reflexive consciousness' (232). Commenting on Myerhoff's work, Kristin Langellier states that 'personal narrative performance functions as social bonding to create and celebrate a community's identity and values', and she contends that 'personal narrative is a performance strategy with particular significance for socially marginal, disparaged, or ignored groups or for individuals with "spoiled identities"' (1999: 134).

Myerhoff's Life Histories focus specifically on her work with elderly American Jews, but I suggest that the conclusions both she and Langellier draw from this work are of relevance to Debbie's participation in *Hearing Voices*. Debbie did not engage in autobiographical performance (in that she did not write a play and perform in it as herself), and the 'performance' of her own life history was only shared with me, as the playwright, in the interview situation. But, since it was then dispersed to a far wider audience through theatrical means, I suggest that Debbie was afforded similar opportunities for reflexivity in her involvement with *Hearing Voices* as those experienced by Myerhoff's group participants. Myerhoff states: 'cultural performances are reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves. They are also capable of being reflexive, arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves. As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware, conscious of our consciousness' (1992: 234). Expanding on this notion, she explains that 'at once actor and audience, we may then come into the fullness of our human capability – and perhaps human desire – to watch ourselves and enjoy knowing that we know' (234). The

reflective awareness of ourselves, together with a degree of comprehension of the impact of our actions perceived within our own social context, combine to create Myerhoff's understanding of the term reflexivity. As a contributor to the play, yet viewing herself played by someone else on stage, Debbie was, to quote Myerhoff, 'at once actor and audience' (234). She was ideally positioned to see herself (as portrayed by an actress), to witness her own words and actions reflected back to her and to subsequently experience both a reflective and a reflexive response to that experience.

Jay Ruby initially became intrigued by possibilities of reflexivity when he first sought a way to reveal, and then analyse the reflexive working process of a documentary filmmaker within the artistic product that was being created – work, which bears a close relationship to verbatim theatre processes. Myerhoff and Ruby present a detailed description of what they understand by the term reflexivity, calling it a 'consciousness about being conscious: thinking about thinking' (1992: 307). They argue that 'the experience may be exhilarating or frightening or both, but it is generally irreversible' (307), and they suggest that, through reflexivity, 'we may achieve a greater originality and responsibility than before, a deeper understanding at once of ourselves and of our subjects' (307).

From her feedback, we learn that one of the most profound reactions Debbie experienced came from seeing herself portrayed by an actress delivering words on stage that she had spoken in an interview. Before I examine the impact this had upon her, I will outline how I scripted her interview excerpts and also how I, as director of the playreading, and later, how Lorae Parry, as director of the full production, worked with the actress who played the part of Debbie. During the week-long rehearsal period for the playreading, as the director, I made the choice to have the actress who was to play Debbie narrate certain excerpts from her interview in a way that appeared as if she was on an episode: quite loudly and with an intense fervour. This is one extract from the script where a manic style of acting was employed by the actress who delivered her lines:

DEBBIE: Before my last episode I'd just given up the Lithium, 'cos I thought I was going to have a baby and I didn't tell anyone I'd stopped taking it and then about ten days down the line I was just back into darkness. My mental state of perception and understanding goes like to other places, like when you're really enthusiastic about things as a kid. And my brain is taking me enthusiastically down a road or a path in

my head, but I'll just be laying there, I can't move... I'm off, I'm gone. Ga ga. [...] And it's twenty-four hours. You don't sleep. It's terrible 'cos you're running around.

(2010: 46)

In every performance of *Hearing Voices*, the way the actress who played Debbie presented her lines – in a loud and hastily-delivered manner – proved to be extremely dramatically powerful, but there were, of course, serious ethical implications in making such a theatrical decision. Even though I had chosen to use the exact words Debbie had spoken in her interview, I employed a large degree of dramatic license by directing the actress who played her (initially in the playreading, but this was then repeated in the tour version) to perform as if she was actually experiencing a bipolar episode, rather than in a calmer state, reflecting back on such a time. The test of whether or not this proved to be dramatically effective and achieved in a way that still demonstrated respect for the contributor, I believe, was by having Debbie come to the show and seeing this portrayal of herself. Fortunately, she seemed very pleased with what she saw, as stated in her online review.

In the follow-up interview, when I asked her how it felt, seeing herself portrayed on stage, she told me: 'it was freaky. It did freak me out, yeah, 'cos I was like "I am like that. I do recognise myself." And I wasn't on an episode when I was watching it' (Debbie, 2012).

This is an extract from that longitudinal interview:

DEBBIE: I was curious to see how I would feel and then, when she came on, and that was me, I was like welling up.

CLARE: Did you know instantly 'that's me'?

DEBBIE: Yeah. [...] 'Cos that's me on an episode. She played me really well. It was over-exaggerated, just like I am on an episode.

CLARE: And when you say you 'welled up', what was the feeling?

DEBBIE: I had tears in my eyes. [...] Sort of shock and embarrassment. [...] And some of the scenes when the police came in and the kids were involved [...] It was all just like 'Aaaaagh! I did do that, I did say that. Oh no!' You know? It were kinda good though. It weren't bad. It did shudder me. There was a slight bad, you know? In the embarrassment

for myself but, on the other hand, it weren't overtaking embarrassment. (2012)

Suffering from bipolar has impacted enormously on Debbie's family, since, when she is not taking her medication, she behaves in ways she accepts are outrageous and which frequently alienate others around her. The performance of her 'character' by an actress allowed her to witness some of these dramatised incidents and seeing them clearly had a powerful impact upon her, as we can tell from her comment 'it did shudder me'. It also afforded her possibilities of reflection. But reflexivity is far more than mere reflection, in the mirroring sense of the word. Bolton explains that reflexivity involves:

coming as close as possible to an awareness of the way I am experienced and perceived by others. It is being able to stay with personal uncertainty, critically informed curiosity as to how others perceive things as well as how I do, and flexibility to consider changing deeply held ways of being. (2010:14)

Reflexivity, as defined by Bolton, involves the person who runs a project setting out intentionally to examine his or her own working processes. Debbie was not in such a position, since she was a contributor to a play who had been asked for an interview, and not the instigator of the production. But I suggest that, in her experience of seeing her character onstage, she was employing several, if not all, of the criteria of reflexivity as described by Bolton.

In her initial interview, Debbie had told me how, over the many years she had been in the psychiatric system, she had been treated quite badly and occasionally with force, when she was on an episode. One incident she recalled involved not just her, but also her family members. When she knew she was not well, she had called the police voluntarily, explaining that she was on a lithium comedown and had asked them to take her to hospital. But, some time later, when the police had still not arrived, she decided to make her own way to the ward. After she set off, the police came to her home, where her partner, Sean, was with their four children. The police could not gain entry and broke into the house, looking in every room for Debbie, shining torches on the faces of children in their beds, shouting and terrifying them. This was one of the scenes acted out in the play and, even though it was Debbie herself who had recounted this tale in her interview, seeing it portrayed on stage had, she explained, made a formidable impression upon her.

Watching this particular incident performed gave Debbie the chance to reflect upon what had occurred and also to reconsider how she and her family had been treated over the years by the police and by the psychiatric system. But comments she made in the follow-up interview and in her review demonstrate a level of reflexivity, as well. On her experience of seeing the enactment of the police breaking into her house, she said:

that scene, with the police coming in and shining the torch on them, and everything that happened that day, [...] it was a terrifying experience, and just to see that, happening in a play in front of me, it brings it all home. [...] I felt sorry for us. (Debbie, 2012)

She added: 'I'm not so hard on myself and the kids because we've been through a lot that if I hadn't seen the play, I probably wouldn't have realised' (2012). In defining the contrast between reflexivity and related attitudes such as self-regard, self-absorption, solipsism, self-reference and self-consciousness, Myerhoff and Ruby state: 'reflexiveness requires subject and object, breaking the thrall of self-concern by its very drive towards self-knowledge, that inevitably takes into account a surrounding world of events, people and places' (1992: 311). Debbie's comments suggest that, after watching the play, she moved from a place of reflection to reflexivity by coming to a greater understanding of herself, as well as of the personal, social and political context in which she is situated.

One additional area where Debbie demonstrated a level of reflexivity was in her witnessing other scenes in the play which showed patients (including herself) in distress being ignored or treated harshly by psychiatric nurses. This experience allowed Debbie to revisit her previous understanding of the behaviour of the nurses and the police towards her when she is very ill. She commented, "Seeing the play brings it home that, hang on a minute, that isn't normal. You shouldn't be treated like that. I shouldn't be treated like that. But when they lock you up against your will, you feel like you've done something wrong" (Debbie, 2012). Debbie continued: "they've taken me away. They've locked me up. They've sectioned me for twenty-eight days. That's a sentence. What's my crime? Oh yeah, of course, I'm bipolar. That's my crime" (2012). At the end of her review (as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis), Debbie stated:

Clare Summerskill's play has opened my eyes, because the treatment that Clare perceived as wrong, inhuman, unjust, uncalled for I had been accepting that as the norm. Because I was a bad, naughty, bipolar person, I felt I'd deserved it, because I was hyper-manic. However, after watching

the play, seeing it Just how it was for all of us, showed me and the rest of the audience that there is a big problem in the nut house with the NHS that could be changed, should be changed. (Debbie, 2009)

On a personal level, Debbie had been shown a representation of herself on a bipolar episode that gave her deeper insight into what others around her might be experiencing during those times when she was not able to control her behaviour. But the play afforded her a further level of comprehension of how she had always seen her illness as something for which she deserved to be punished, an observation which is, of course, a serious indictment of the psychiatric system. Again, I suggest that this renewed understanding enabled Debbie a reflexive, as well as a reflective, experience.

The study of Debbie's comments about contributing to and then watching the play supports Myerhoff and Ruby's suggestion that, in the process of reflexivity: 'within the self, detachment occurs between self and experience, self and other, witness and actor, hero and hero's story. We become at once both subject and object' (1992: 308). This observation is significant when examining the process of anyone who tells their story privately or publicly who, during that process, may have the opportunity to develop a reflexive understanding of their life or of an event. That understanding may occur through various aspects, all of which Debbie experienced: reflecting on the experience of the telling of their stories, reviewing the means by which their narrative has been revealed, and observing the outcome of their experiences, either in the form of an interview transcript, or during a performance.

## **Conclusion**

In seeking to demonstrate the value of personal feedback provided by a contributor about her experience of being involved in a verbatim theatre production, this chapter has also shown how a longitudinal interview can provide documentation which illustrates the reflective and reflexive opportunities afforded to contributors in such a process. The practice of theatre practitioners attaining longitudinal research in the form of follow-up interviews, is one that, I suggest, could be employed by a number of theatre makers who wish to ascertain the experience of their contributors and also to identify any benefits that they might have drawn from their participation, a step which is, arguably, critical in work that is essentially appropriative. This would go some way to countering claims by those who

regard verbatim theatre as a potentially exploitative practice and seek to mitigate some of the charges relating to the risks that contributors encounter in this work, by balancing those dangers with more personally beneficial outcomes.

A detailed analysis of one contributor's feedback, as presented in this chapter, is a rich but ultimately limited resource in seeking to gain insight into the experience of contributors to verbatim theatre processes. Many other longitudinal interviews with contributors from a number of plays would have to be conducted to form any substantial basis for wider research. But the reflections provided by one personal, albeit highly subjective, account still inform a discussion on the role that contributors play in verbatim theatre processes and what they might be able to take away from their involvement. Since Debbie was able to write and speak eloquently about her experiences, I was fortunate to have both written and oral documentation as research material upon which to draw when writing about the experience of someone who provides an interview for a piece of verbatim theatre. The longitudinal interview I conducted reveals how, during the intervening years, Debbie had thought carefully about the play and her involvement in it, and she was able to share significant reflections and insights with me about her experience during, and since, the production period, many of which point to her having gained several beneficial outcomes.

One of the benefits which Debbie identifies concerns her appreciation of the way in which the initial interview for the play had allowed her to talk, at some length, about her own history of mental illness and reflect upon how this had impacted her family members. Although some forms of psychiatry involve talking therapy, she had never been offered any in all the years that she had been ill, and none was ever provided when she was hospitalised. Although, as explained, an interview for a verbatim play is certainly not a therapeutic session and the playwright not a therapist, some therapeutic benefits can nonetheless be identified for the contributor when speaking about very personal and occasionally traumatic incidents with a concerned listener.

The playwright might well want to use that 'material', solicited in the form of interview content, to support their own agenda in the scripting of a play, but if it aligns with the aims of the contributor, then it might not necessarily then be seen as an appropriative act. Debbie had made her very strong views clear on the ward about what she saw as being

a lack of care and a punitive attitude, as demonstrated by the hospital staff and, since I had observed this too, we therefore had a shared aim in bringing our observations to the attention of a wider audience who might be in a position to do something about the treatment of patients. An additional, related, benefit that Debbie experienced was from her participation in the post-performance discussion, at the rehearsed playreading. This meant that not only had she been able to talk to me in the interview about her own experiences of being mentally ill and her views of the psychiatric system and the way nurses and doctors had treated her over the years, but she had also participated in a wider discussion about those issues which possibly empowered her by speaking 'out' to professionals working in various sections of the mental health system.

Finally, through exploring the work of Myerhoff and the benefits participants gained through her Life Histories, whereby their personal stories were shared and then told back to them, this chapter has demonstrated how a contributor's involvement in verbatim theatre processes can afford them possibilities of reflection and also, occasionally, reflexivity. When Debbie's experiences were performed back to her, she was able to gain greater insight into her own situation and that of her family. She stated that she was also able to see, for what she claimed to be the first time, that the way people working in the psychiatric system treat her makes her feel that her mental illness is something for which she should be punished. This significant revelation, expressed in her follow-up interview, illustrates the far-reaching potential verbatim theatre can offer, in the form of potentially life-changing insight for a contributor.

## **Chapter Eight. Ethical concerns and production challenges in the creation of theatre from interviews with asylum seekers and refugees**

### **Introduction**

Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in the production of verbatim plays and applied theatre projects based on stories provided by asylum seekers and refugees. Emma Cox states: 'verbatim theatre [...] has emerged as one of the most prominent modes of representing refugees' and asylum seekers' stories on stage' (2013: 4). In their work, playwrights and theatre practitioners are reflecting ongoing conversations about the reasons people seek asylum and they are using their plays and drama projects to comment on the existing treatment of those claiming refuge from persecution after fleeing their countries of origin. Alison Jeffers explains that 'refugees' stories are troubling, troubled and troublesome' (2012: 1). She suggests they are: 'troubling because they are hard to hear, especially if the listener enjoys the privileges of the West; troubled because persecution, trauma and suffering are essential elements of these stories, and troublesome because lives depend on their claims for truth' (1). Jeffers' observations demonstrate that theatre created from such stories can produce some degree of discomfort, not only for the playwrights researching the subject matter, often encountering narratives of terror and suffering beyond the realm of their own experience; but also for theatre audiences witnessing such dramatised testimony. Furthermore, her statement that 'lives depend on their claims for truth' (1) emphasises the proximity of the relationship between theatrical depictions and the lived experience of those portrayed. But in spite of the challenges involved, theatre practitioners in many countries, including Australia, the UK, Germany, the US, Canada, and South Africa are still keen to work on dramatic presentations which draw upon the personal experiences of asylum seekers or refugees who have suffered persecution and trauma.

When theatre makers seek and employ testimonies from persecuted people whose lives were under threat, and who have already had to relate those experiences in interviews with officials of the country in which they are claiming asylum, ethical concerns around practice are foregrounded. How and when are such testimonies elicited, recorded and

documented? How is the transcribed material employed in the artistic production? And, perhaps most importantly, what consideration, protection, or support is given to the person who has contributed their stories and who might either narrate them in a performance or see them presented by an actor on stage? In addition to addressing these questions, in this chapter, the interview situation for asylum seekers and for verbatim theatre contributors will be placed under scrutiny since the interview is such an integral part of both processes.

My interest in examining the role contributors play in theatre projects based on stories provided by refugees and asylum seekers is connected to, and informed by the creation my own production: *Rights of Passage*, based on interviews with lesbian and gay asylum seekers and refugees. The play was performed by members of my theatre company, Artemis, and it toured in England in 2016. This chapter is extensive because, at certain points, I will reflect upon my experience of researching, scripting and producing *Rights of Passage*, and write about those matters as they relate to the subjects under discussion, also drawing upon post-production interviews I conducted with two of the main contributors to the play. I will also employ excerpts from my interview with Christine Bacon, the Artistic Director of Ice and Fire, a company that creates many of its productions from interviews with asylum seekers and refugees. I will include Bacon's reflections on her own working methods, particularly in relation to the role and treatment of contributors to her productions, referencing her work when it speaks to the subjects under consideration.

The chapter has been arranged in four sections, exploring a variety of production possibilities in theatre created from narratives provided by asylum seekers and refugees. In Section One, in order to address the ethical implications in such work, the issues of migration and asylum seeking will be contextualised. An outline of the production, *Rights of Passage* will then be presented, followed by an exploration of a sample of theatrical work created in recent years by playwrights employing the testimonies of asylum seekers and refugees. This main focus of this section will be on theatre projects which took place in Australia and the UK, where there has been a noticeable increase in such plays over recent years. The productions I discuss provide examples of the differing levels of involvement and agency that contributors experience within those pieces.

Section Two will examine potential risks faced by contributors when working with theatre makers who create plays from their stories. Caroline Wake states; 'testimonial

theatre is an ethically risky proposition, rife with potential for pain and exploitation' (2013: 117). The pain to which she refers can result from contributors' narration of traumatic personal events, from seeing their stories dramatically portrayed, or even acting them, themselves. Possibilities of exploitation increase when theatre makers employ stories solely for their own professional advancement and reputation, rather than for the benefit of contributors. Addressing concerns that verbatim theatre processes can retraumatise contributors, the beginning of Section Two outlines the interview process encountered by asylum seekers who apply for residency in a new country. Not all asylum seekers undergo the same kind of questioning procedures and since *Rights of Passage* was created from stories provided by lesbians and gay men, I will discuss border agency interview procedures employed with those claiming asylum based on their sexual orientation. I will then outline theatre scholarship that relates to the ethical choices and concerns which arise when playwrights employ testimony from refugees and asylum seekers, examining ways in which eliciting their stories can result in re-traumatisation.

After discussing several areas of ethical concern, Section Three moves towards a consideration of potential benefits afforded to contributors through their involvement in verbatim theatre processes. It also addresses ways in which harm to the contributor might be mitigated through theatre practitioners' employment of vigilant ethical practice and critical reflexivity. Using qualitative methods, namely narrative research in the form of post-production interviews with some of the contributors to *Rights of Passage*, and also discussing the working methods of *Ice and Fire*, I explore the opportunities available for those who share stories of persecution with theatre makers.

Finally, in Section Four, continuing the exploration of identifying benefits for contributors, I revisit the subject of theatre practitioners' positionality in relation to those who are interviewed for a play. Focussing on *Rights of Passage*, I suggest that the contributors gained a sense of safety and also of pride when they were interviewed, and later saw their stories acted by members of a theatre company who also shared their sexual orientation. This is a matter which I address in an article entitled 'The Importance of Being Gay: The Perils and Possibilities of LGBTI Asylum Seekers' Involvement in *Rights of Passage*', in the journal, *Research in Drama Education*, (2018). The fourth section of this chapter develops from that published work.

Jeffers suggests that ‘understanding the parasitical undertones of the act of theatre and how they interact with the asylum debate’ (2012: 50) could help theatre practitioners enhance their practice, specifically in regard to ‘questions of ownership’ (50) and ‘the importance of transaction’ (50). The main intention behind this chapter is to follow Jeffers’ advice by interrogating the inherent ethical concerns in this work and exploring the ways in which plays based on interviews with contributors who have been persecuted and traumatised can afford them opportunities for political and personal agency.

## **Section 1: An exploration of production possibilities in theatre created from stories provided by asylum seekers and refugees**

### **1.1 Asylum seekers and refugees within a global context**

Before examining some of the ethical demands of creating theatre from narratives provided by asylum seekers and refugees, I will contextualise this work within a wider political frame. My research focusses primarily on the key issues of immigration, asylum seeking and refugees in the UK and Australia, where there has been a noticeable rise in theatre productions and projects created from the testimonies of asylum seekers and refugees. But initially, it might be useful to broadly survey some causes of the increase in global migration and outline how the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ has impacted the countries seeing a proliferation of plays addressing this matter.

The term ‘refugee’ (as opposed to ‘migrant’) applies to people who are forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, generalised violence and human rights violations. An ‘asylum seeker’ is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applies for asylum in another country, but whose application has not yet been concluded. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) states that there are 3.5 million asylum seekers in the world (UNHCR.org, 2019). The main reasons given by asylum seekers for seeking refuge are: fleeing political or religious persecution, torture and repressive regimes; economic reasons – trying to find work; escaping from conflict and war; searching for a better life, and escaping from poverty and unemployment.

In 2018, according to the UNHCR, almost 70.8 million people around the world were forcibly displaced as a result of conflict, violence, persecution or human rights violations, and, at the time of writing, the global refugee population stands at 25.9 million (Leung,

2019). The refugee crisis is not a recent phenomenon, but it is relatively new to Europe and the West. Over two-thirds of the world's refugees come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia, and it is notable that poorer countries shelter the vast majority of the world's refugees: eighty-six percent live in developing countries (refugeecouncil.org.uk, [n.d.]). But there has also been a significant increase in migrants and refugees crossing into the richer continent of Europe over the last few years, which has led to a political and humanitarian crisis. At a time when populist parties and policies are gaining political ground, immigration has become a hotly contested issue and in many European countries, there have been highly-charged debates on how best to handle the urgent matter of resettling these people.

The refugee issue has been viewed by the right-wing press as a major problem for the UK, and has dominated many headlines and much editorial copy over several years. But Britain is host to less than one percent of the world's refugees and, in 2016, had received just three percent of all asylum claims made in the European Union (refugeecouncil.org.uk, [n.d.]). According to the 2015 Refugee Council report, thirty-four percent of the people who applied for asylum in the UK were granted it, which was close to the average for EU states. In some countries, such as Germany and Denmark, fifty percent of applications succeed (refugeecouncil.org.uk, [n.d.]): Germany received the highest number of new asylum applications in 2015, with Hungary in second place, as more migrants made the journey overland through Greece and the Western Balkans (BBC.com, 2016). In the eighteen months before April 2017, Germany accepted more than a million migrants often fleeing war and turmoil in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Although asylum seekers have been required to prove that they would face persecution at home, many whose applications are rejected have nevertheless been allowed to stay temporarily (Cocks, 2017). However, after a right-wing backlash, Germany decided to start returning newly-arrived asylum seekers to Greece, effectively reversing a five-year suspension of such transfers owing to the poor conditions there. One other reason for an increase in asylum applications in the UK and other European countries, as well as in the US and in Canada, is because LGBT people in several countries, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, are persecuted because of their sexual

orientation and gender identity.<sup>22</sup> Unable to live a full and open life in those countries because of oppressive laws, and prevalent homophobic religious and social attitudes, LGBT asylum seekers are forced to leave their own homes and seek refuge in countries where their lives are not under threat.

Matters related to immigration, refugees and asylum seekers have, in recent years, provided rich material for theatre makers interested in creating productions which engage contemporary political and social issues. Consequently, there has been a rise in the number of plays and applied theatre projects in many countries where these issues are in sharp political focus. In Australia, for example, Cox explains that – because of its geographical situation – that country has ‘had the opportunity over the past decade or more to build an edifice of increasingly heated political and cultural discourse about unauthorised asylum seekers (specifically boatpeople ...)’ (2014: 45). The Migration Act of 1958 in Australia requires that all non-Australian citizens who do not have a visa be detained. This form of mandatory detention applies to many groups, but the policy disproportionately affects asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat without authorisation. Amnesty claim that ‘rather than assessing all people asking for protection in a fair, efficient and orderly way, the Australian Government has created a deliberate system of abuse of thousands of adults and children’ (Amnesty.org.au, [n.d.]). A combination of the country’s punitive laws for asylum seekers and refugees, and the outrage expressed by some political opposition and citizens, has led to a lively, if acrimonious, national debate on the issue. Inevitably, playwrights have also joined that conversation. Employing personal testimonies from asylum seekers can create a dramatically powerful and politically efficacious way to educate the wider public about these matters. Contributors not only share narratives of trauma, persecution and suffering from their countries of origin, but also speak of detrimental treatment within detention systems and during the asylum processes in the countries where they seek refuge

---

<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, I have used ‘LGBT’ when referring to asylum seekers in the UK, since it is used by Stonewall on their website and in their reports. The asylum seekers and refugees I interviewed for *Rights of Passage* were lesbians and gay men. The LGBT asylum seeker support group, UKLGIG, which I consulted during the production of my play *Rights of Passage*, uses both LGBT and LGBTI in their literature. The United Nations Convention refers to LGBTI asylum seekers, and Smith-Sivertsen’s research also references LGBTI asylum seekers.

– narratives which, in some verbatim theatre practitioners’ eyes offer exciting dramatic possibilities.

The current trend in creating drama based on stories given by asylum seekers and refugees is therefore the result of several factors: the worldwide increase in migration and dislocation; its impact on host countries, and the interest this issue has piqued in artists living in those countries. Some playwrights regard their work as a means of highlighting human rights concerns and political issues that are not always addressed in mainstream news outlets. Maggie Inchley, in her examination of the performance of testimony and its connection with human rights activism, argues that ‘in the contemporary globalised world, the life stories of marginalised and vulnerable peoples play a crucial role in attempting to leverage justice’ (2016: 1) – an observation which indicates an additional motivation behind the practice of some theatre makers. The increasing number of verbatim plays which address the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees also reflects the continuing popularity, over the last few decades, of employing personal testimony as a means of entertainment, whether on television, film, or on stage.

## **1.2 *Rights of Passage***

This section outlines the production process of my own play, *Rights of Passage*, since, at certain points in this chapter, I will discuss some scenes from the script and the experience of contributors to that piece. The play was scripted from interviews with lesbian and gay asylum seekers and refugees in the UK and it also includes interview excerpts from three contributors who work in a legal capacity for LGBT asylum and human rights, and for organisations which support LGBT asylum seekers. The three main characters in the play are Mirembe (a lesbian from Uganda), Izzuddin (a gay man from Malaysia), and Hamed (a gay Iranian man).<sup>23</sup> Other principal characters in the piece are Erin Power (who worked for the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group), S. Chelvan (a barrister and expert in asylum claims based on sexuality), and Mehri (an Iranian human rights lawyer). It was first performed in 2016 by members of my theatre company, Artemis. My own practice, in creating verbatim theatre, involves employing professional actors to play the parts of the contributors and

---

<sup>23</sup> Mirembe, Hamed and Izzuddin are not the real names of the contributors. But the name ‘Izzuddin’ was chosen by the contributor who provided his interview material.

employing word-for-word excerpts of contributors' interviews in the script. Three actors played the main three asylum seekers and refugees, along with many other parts assigned to them, and I played the parts of Erin and Mehri, and some minor characters.

The script follows the journeys of the main protagonists. The first act is staged primarily in their various countries of origin, showing incidences of persecution that led them to seek a safer and freer way of life in another country, and the focus of the second act is largely on their encounters with the asylum system in the UK. By the end of the play, the audience has learnt that two out of three of the main characters have attained refugee status, but one is still awaiting the outcome of her asylum application. For the 2016 Artemis production, the set design consisted of three main pillars, portraying towers of documents representing the numerous asylum cases the Home Office have to process. The pillars were bound by barbed wire, and video images – in the form of film clips of street scenes from Kampala, Tehran, and Kuala Lumpur – were projected onto one of them at certain times during the show, to enhance cultural references. Musical sound cues from the different countries mentioned were also employed throughout, to create a sense of context.

The play was initially performed in 2014 as a rehearsed playreading at Oxford House, Bethnal Green, London, funded by the Arts Council as part of a research and development project. Members of London-based LGBT asylum groups were invited by the theatre company to attend the event for free, with travel expenses offered to them when they picked up their tickets. There was a post-show discussion with panellists, who included people working for LGBT asylum groups in London, and also one of the contributors to the play. In 2016, again supported by the Arts Council, the show opened with a week-long run at Chelsea Theatre, London, and then toured, for a six-week period, to twelve theatres around England. The venues included Arena Theatre (Wolverhampton), Lawrence Batley Theatre (Huddersfield), the Unity (Liverpool), and the Lowry (Manchester), and the New Vic (Stoke on Trent).

As a playwright who has worked on several theatre projects addressing LGBT issues, and as a lesbian activist involved in several LGBT and human rights organisations, either as a patron or a trustee, I had, for a long time, been extremely concerned about LGBT rights in countries around the world. I was aware of the persecution that many LGBT people face internationally, while in many Western countries there has been an increase in legal rights

and equality in recent years. That knowledge led me to question how much responsibility, if any, LGBT people feel towards their LGBT 'siblings' around the world. I discovered LGBT asylum seeker and refugee groups in London, Coventry, Liverpool, and Manchester which not only provided their members with legal, practical, and emotional support, but are also involved in raising awareness of the life-threatening levels of homophobia and transphobia that exist globally. According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) report on state-sponsored homophobia, six United Nations (UN) member states impose the death penalty on consensual same-sex sexual acts. The death penalty is also a possible punishment in a further five member states, according to the report. Seventy UN member states still criminalise same-sex relations between two consenting adults, the report states, and in twenty-six of those countries, the penalty varies from ten years in prison to life (ILGA.org, 2019). Thirty-seven of the fifty-three member states of the Commonwealth currently criminalise homosexuality and in these countries, being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender can result in lengthy imprisonment or, in some cases, death (Thecrs.org, 2015).

Over the five-year period during which I researched the play, I became acquainted with members of some of the LGBT asylum groups and organisations in England, mainly through attending protests and demonstrations which highlighted LGBT human rights abuses and supported individual asylum seekers facing imminent deportation. Most of these actions were organised by the London-based LGBT asylum group, Out and Proud Africa. I also met, and gave a talk about my theatre and LGBT history work to members of the Croydon LGBT asylum seekers group, Rainbows Across Borders. In 2015, I offered free writing workshops for LGBT asylum seekers and refugees (entitled *Writing the Journey*) to the LGBT asylum seekers support organisation, Micro Rainbow, and also, at Oxford House, London.

I was aware of news reports about lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people who, in the process of applying for asylum, were being asked to 'prove' their sexuality to Home Office interviewers and to judges in courts. Through my preliminary research into this issue and from talking to LGB asylum seekers I met, I discovered that to support their claims, LGB asylum seekers were, in some cases, required to produce photographic and video evidence of sexual acts in which they had been involved (Dunt, 2014). The Stonewall report on

*Lesbian and Gay People in the Asylum System*, published in 2009, explains the implications of such a practice:

this focus on sexual activity is symptomatic of a misunderstanding that gay people's persecution stems from just their conduct rather than their identity. In many countries, simply being perceived as different is enough to result in persecution, but UKBA [United Kingdom Border Agency] practice tends to focus instead on sexual conduct because this is what anti-gay laws in these countries stipulate. (Miles, 2009: 16)

Even though some parts of the media (most particularly, the right-wing tabloid press) had been writing extensively about immigration and asylum for years, prior to my research, I had not fully understood that the ways LGB people are asked to demonstrate evidence of their sexual orientation differ noticeably from those relating to heterosexuals who seek asylum based on political or religious grounds; the persecution suffered by LGB people, and the refuge they are forced to seek, are simply because of who they find sexually attractive. One further concern that arose during my research was the discovery that LGB people held in detention centres in the UK are particularly vulnerable, since they can experience bullying, abuse and harassment by other detainees and from members of staff, because of prejudice against their sexual orientation. According to reports, this occurs because many people in the centres are as homophobic as those in the countries of origin the LGB asylum seekers were fleeing.<sup>24</sup>

Until it was suspended in 2015 and deemed illegal by the High Court, a procedure called the Detained Fast Track system existed (Yeo, 2015). This was a process whereby asylum seekers whose claims were not held to be credible by the authorities were detained immediately after their interview and given a period of two weeks to appeal, often without access to legal help. On admission to the detention centres, their personal phones were confiscated, and they were given other phones to use which contained no personal contact information, making it exceedingly difficult for them to gain legal support in time to make a

---

<sup>24</sup> A report entitled 'Written Submission to the Independent Review into the Welfare in Detention of Vulnerable Persons' was written on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015 by the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG). It stated: 'we are seriously concerned about the increased detention of LGBTI people and the bullying, abuse and harassment experienced by LGBTI people in immigration detention centres in the UK.' (UKLGIG.org.uk, 2015: 2)

successful appeal. After the fortnight elapsed, they could be forcibly boarded onto a plane and returned to their country of origin, where their lives would often be under threat.

The more I heard about the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers and personally came to know people who were suffering as a consequence of Home Office procedures, the more it seemed to me that such practices amounted to violations of basic human rights. LGBT people who had travelled to the UK to seek protection were being criminalised, subjected to personally intrusive and sexually explicit questioning procedures, forcibly imprisoned – often with homophobic detainees – and threatened with deportation. As a verbatim theatre playwright, I wanted to create a piece based on the testimonies of people who had undergone these harrowing journeys. I was aware that such stories held powerful dramatic and staging possibilities, but my main motivation in creating a script was to inform a wider public, by means of a theatre production and national tour, about what I considered to be an underreported issue that showed the UK's immigration system and its commitment to the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention in an extremely poor light. Verbatim theatre seemed to provide a powerful means to convey personal testimony and political information on this important subject.

I was aware that I, as an individual, am not in a position to bring about any effective change within asylum system processes. Lawyers and barristers (such as S. Chelvan, one of the contributors) are currently working on the adaptation of Home Office interviewing techniques to more suitably assess claims of asylum based on persecution, and a cross-party committee of politicians has been formed to address the UK's treatment of LGBT asylum seekers. I could have chosen to 'expose' my discovery of appalling practices and treatment of LGBT people claiming asylum, through journalistic means: writing about people who are forcibly detained for months as if they were criminals, when they pose no flight risk – and at enormous cost to the tax payer. As a lesbian activist and performer, I might even have had a platform to share my concerns, particularly with other LGBT people, but as a playwright and an oral historian, I have always been drawn to the power of the personal story when conveying matters of social or political concern. The media's portrayal of asylum seekers in the UK has played a large part in influencing the public's perception of them. They are often discussed as a problem, rather than as people who can contribute to their newly-found homelands: in other words, they are viewed as takers rather than givers. Asylum seekers are

often perceived to be numerous, referred to as a group and, as Jeffers notes, 'generally not individuated' (2009: 98). But theatre created from individual testimony can counteract this image of multiple asylum seekers or refugees and replace it with detailed and personalised accounts of the individuals involved.

### **1.3 Contributors' involvement and agency within verbatim theatre productions**

This section outlines some examples of working practices employed by a selection of theatre companies who create plays from stories provided by asylum seekers and refugees. The purpose of this selection is to examine choices made by theatre practitioners when working with those they interview and to reflect upon some of the ethical considerations that arise in their work since these decisions will impact the contributors. I will discuss plays produced in Australia and the UK, and one piece produced by a theatre practitioner in Germany who, after seeing Bacon's *Asylum Monologues* in England, decided to replicate that work in his own country. The production methods of the projects vary considerably: some have been devised and performed jointly by theatre practitioners and refugees; some are presented by the refugees themselves; some involve professional actors reading out scripts created from interviews, and some are written by playwrights about refugees and asylum seekers they have interviewed, then performed by professional actors. Depending on the theatre processes employed, contributors inevitably have varying experiences and differing degrees of involvement in each production.

#### **1.3.1 Theatre in Australia**

Wake states that 'in the five years from 2000 to 2005, almost forty performances made by, with, and about asylum seekers appeared on the Australian stage' (2013:102). Her research addresses the participation and representation of refugees in performance and visual art in that country, and she comments that *Through the Wire* (written and directed by Ros Horin and performed at Sydney Opera House Studio in 2004) was 'the first play to bring the plight of detained refugees to the mainstream stage' (102). For this production, Wake explains how Horin invited 'four asylum seekers to audition to play themselves but only cast one' (115) – Shahin Shafaei, who had worked as an actor in Iran before he came to Australia and experienced the horrors of the detention system himself. Although there was an asylum seeker performing his own story in the piece, three asylum seekers who had given their

stories for the play were passed over in the audition period and were played, instead, by professional actors. This decision appears to be ethically problematic, not least, as Wake suggests, by its re-silencing of asylum seekers after eliciting their stories, but then portraying them by actors who hold residency (and consequently power) in a country in which they seek it (115). The audience would probably have been unaware of the casting decisions made for this production, however, and Wake states that, in this piece, 'the actor is not seen as the absent asylum seeker, but rather as a surrogate for him, a stand-in, as someone who had previously been co-present with him and who is now co-present with us' (113). This comment highlights how verbatim theatre work allows audience members some degree of proximity to those who have lived experience of the subject matter presented on stage.

If *Through the Wire* provides an example of a playwright facing challenging ethical choices around representation, since only one of the cast members was a refugee himself, then Towfiq Al-Qady's autobiographical solo performance, *Nothing but Nothing: One Refugee's Story*, demonstrates how a refugee attain personal and political agency by constructing and dramatically depicting his own story. In the production, Al-Qady plays himself, as well as a number of other characters, including his mother, a soldier, his daughter, and an immigration officer. The piece was produced by Metro Arts Theatre in association with Actors for Refugees, with editorial assistance by Leah Mercer, and it premiered in Brisbane in 2005. Cox acknowledges that this was an exceptional production, in that 'rarely do asylum seekers and refugees find the opportunity to write, perform and co-direct their own work in a professional context' (2013: x). She also states that 'Al-Qady's comprehensive role in the production is significant. *Nothing but Nothing* was almost entirely his creation, both in terms of writing and theatrical realisation' (2008: 197). When refugees have control over the writing and the presentation of their stories, not only is this a rare occurrence, as Cox points out, but it also mitigates ethical concerns that arise when theatre makers with full residence in a country create theatre from testimonies of people who do not share a similar privilege.

The play, *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* also addresses the refugee issue and was produced in Sydney in 2004 by the company, version 1.0. It was devised from the transcripts of the Senate Select Committee on a Certain Maritime Incident, the inquiry into the so-

called 'children overboard scandal': a maritime disaster in which over three hundred people from the SIEV X, an Indonesian fishing boat, perished. Cox explains how: 'Navy personnel, senior government ministers and the Prime Minister circulated the claim that asylum seekers had thrown children into the water to manipulate Navy rescuers and secure passage to Australia' (2013: 3). Commenting on an anthology of Australian plays about asylum issues, Cox states that 'while all the plays [...] are concerned [...] with what cross-cultural engagement looks like, in some cases they are oriented more towards the ongoing cultural conversation Australians are having with one another, than with asylum seekers' (2013: ix). She suggests that *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* is one such piece. Rather than dramatising personal testimony of refugees, the script focuses on the politics of the crisis, as experienced by six Senators involved in the inquiry. Jeffers suggests that 'in rejecting the representation of the "refugee body" and the trope of "the face or voice of the refugee" version 1.0 emphasised questions of responsibility and hospitality' (2012: 66). Since the production dramatised a debate about the incident as discussed by politicians, ethical choices pertaining to presentations of the refugees themselves were averted. Nonetheless, the decision not to show the refugees is still ethically problematic, since it risks accusations that those in power (the theatre makers) are discussing matters relating to those absent in the dramatic portrayal (the asylum seekers).

### **1.3.2 Theatre in the UK**

The UK has also seen a significant increase in plays based on testimony from asylum seekers and refugees. Christine Bacon, who has been the Artistic Director at Ice and Fire since 2009, began her theatre work with refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, where she produced *Something to Declare*, written by Michael Gurr in 2003, a rehearsed playreading of true stories and first-hand testimonies of asylum seekers and refugees. After moving to England, she established Actors for Human Rights, which then collaborated with Ice and Fire. Bacon's work addresses human rights issues in general, but *The Illegals* and *The Asylum Monologues* are two pieces created from interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, also presented as playreadings. *The Illegals* was launched in 2008 at Soho Theatre, London, and was scripted by Bacon from personal narratives provided by undocumented migrants living and working in London. *The Asylum Monologues* is a first-hand account of the UK's asylum system, in the

words of people who have experienced it. Written by Sonja Linden and Christine Bacon, it premiered at Amnesty International in London in June 2006, and has been touring the UK ever since. Ice and Fire state: 'the script is regularly updated and because we have a large number of different testimonies, it can be adapted for bespoke events which may have a particular focus (e.g. children in the asylum system, access to health care, etc.)' (Iceandfire.co.uk, [n.d.]).

Paget, examining Ice and Fire's plays in the context of what he terms 'Activist Arts', writes that asylum seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants are all particularly vulnerable groups, but they are also 'controversial as far as public opinion [...] is concerned' (2010: 177). He observes that 'most importantly, their own voices tend to go unheard in the storm of public noise that swirls about them' (177). This fact speaks to one of the main challenges for theatre companies who work with asylum seekers and their stories, namely that of deciding how to dramatise and raise awareness of the issues involved, whilst navigating accusations of appropriation in so doing. Christine Bacon, describing the rehearsed playreadings of Ice and Fire, states: 'I never define it as a theatrical activity, it's much more a campaigning activity' (Paget, 2010: 181). At the end of each reading, the audience is informed about various ways they can get involved in providing immediate help to asylum seekers and refugees. Inchley observes that *Asylum Monologues* uses 'thematic patterning and narrative crafting to shape the material into a whole that is satisfying aesthetically, and which also serves to mobilise the humanitarian impulses of audience members' (2016: 34). When I interviewed Bacon, she told me: 'there's hundreds of things you can do, no matter where you are in the country. That's really the objective of the script, and it's sort of nakedly campaigning in that sense' (Bacon, 2016). She is aware that in packaging the production as entertainment, rather than as a political debate or event, the theatre company can attract audiences which consist not only of those already interested in the issues addressed, but a far wider public.

Another company in the UK that has sought to address ethical sensitivities in the theatrical representation of asylum seekers and refugees is Birmingham-based Banner Theatre, which has produced a series of plays and 'video ballads' about forced migration. In 2004 and 2006, the company toured its production of *Wild Geese*, describing the piece as 'a song and video ballad of exile and migration, using live music and video to combine the

stories of Irish nurses, Asian textile workers, Iranian refugees and Chinese cockle-pickers' (Bannertheatre.co.uk, [n.d]). Jeffers suggests that by employing video footage of the refugees speaking, the company was attempting to 'avoid some of the ethical pitfalls of having an actor re-tell the refugees' stories' (2006: 14). She observes that 'although the teller of the story has control of what they chose to say or not say, they appear to have little or no control of the framing narrative' (14), a situation that occurs in many other theatrical representations of narratives provided by asylum seekers and refugees.

It is rare that those who have been through the asylum system or experienced refugee status are, in their adopted country, in a position to create their own production about their experience, have theatre company members at their disposal (actors, designers, and technical staff), secure the funding required to produce a show or tour, and have the artistic expertise to direct and/or act in the piece they have written. A far more frequent occurrence is for theatre companies interested in matters relating to asylum to approach claimants or refugees and, with their consent, employ their stories in productions. Theatre based on testimonies, particularly when they are provided by people from marginalised or vulnerable populations, are, consequently, often the result of a collaboration between those who hold the power to produce the play and those who share stories employed in its creation. It is therefore incumbent upon theatre members to navigate this ethically precarious situation, demonstrating sensitivity to any risks the process might pose to the contributors when producing theatre of this kind.

### **1.3.3 Theatre in Germany**

In Germany, the director Michael Ruf created a version of *The Asylum Monologues* tailored to the concerns of that country. *Die Asyl Monologe* was presented in 2011 by his theatre company, Stage for Human Rights. Ruf was inspired to work on this project after seeing a presentation of *The Asylum Monologues* in England. Bacon explains how:

he came to see a couple of our readings and was really interested in them and interested in the idea, and I just said 'Well, why don't you do it in Germany? It can be done anywhere [...] it can be adapted for any context', and he said 'Oh, I think I will!' And he's the type of person that, when he said that, I believed him! (Bacon, 2016)

The play is based on original, non-fictional narratives and tells the stories of three refugees. According to Janis Arbeit von Jirotko, 'it narrates their stories of flight, of resistance towards the German asylum system and indicts the German asylum politics of inhumanity' (2015: 2).

In Ruf's play, professional actors narrate the refugees' experiences; after which, facilitated discussion sessions with the audience, actors and refugees take place. Fazila Bhimji states that the performances are also attended by 'refugee supporters, human rights lawyers, the refugees themselves and human rights groups' (2016: 89). Bhimji's understanding of this work is that 'the refugees did not perceive themselves as working in isolation, but rather in conjunction with differing cultural groups' (90), suggesting that, in this form of theatre, 'the actors convey the actual testimonies of the refugees, but these testimonies are reinforced, repeated and reiterated on stage by the bodies of actual refugees' (93). Ruf's productions therefore create a three-way conversation between the actors, the refugees whose stories they depict, and the audience members who become politically and emotionally engaged with the dramatised subject matter. At the same time, this form of theatre allows those who provide the stories – but do not actually perform them – to still attain a degree of personal and political agency in the theatrical process. The subject matter, given a wider audience through the dramatisation of the refugees' testimony, allows further discussion and audience engagement to occur than if the event ended immediately after the play-reading.

The aforementioned productions demonstrate a variety of ways in which theatre companies in countries impacted by asylum issues have portrayed the stories of those personally affected. With the exception of *CMI: A Certain Maritime Incident*, all the other plays include testimony gathered from people who have suffered persecution in their own country and have frequently been mistreated in the country in which they have sought refuge. In conveying these testimonies, each company or playwright has made choices about how the person giving their story will be involved in the dramatisation of their story. Some contributors are ultimately granted more agency in production processes than others, but the decisions are rarely ever taken by the asylum seekers or refugees themselves.

In some of the projects an asylum seeker was employed as an actor, a choice that may have sharpened the dramatic impact but was inevitably accompanied by the danger of exploitation. Conversely, employing professional actors who are not asylum seekers can

create a sense of separation from the contributors, who have lived experience of the stories that are staged. But when a company projects images of 'real' claimants onto a screen during the show, this runs the risk of representing them in a way over which they have no control. In all the plays mentioned in this section, the artistic and ethical choices of theatre practitioners living in the host countries have apparently been made with the intention of publicising urgent matters which have previously gone unheard, or been under-reported. Theatre makers have to consider how stories from contributors who have suffered persecution and trauma can be conveyed sensitively and ethically, and ask themselves if employing their testimony might have an adverse effect upon the contributors, since their stories are being used for theatrical entertainment by people holding a greater degree of power in society than the contributors.

Having the 'real' contributor on stage, telling his or her story, (as demonstrated by Al-Qady playing himself in *Nothing but Nothing*) goes some way towards mitigating accusations that theatre makers might appropriate interview material from asylum seekers for their own ends. But arguably, this production could be described more accurately as autobiographical performance, rather than verbatim theatre. However, in verbatim theatre processes in which interview content is employed in a script and then presented by actors, ethical challenges will always arise concerning the presence or absence of those who have shared their stories (as seen in *Wild Geese* and *CMI: A Certain Maritime Incident*). Both options raise questions relating to possibilities of exploitation and, depending on the decisions taken by the theatre makers, contributors are ultimately afforded a lesser or greater degree of personal and political agency within the projects. Since there is no one 'correct' way to present stories provided by members of such a vulnerable population, theatre makers must continue to operate with heightened ethical vigilance in regard to how their contributors are represented theatrically, and the ways in which they are involved in, and treated during the production process.

## **Section 2: 'Risky stories'**

The focus of this section is upon the potential risks asylum seekers and refugees can encounter during verbatim theatre processes. Contributors may have already undergone rigorous questioning conducted by border agency staff, judges, and solicitors. When seeking

asylum, a claimant has to narrate a personal story of persecution; the veracity of which is judged by officials who can either provide, or deny, refuge to the applicant. The outcome of the interview is often determined by the 'performativity' of the interviewees – this not only puts a rigorous spotlight on the methods employed by the border agency (in the UK: the Home Office), but also on the foundational practices of verbatim theatre.

In order to address concerns about asylum seekers' and refugees' involvement in verbatim theatre work, I will first outline the purpose of asylum-seeking procedures; mainly those conducted in the UK, but also in the Netherlands and the US. Since this chapter also reflects on the production of *Rights of Passage* and examines the experience of contributors who are LGBT asylum seekers, after describing the interview process that asylum seekers applying on the grounds of race, religion or nationality have to navigate, I will then discuss the interview process for claimants applying on account of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

## **2.1 Asylum interview procedures**

The UNHCR emerged in the wake of the Second World War, to help Europeans displaced by that conflict, and was established in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The following year, the legal foundation for helping refugees, and the basic statute guiding UNHCR's work – the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees – was adopted. Article 1 of the Convention defines a refugee as somebody who seeks refuge in another country because they have 'a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (UNHCR, 1950). Jeffers states that, under this international law, 'the onus is on refugees to prove their persecution to the state before that state will offer the protection that is due to all refugees' (2012: 6). She explains that, 'to convince the authorities of their right to stay asylum seekers are compelled to produce a convincing story of individual persecution in their previous home and show that this persecution would continue were they to be returned' (13). In this way, asylum seekers must engage in a process of trying to persuade the authorities that they are not economic migrants but legitimate claimants fleeing persecution. Bohmer and Shuman suggest that, during this procedure: 'applicants for asylum are caught between exile and legitimate status, a liminal state prolonged by a

difficult bureaucratic process that requires applicants to prove their own identity and to defend the urgency of their claims' (2007: 624).

Since 1999, the United Nations Convention Article has included lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the term 'particular social group'. To claim asylum in the UK, the Stonewall report states that LGBT people:

must fear a real risk of serious harm (eg. torture, rape etc) on the basis of their sexual identity without effective protection from their home country. The risk can be from the state (ie. the police) or from people in their community referred to as 'non-state agents' or 'the mob'. (Miles, 2009: 5)

Many asylum seekers have minimal contact with those they left behind in their countries of origin and limited access to personal documentation that might support their claim. But for LGBT people, the difficulty in proving one's identity is exacerbated by the fact that they have usually kept their personal lives secret from state authorities, from religious organisations, and even from close family members, for fear of retribution. Unlike those who apply for asylum on grounds of religious or political persecution, who can call upon fellow community members who have successfully gained refugee status, as witnesses – LGBT people frequently have no witnesses to support their asylum claims. Erin Power, a contributor to *Rights of Passage*, who worked for the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG), states, in the script of that play:

if you leave your country, you leave behind everybody who knows you. No-one even knew you were homosexual in your home country. Then you come here, you have to prove it [...] often you don't leave until the one or two people that were your witnesses are dead. (Summerskill, 2016: 68)

In systems that look for reasons to refuse, rather than to grant, asylum applications, the inability to produce witnesses puts LGBT asylum seekers at an immediate disadvantage, compared to some other claimants.

Without witnesses, the emphasis of the enquiry into a claim usually moves from a requirement for documented evidence and letters of support, to the applicant having to prove their sexual orientation in some other way. During an asylum claim, an interviewer might, for example, base their decision on whether they think the claimant 'looks' gay or

lesbian. Rachel Lewis, addressing the performance of visible identity required for LGBT asylum seekers, explains how:

unlike other refugee claimants who are not compelled to perform a visible identity in the country to which they migrate, lesbian and gay asylum applicants frequently are expected to conform to neoliberal narratives of sexual citizenship grounded in visibility politics, consumption, and an identity in the public sphere in order to be considered worthy candidates for asylum. (2013: 179)

The emphasis on a visible identity is troubling, mainly because it relies upon perceived stereotypes of LGBT people. Lewis' statement is reflected in the Stonewall report that states: 'some UKBA staff believe that applicants' appearance plays a key role in influencing a judge's decision' (Miles, 2009: 27).

The notion of 'proving' your identity, which is already a complicated challenge for heterosexual applicants who enter the asylum-seeking process, often without documentation, is harder still for LGB people, who will only gain refuge from persecution if they can somehow prove their sexual orientation to the immigration authorities. This is particularly difficult, not just because the premise of most asylum interviews is one of disbelief in the veracity of the applicant's testimony but also because of the current inadequacy in the lines of questioning that such an investigation involves. In her study of case procedures of asylum claims in Denmark based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI), Rebecca Christine Smith-Sivertsen explains that:

for the asylum seekers the interviews were described as stressful, exhausting, frightening, and uncomfortable experiences, where they multiple times were summoned for interviews that last all day in which they have to repeatedly tell their life stories, prove their SOGI, account for experiences that often include loss, social exclusion, harassment, violence and being disowned by family in the country of origin in the presence of a caseworker and an interpreter. (2016: 53)

Since my research now moves to an analysis of some of the risks for contributors to verbatim theatre, I will briefly summarise matters relating to the asylum process which are of particular relevance to theatre practitioners. To gain asylum in a foreign country, you do not just have to be fleeing persecution – you have to *prove* that you are. The asylum system is weighted against applicants, with border agencies generally looking for reasons to refuse,

rather than accept, refugees; which is reflected in a culture of disbelief in the asylum-seeking process. People claiming asylum on account of their sexual orientation are further disadvantaged because they rarely have witnesses to support their claims. They are also in the position of having to prove an identity relating to sexual feelings and emotional attraction towards the same sex, rather than one supportable by documentary evidence. In order to stand any chance of achieving a place of safety, these applicants are forced to talk in detail and openly about something they have always kept secret, and for which they may not even have the vocabulary. Moreover, they are often judged by Western standards on their appearance and the performativity of their sexual orientation – and by criteria such as a previous marriage and having had children, with an affirmative response potentially putting their lives at risk. Armed with an understanding of what most LGBT asylum seekers experience in the process of their application, the theatre practitioner who seeks their story for dramatic use cannot be unaware of the ethical minefield they enter. But for both heterosexual, cisgender and LGBT claimants alike, an interview by a playwright about the experiences which have led them to claim refuge in another country has the potential to repeat, or at least resemble, the asylum interview procedure – an ethical concern that requires further examination.

## **2.2 Ethical concerns about the interviewing process in verbatim theatre**

The following section addresses concerns expressed by scholars and practitioners who have observed close connections between the asylum-seeking interview process and interviews conducted for verbatim theatre projects. The possibility of harming a contributor by asking them to narrate a personally traumatic experience always exists when members of a vulnerable community are interviewed, but this risk increases when the contributor has experienced a stringent and harrowing interview process, in applying for asylum.

The examples of theatre created from stories provided by asylum seekers and refugees explored in this section range from applied theatre projects, in which the participants are involved in a rehearsal period, then narrate their own stories in a performance; to pieces in which contributors are not involved in the production process beyond the interview stage and professional actors are employed to play their ‘characters’. The experience of a contributor during a production process is therefore related to whether

they perform as themselves in the theatrical project or if their only involvement is in providing their story for the playwright to include in a script, and then possibly attending the final performance. In order to examine specific ethical concerns, mainly about possibilities of re-traumatisation, I therefore reference several different types of theatre projects based on personal testimonies, with the understanding that the dramatic forms, as well as the aims, of these productions and the experience of contributors, vary considerably.

Julie Salverson writes about theatre that involves 'personal contact between survivors of violence and the artists who direct, animate, or in some way perform their stories' (2001: 120), examining ethical considerations in these processes. In her article, 'Change on Whose Terms?: Testimony and an Erotics of Inquiry' (2001), she discusses what she views as 'a preoccupation with the experience of loss and a privileging of trauma as a mode of knowledge – both in popular theatre practice and in witnessing and trauma literature' (2001: 122), suggesting that this 'provides an essential yet limiting framework that fixes testimony within a discourse of loss and the tragic' (122). In her 1996 article, 'Performing Emergency: Witnessing, Popular Theatre, and the Lie of the Literal' she warns that 'thoughtlessly soliciting autobiography may reproduce a form of cultural colonialism that is at the very least voyeuristic' (1996: 181), and she proposes that: 'as artists and educators, we must continually ask ourselves: in what context are risky stories being told?' (181). Following Salverson's suggestion might involve theatre practitioners who work with testimonies asking themselves firstly, why they are drawn to this kind of material, and then questioning why the tragic parts of contributors' narratives are often the only parts employed in their productions. The response to this second question might be that the playwright wishes to highlight a particular matter of concern, such as the atrocities the asylum seeker is escaping, their enforced detention, or the inadequacies of the interviewing system within the asylum process. The interviewer's line of questioning with a contributor will therefore elicit responses on these specific subjects, rather than broadening its remit to include a more general interest in the contributor's life experiences. But if this is the case, those involved in this form of theatre work must be accountable to accusations of mining tragic stories from vulnerable contributors, since it is almost always the playwright, not the contributor, who determines how the contributors' stories are selected and then finally framed and portrayed.

Jeffers also expresses concerns about the kind of stories that are sought by theatre practitioners working with narratives provided by asylum seekers and refugees. She states: 'asylum seekers are often forced to perform the role of the victim in order to expedite their case for asylum' (2008: 218) and she observes that: 'in re-staging stories of refuge within a fictional frame that is peopled by refugees who are directly affected, applied theatre practitioners tread a precarious line between producing validation, on the one hand, and victimhood, on the other' (217). This 'victimhood' can occur when contributors are only seen in terms of providing tragic narratives – which their lawyers will have also encouraged them to present during their asylum seeking processes. Jeffers suggests that an increase in self-reflexivity by theatre practitioners will contribute towards undermining 'any attempt to create a simple "heroic" role in relation to asylum seeker's supposed victimhood, potentially destabilising or, at least partially levelling, the ground on which participants and facilitators meet' (220). The self-reflexivity Jeffers encourages leads me to critically reflect upon one area of my own working practice with *Rights of Passage*, where I now see that I was culpable of pursuing the kind of narrative of victimhood she cautions against.

In the play, the part of the Iranian gay character, Hamed, was created from testimony taken from two 'real' gay men. The first man's experience (who I will call Contributor A) described events in Iran which included a forcible arrest by the Basij (a branch of social police) for 'appearing' to be gay, by having long hair. This is the scripted version of that incident:

HAMED:           And three guys with lots of muscle, they caught me. They pushed me in the car, in the back seat.

*BASIJ blindfolds HAMED*

HAMED:           I can remember the sound of the highway, and after 30 minutes I knew we'd arrived somewhere. And it was very obvious if I try to escape they definitely will shoot me. And we went to a ... I don't know, it was an office or something like this, but suddenly all the voices and the sound turn to silence.

*HAMED is tied to a chair with rope and handcuffed with his hands behind his back. The guards open his bag. A GUARD urinates on HAMED's hair.*

GUARD: You like cigarette?

HAMED: Please, I'm absolutely wet.

GUARD: Well you'd better take your clothes off then, hadn't you?

*The GUARD takes off HAMED's blindfold and handcuffs.*

GUARD: Now bend over.

*GUARD touches HAMED's bottom with a truncheon.  
Then he ties him down again on the chair.*

HAMED: And next I felt somebody start to cut my hair, not with scissor, but with something blunt, definitely with a knife, not scissor, and, you know, in a very, very, tough way.

*GUARD pushes him down.*

GUARD: We know who you are. If we catch you next time we put you in a place where nobody can find you.

(Summerskill, 2016: 16)

This story provided a visually compelling scene in the performance. The experiences of the second Iranian man (Contributor B) whose I interviewed mainly focussed on the frustrating and harrowing process he had encountered with the UK Border Agency, and his subsequent incarcerations in a prison and then, in a detention centre, while he tried to claim asylum based on his sexual orientation. This is an excerpt from the second half of the play, where Contributor B's testimony was employed in the script:

HAMED: When they interviewed me at Croydon they asked me:

INTERVIEWER: Have you got any proof for saying that you are gay?

HAMED: What do you mean? What kind of proof? What kind of evidence do you need?

INTERVIEWER: Any boyfriend, a relationship with European or British person?

HAMED: No. I just came here three weeks ago, how can I have it?

INTERVIEWER: That's not good enough for evidence.

HAMED: And she stopped speaking with me, and then they didn't let me out. Don't know why. I had a visa, my own passport and even fingerprint in

UK embassy in Iran. I was confused, and in the evening time they put me in some special van.

*GUARD takes HAMED off*

HAMED: *(Cont)* No window, no way to see out. When I came out from the van I just thought “Oh shit, it's a prison. Oh my God, it's a jail”. And that woman, she put me in the jail for twenty-one days.

(Summerskill, 2016: 44)

As the playwright, I chose to merge these two narratives and create one composite character who would narrate the excerpts I selected from both contributors' stories. As soon as I came to the scripting part of the process, I contacted the two contributors, explained what I was going to do and sent them the excerpts I was intending to employ from their interviews. Both replied that they were content with those excerpts being included in the script. Contributor A came to the rehearsed playreading at Oxford House in London and took part in the post-show discussion, but Contributor B lives in Scotland, and although I kept in touch with him about every stage of the production process, he was, sadly, unable to attend any of the shows in England.

Jeffers suggests that theatre practitioners would benefit from an understanding of how the narratives of refugee participants are ‘conditioned by bureaucratic performance’ (2008: 217), referring to their interview process for seeking asylum. Whilst Salverson warns of ‘scripts of melancholic loss’ (2001: 124) being recycled by writers, Jeffers encourages practitioners to ‘avoid perpetuating simplistic narratives of victimhood in theatre projects whereby the apparently symbiotic relationship between asylum seekers and suffering is presented’ (2008: 220). I now see that the reason behind my decision to merge Contributor A and Contributor B’s testimonies to create one theatrical character was, indeed, precisely because, as a dramatist, I was searching for such narratives of ‘victimhood’. Jeffers also argues that ‘stories about the poor treatment received by refugees when they arrive in a “safe” country can be privileged over narratives depicting a largely unproblematic entry to that country’ (2012: 46). In the scripting process, I employed Contributor B’s experiences of the asylum system because Contributor A had experienced a relatively easy entry into the UK. My aim was to create scenes that worked well dramatically, whilst addressing two different issues that the narrative of one person alone did not cover. I had hoped, by

explaining my choices and process to the contributors and sending them the final excerpts, that I was operating in a way that demonstrated best practice; but I now see that, however well-intentioned, I was still, in effect, 'privileging' stories of poor treatment of asylum seekers in my scripting process.

I suggest, however, that the essential difference between my selection of stories that provided artistic tension in a theatrical context, and the narrative of persecution demanded by the Home Office, was that – for my play – the shocking and moving scenes were included to raise awareness of what lesbians and gay men suffered in the form of homophobic attitudes and attacks around the world. The interview process an asylum seeker undergoes by a border agency is for a different reason entirely. Bohmer and Shuman point out: 'as is true of other fact-finding inquiries, the political asylum process is designed not to actually "find facts" but to use interrogation as a deterrent to admitting unworthy applicants' (2007: 604). Similar narratives may well have been sought for the asylum claim, but the purpose of that interview process was to determine whether or not asylum would be granted to one of tens of thousands of claimants seeking refuge – who would not all be successful in that endeavour.

Addressing the recent increase in Anglophone plays created in collaboration with refugees, asylum seekers and irregular immigrants, Wake comments that current scholarship focusses on three areas: 'production, representation, and reception' (2013: 104) which, she suggests are 'bound by a common concern with what [she calls] the "risks of repetition" or more specifically the "ethics of repetition"' (104). She suggests that during the production process, there is a danger that the asylum seeker can be retraumatised, since 'by soliciting testimony from an asylum seeker, the playwright will inadvertently re-injure her or him' (104). Summing up the dangers this work poses to contributors, as explained by Salverson and Jeffers, Wake contends that these risks can occur 'either because contributors have never told their story or because they have told it too many times' (104). She expresses particular concern about asylum seekers who are cast as themselves, but even in verbatim theatre pieces where contributors' stories are acted by professional actors, Wake suggests that 'in ethical terms, mimetic witnessing emerges as a deeply ambiguous practice that risks re-interrogating the always already interrogated' (120).

The working practice of Ros Horin, the director and writer of *Through the Wire*, provides an example of concerns arising about the re-injuring of contributors during the interview process. Horin describes the manner in which she approached the four interviews she conducted with refugees from Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney:

I didn't come in with a point of view. I came in with a healthy degree of scepticism. How do I know these people are genuine refugees? I thought I had to go through that – to convince an audience, I have to really convince myself. So I was rather forensic in my questioning. Why? What had happened? What got you into trouble? So what? Couldn't you have lived with that there? Why did you have to get out? What would have happened if you'd stayed? What were the political ramifications? (Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007: 160)

Because of Horin's personal need to be persuaded that the refugees' claims were valid in her view – since she assumed her audience members would be asking the same question to also be 'convinced' – she reproduced the kind of interview procedure she believed the contributors underwent in their processing as asylum seekers. Rather than attempting to avoid any form of re-traumatisation by making the theatre interview process an entirely different experience from an asylum-seeking process, Horin quite deliberately replicated it.

This working method raises ethical concerns, since it prioritises the artistic requirements of the writer and the production over any possible distress caused to the contributors. In her interview with Anderson and Wilkinson, Horin does not mention how her interviewing technique may have impacted those whom she interviewed for this piece; nor does she include within the text of the play any information about her own position as a writer in relation to the contributors, that could throw further light on how they experienced her working methods. Wake comments that 'this absence, in a play that insists on presence and co-presence, warrants further investigation' (2013: 114), but she also states: 'while *Through the Wire* was ethically problematic, it was also politically efficacious' (117). This observation demonstrates one of the critical quandaries for a playwright creating theatre from interviews with vulnerable or traumatised contributors: namely, how to create a production that is moving, powerful and educational, that, at the same time, does not exploit contributors.

A key question posed by Salverson, in a reflective appraisal of one of her own projects, is 'what is the cost to the speaker?' (1996: 182). In 1993, she worked on a theatre piece entitled *Are the Birds in Canada the Same?* – produced by Flying Blind Theatre Events, who hired refugees and actors for the performance, which was then presented to an audience predominantly comprised of refugees. The play explores the experience of three refugees to Canada: one from Central America, one from the former Yugoslavia, and one from Sri Lanka – and it was developed through a process of improvisation and discussion. Salverson writes about one of the participants, Tom, who seemed to enjoy the weeks he spent working on the project. However, Salverson informs us that after it was finished, 'Tom began telling people how awful the experience had been' (185). Even though his asylum process occurred many years previously, and the stories he shared were not recent, nonetheless, he revealed that he had suffered nightmares throughout his involvement in the project.

Reflecting upon Tom's experience, Salverson's analysis is: 'we were ready to hear stories about torture. We were not ready to hear what it would mean for Tom to remember and speak them. The container, in other words, was suggested but not fully built' (185). She explains that:

Tom, who was not an actor, spoke lines he had created and told stories he had lived. My mistake as a playwright was not writing for Tom a character sufficiently new and different from 'Tom' – one that would allow him to step into a character who was not himself. (187)

Salverson's interpretation of the difficulties contributors such as Tom experienced during the project and after it was: 'there is no external image for the participants to step into, and they are caught recycling a story they may wish they had never remembered' (188).

Salverson's candid and insightful account of Tom's involvement in *Are the Birds in Canada the Same?* provides an important addition to the otherwise limited scholarship on the experience of those who contribute to plays based on personal narratives. In this production, Salverson concludes that the theatre company's working processes were not sufficiently capable of ensuring Tom's emotional safety or affording him benefits from his involvement. Theatre practitioners working with members of vulnerable communities are often aware of their heightened ethical responsibilities in relation to their contributors but, as Salverson explains, sometimes they will get things wrong and can learn from those

mistakes. But in spite of the potential risks that verbatim theatre can pose for contributors, as demonstrated in the examples above, it is evident that not only can some risks of adverse experience be mitigated, but certain benefits might also be afforded to those who share their stories with theatre makers, too; as I will demonstrate in the following section.

### **Section 3: Identifying benefits for contributors and mitigating risks from their involvement**

One of the advantages in creating verbatim theatre from interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, then having the parts of the contributors acted by professional actors, is that it saves contributors from having to perform themselves when they would not wish to do so. When testimonies of persecution or trauma are staged in this way, the risk for the contributors of re-traumatisation is reduced, which is one of the reasons it has proved a popular option for many playwrights and contributors. This section examines some of the benefits for contributors who do not perform in productions and explores ways in which risks identified in the earlier part of this chapter can be mitigated.

#### **3:1 'This is my opportunity to get my story out'**

While some people might be prepared to act 'themselves' in a theatre piece and recount traumatic incidents, Bacon states that in her experience, the contributors she interviewed for *Asylum Monologues* were generally delighted when they found out that professional actors would be playing them. She explains, 'half of the attraction of this project for interviewees is "Great! My story can be out there and I don't have to repeat it a hundred times"' (Bacon, 2016). In her opinion, having an actor present the contributor's narrative 'is a very attractive thing. It's actually a sort of relief. It's like "OK. I just have to speak with you. We'll have a conversation, and then that's it. I'm done with it"' (2016). She also observes that when the contributors do come and see the show and witness the impact on an audience of the narration of their own story, 'that is very often an eye-opening moment for them as well, because they think "People do care about what I've been through"' (2016). An additional benefit afforded to contributors can be detected when contributors claim that they value the fact that their story is being told to a wider audience than might otherwise hear about their experiences. Bacon emphasises that not only is she intent on creating these plays because 'I feel that people need to hear these stories' but also, critically, she states:

the people who talk to me feel the same [...] A lot of the asylum seekers and refugees are activists themselves. A lot of them have left their country because they stood up to authority and because they believed in speaking out. So, they understand why it's useful to speak out and get stories heard. (2016)

In plays created from stories provided by asylum seekers and refugees, there will also be contributors who have not been activists, including some LGBT people for whom speaking out publicly about their sexual orientation or gender identity to anyone at all in their countries of origin would have extremely dangerous. Nonetheless, these contributors may still be keen to take advantage of having their story recorded and performed on stage by members of a theatre company, in order to help other people who have suffered in a similar way.

I re-interviewed Izzuddin, the gay Malaysian contributor to *Rights of Passage*, shortly after the production had finished touring. He had attended many of the performances, not only in London, where he lived, but also at other venues around the country and, during the rehearsal period, he had been in contact with the actor playing him who worked as a 'Method' actor and had wanted to know a little more about certain incidents Izzuddin described in the script. In the later interview I conducted with the 'real' Izzuddin, I was interested in asking about his own experience of watching himself and his story portrayed on stage. It was during this interview that he used the phrase, "He's talking, my mouth moving" about watching an actor deliver his very own words. One of my questions was to ask why he had initially volunteered to be a contributor to the play. This was his response:

I thought 'this is my opportunity to get my story out', because the aim really is to help others who are actually experiencing similar issues in this country, who have not been able to find elsewhere. So, I thought by having my story presented in a play, it could reach the wider public... I guess the more people knew about my story... if somebody could benefit from it as well, my job's done, because I've done something to help others. (Izzuddin, 2016)

Izzuddin had not been an activist in his home country; in fact, he was just sixteen when he came to study at a college in Edinburgh, but he now works at the Home Office in London, and some of his colleagues there process asylum seekers' claims. He hoped that by inviting his work friends to see his and other asylum seekers' stories portrayed on stage,

they would learn more about him personally than he had previously been able to share, and that the play's depiction of the asylum-seeking process, particularly the interviewing methods employed by the Home Office, might encourage them to reflect upon their ongoing work in that area. He told me that after seeing the play, his colleagues told him, 'in future, they want to be more sympathetic, especially to LGBT people claiming asylum' (Izzuddin, 2016). He said: 'they learn from that, which is good. At least they learn something!' (2016).

Similarly, with the playreadings of *The Asylum Monologues*, although many contributors understood their involvement to have ended after their interview, Bacon recalls that she mentioned to some of them that the piece was going to be performed at the Home Office and she asked them if they would like to attend and participate in the post-show discussion there. They replied that they were 'keen to be part of that because there was something very direct about it' (Bacon, 2016). The reactions described by Izzuddin and Bacon's contributors demonstrate that rather than seeing themselves as being 'used' by the playwrights, who inevitably had their own agenda in creating the scripts, the contributors were also able to 'use' the production to tell their own story to a larger audience. Additionally, the plays provided an opportunity for issues relating to their experiences to be heard by those in a position to influence and possibly change policies relating to asylum.

### **3.2 Possibilities of co-creation**

Even though the piece was created from a desire to generate wider interest in, and activism on, asylum issues, Ice and Fire's working methods in *The Asylum Monologues* demonstrate the company's attempts to carefully balance its political agenda with ethical considerations relating to the value and experience of contributors within this process. When I asked Bacon how she views her contributors' involvement, she explained:

the idea is that we're borrowing their testimony for as long as they are happy for us to do that. And we make it very clear that 'This is your story. Anything you don't want to answer, just say. We will send you a transcript when it's finished and you can change anything you like and it will be honoured. You can withdraw your permission at any time'. (Bacon, 2016)

This practice, which reflects a high regard for the contributors and their valuable role in the creation of the play, goes some way to mitigating concerns about the appropriation of their stories. The key term Bacon employs is that she views the theatre company as ‘borrowing’ people’s stories, rather than ‘taking’ them, which would suggest ownership. When contributors are permitted to read through their excerpts and approve the content before it is employed in the script, they are afforded a degree of agency within the creation process.

In the scripting of *Rights of Passage*, my own practice of sending contributors their interview excerpts to be read and agreed to was imbued with additional significance after Miremba told me about an incident at her screening interview, when she initially presented herself to the Home Office as an asylum seeker. She asked an official if she could look over a written statement she had provided during the interview, but was told there was no time for her to do that, since it had to be handed in immediately. Since so much weight in the asylum process is placed on the accuracy of every single comment and recollection provided by the applicant, this put Miremba in an extremely difficult position. She was torn between insisting upon being given the time to read through the statement to verify it, or – to avoid the risk of being seen as difficult – complying with the official who wanted to quickly take her statement away from her to be processed. I decided to include this incident in the script, hoping it would give the audience a valuable glimpse into the interview processes that asylum seekers undergo. This is the scripted excerpt:

INTERVIEWER 2: Now you have to sign this.

MIREMBA: What is it?

INTERVIEWER 2: It is a statement that you made about your life.

MIREMBA: Can I read over it please, then?

INTERVIEWER 2: Just sign it. We don't have time. You have to sign it now. I'll give you a copy which you'll read when you go out.

MIREMBA: *(To audience)* They put you in a situation whereby you can't even say anything is wrong. They push you in a corner whereby you start shaking and getting scared because you're an asylum seeker, and you start thinking "Oh, if I start maybe saying something they'll say I'm rude, and that might affect my, my application."

But I want to read before I sign.

INTERVIEWER 2: No, you don't have to read it. Just sign it here.

(Summerskill, 2016: 69)

During each performance of this scene, as with all the other scenes where the actors portrayed pressurised interview situations with Home Office officials, judges and lawyers, there was an audible response of recognition from asylum seekers and refugees in the audience, indicating to me that many of them might have received similar treatment. In my own interview practice with contributors to *Rights of Passage*, I thought it imperative to give them full access to the excerpts I wished to employ in the play, a period to look over them and edit them if necessary, and time to talk about the kind of play I wanted to create, and my reasons for doing it. I invited them to participate in post-show discussions, offered them travel money to the theatre if required, and gave them complimentary tickets to the performances.

Writing about the working methods of *Ice and Fire*, Inchley comments that 'interviews will last several hours [...] contact will often be maintained with interviewees over several years, a span of time that can reflect the wait that asylum seekers experience as part of the application and appeals process' (2016: 39). Bacon states: 'I keep in touch with a lot of them so I can update the audience on what's going on. We update the stories, the testimonies, if significant things change as well in their lives and add those details to the story' (Bacon, 2016). This is one of the advantages of working with rehearsed playreadings, rather than full productions, which require a much longer period of preparation in which actors have to learn scripts and would find it difficult, if not impossible, to constantly learn new lines to reflect changes in the contributors' circumstances. But the attention given by *Ice and Fire* to the contributors who provide the narratives, whereby their story can be re-written when required, reflects a respectful and caring approach by the theatre company towards those who provide the content of their scripts. Furthermore, the extended period after the initial interview in which Bacon stays in touch with the contributors shows a concern for their ongoing experiences and presents a stark contrast to asylum procedures, where interviews are highly-pressurised and there is always a critical outcome.

Like Bacon and her contributors to the Ice and Fire scripts, I, too, stayed in contact with the main contributors to *Rights of Passage* after my initial interviews with them. When I first interviewed Miremba, she had just applied for asylum in the UK and had undergone her initial presentation to, and interview with, the Home Office. It was not until eighteen months later that she attended her final interview and was subsequently granted asylum. Although, by the time the production toured, Miremba had finally gained asylum, in the final script, I decided to end her story at a point where she did not know the outcome of her claim, so the audience would be left in a state reflecting the uncertainty with which asylum seekers have to live.

I was in contact with Miremba from the time she first applied for asylum through to the day she received it and, during that period, I helped her with certain stages of her application, such as form-filling, contacting her local Member of Parliament about her case, seeking a lawyer to represent her and writing a statement of support for her. One year after I first met her, I interviewed her again, asking her why she had agreed to come forward to tell her story. She told me: ‘talking about my life, it was something like “Oh, maybe if I talk about it, it might be something to make me heal”’(Miremba, 2015). She said:

it was exciting and at the same time scary [...] When we first spoke, it was very hard, very emotional. But I think it did help because I’ve never really opened up, I always try to avoid going deeper because I didn’t want to bring all these memories back, so I always cut off. I also wanted my story to be heard because I knew I’m not the only one that has gone through such hardship. So, coming out and saying it, and knowing that you do write plays and other people are going to see that play and they will tell another person about the play and someone else will read the script when it comes out, and probably they will do something about it. (Miremba, 2015)

Miremba’s comments echo Bacon’s suggestion that the contributor can, to some extent, be a co-creator in the process of telling their story for use in a play. There is always a risk that the writer’s editorial control can result in erasure of the testimonial co-production at the moment of staging – and important ethical questions abound regarding power imbalances between the two parties; but there are still ways in which the contributor can attain a significant degree of political and personal agency in this work.

Differences between asylum seekers who are interviewed for a verbatim play and interrogations conducted by the Home Office or a country’s border agency staff lie in the

style, purpose, and atmosphere of those interviews. Asylum seekers experience fraught interview sessions, often for hours on end, frequently not conducted in the applicant's first language, and with an uncertain outcome that could have potentially dire consequences for the claimant. Knowing this, and in an attempt to minimise further trauma for the contributors, playwrights interviewing asylum seekers and refugees will usually endeavour to create a safe and supportive space during the interview process. Furthermore, potential benefits have been identified for the contributor in such circumstances. Stuart Fisher, discussing theatre created from people's traumatic stories, states: 'many survivors of trauma speak of the *need* or indeed the compulsion to testify and to make other people aware of what has been lived through' (2011b: 114), and Jeffers observes that 'for refugees who have experienced violence, the need to be listened to can be imperative' (2006: 7). An interview with a verbatim theatre playwright can provide an opportunity for contributors to share their stories in a place of relative safety and, at the same time, feel listened to in a way they will not have experienced during their asylum interviews.

Turning once again to oral history scholarship, I suggest that verbatim playwrights can benefit from examining existing discussions in that field relating to interviews with those who have experienced trauma. Carol McKirdy, for example, addressing best practice when interviewing immigrants, states that whilst 'experiencing traumatic events does not necessarily lead to lasting emotional and psychological damage' (2015: 49), it may still be the case that 'trauma issues can appear unexpectedly in any oral history interview and it is important to be prepared to allow for professional counselling support for any narrator if needed' (52). She advises interviewers to 'be mindful of how you leave the narrator [...] physically, emotionally and metaphorically. Wind down the interview graciously; take ample time to gently ease away from the interview's focus. [...] Phone the following day to see if the narrator is okay' (62). All of these guidelines outlined by McKirdy can easily be employed by verbatim playwrights.

This section has examined the ways in which some of the risks of re-traumatisation are addressed by playwrights who interview asylum seekers. Unlike Ros Horin, who chose to deliberately replicate the harsher aspects of an asylum seeker's interview process, Bacon's approach to contributors appears to be based more on a sense of gratitude and respect for their participation and concern for their ongoing wellbeing. Her working methods afford

contributors a degree of control over the narratives the playwrights have ‘borrowed’ and then included in their scripts. Additionally, I have described how the atmosphere and set-up of an interview for a play can be attended to, in a deliberate attempt to ensure that it differs substantially from interviews an asylum claimant has previously experienced. However, in acknowledging that there are no risk-free encounters in this work, it is still prudent to assume that, during an interview with anyone who has experienced trauma and/or persecution, hitherto suppressed – or even clearly-remembered – traumatic memories and feelings may re-surface, constituting a serious ethical concern, to which verbatim theatre practitioners must pay close attention.

### **3.3 Identifying the time when contributors are interviewed in relation to their asylum process**

Some of the concerns expressed by Wake, Jeffers, and Salverson about possibilities of re-traumatisation of asylum seekers are based on the understanding that the danger arises because contributors have already – and possibly recently – been interviewed for their asylum claims. However, in describing her working methods for plays created for Ice and Fire, Bacon draws a distinction between the various stages of the asylum seekers’ own application process, at which they might be approached to share their testimony for inclusion in a script. She explains:

it’s tricky to speak to someone at the very beginning of when they come to the country and they’re still grappling with what asylum is and how they’re going to get through the system. Whereas, if someone’s been here for a while, they sort of feel like ‘OK, I’ve got support here. I know where I stand’. (Bacon, 2016)

Bacon also highlights differences between asking asylum seekers and refugees for their stories for plays such as *The Asylum Monologues*, and the work she is involved with at ‘Room to Heal’ and ‘Freedom from Torture’.<sup>25</sup> In these two groups, she states that the participants are ‘going through a very intensive therapeutic process, and they’ve still got very unstable mental health’ (2016). She explains that ‘they don’t want to rehash their stories. They don’t want to have to go into those details’ (2016). However, with contributors

---

<sup>25</sup> ‘Room to Heal’ offers practical casework assistance and a range of creative and social activities to refugees and asylum seekers who have experienced torture and human rights abuses. ‘Freedom from Torture’ is an organisation dedicated solely to the treatment and rehabilitation of survivors of torture.

Bacon believes are not at such a vulnerable stage, she observes: 'they've gone through a process of therapy perhaps, of going through their experience and story, and that's a very different situation and it's a much clearer transaction in that instance' (2016).

With regard to *Rights of Passage*, I suggest that concerns about the possible re-traumatisation of contributors who have recently undergone an asylum interview were not always applicable. The 'real' Izzuddin, for example, had been working full-time in London for many years when we met and the main elements of his story – coming to Edinburgh as a young student, realising he was gay, having his educational grant withdrawn by the Malaysian Education Board who had then asked him to return to that country, then claiming asylum in the UK – had occurred more than fifteen years before I met him. In the composite character of Hamed, one of two contributors (Contributor A) had quite recently experienced the asylum interview process, but the other (Contributor B) had received full refugee status a few years previously.

When I first interviewed Miremba, she had only recently applied to the Home Office for asylum based on her sexual orientation, and had not yet undergone her main interview, in which she would be fully interrogated, her supporting statements presented by a lawyer, and her claim finally decided upon. In my follow-up interview with her, when I asked her why she had agreed to contribute to the play, she said: 'I've been discreet all my life, so this opening up is a big step for me' (Miremba, 2015). My understanding was that her initial interview with me was the first time she had spoken openly about some of the deeply traumatic experiences she had endured as a lesbian in Uganda. After her first asylum screening interview (during which she was refused any time to look over her statement), there was a period of approximately eighteen months before she was called again for her case to be assessed. At one point during that time, I read through a piece of written testimony she had prepared for her lawyer and I suggested that she include slightly more information about the level of sexual and physical abuse she had suffered in her marriage, which she had mentioned to me in her first interview for the play. The reason I made this suggestion was that, while I had been working with other LGBT asylum seekers on writing their statements of support, I had learned that the more asylum seekers disclosed about their past traumatic experiences, the likelier their claims were to be granted. Miremba told me that she had been reluctant to reveal so much of her personal life to the lawyer but,

after we had discussed it, she agreed that she would include the information about the abusive relationship. In this instance, Miremba made the decision to employ information she had disclosed in the theatre interview to lend weight to her Home Office application.

The examples I have cited – of Miremba not having undergone her main asylum interview process, Izzuddin’s situation, and that of one of the men who created the composite character of Hamed – show that a sequential process in the creation of plays, whereby a contributor’s interview will follow shortly after an asylum interview, is not always inevitable. In productions where this is the case, there is, undoubtedly, a higher risk of re-traumatisation. However, the examples provided of my own working methods with Artemis, and those, as outlined by Bacon at *Ice and Fire*, demonstrate that it is also not inevitable that contributors are always at risk of being re-traumatised in this work. It is even a possibility that being interviewed by a playwright in a relatively safe and welcoming environment, with the opportunity to reveal whatever narratives the asylum seeker wishes, without pressure, can allow contributors to compose their experiences in ways that are helpful to them for a future Home Office interview or court appearance.

#### **Section 4: Positionality: Interviewing lesbian and gay asylum seekers and refugees for verbatim theatre projects**

This section discusses whether the inherent risks for contributors to plays created from interviews, as noted by scholars, can be mitigated for LGB asylum seekers when the playwright shares their sexual orientation. It also addresses the question (initially explored in Chapter Five), of whether contributors can feel that their experiences and identity are validated when they attend a performance and see other audience members, many of whom share their sexual orientation and some of whom are also LGB asylum seekers, moved by parts of a play with which they, too, can identify. In spite of the fact that dangers of re-traumatisation exist in telling a story of persecution to a playwright, it is possible that these risks can diminish when the interviewer and the narrator share some degree of lived experience and this matter will be examined in relation to contributors to the play *Rights of Passage*. In addressing the significance of the positionality of the playwright in verbatim theatre created from interviews with lesbian and gay asylum seekers, I employ the tools of intersectionality, exploring the spectrum of insider to outsider terminologies, whilst

endeavouring to identify my own position as a playwright in relation to contributors in this production. Comments made by two contributors to *Rights of Passage* in follow-up interviews conducted with them after the production will be included in this analysis.

In Chapter Five, reflecting on *Gateway to Heaven*, I argued that my insider positioning as a playwright (as a lesbian, sharing the same sexual orientation as contributors to the play) helped to elicit a rich level of disclosure from Eileen and enabled me, as the interviewer, to listen with empathy to her stories. Miremba also told me that it was because I was a lesbian that she had come forward as a contributor to *Rights of Passage*, and that was why she had been willing to talk to me about her experiences. She commented:

with you, I thought, 'Oh, she's a lesbian and I think she'll understand what I'm about. She'll really get my point'. 'Cos straight people don't really get it when I say it wasn't easy what I went through, because they're not in my shoes. They're not like me. So, maybe her, she's like me, she will really understand what it means, and we'll be on the same page. (Miremba, 2015)

The understanding that LGBTQ narrators are more comfortable sharing narratives about aspects of their personal lives which relate to their sexual orientation with LGBTQ interviewers is one that is also held by oral historians Jane Traies (2020) and Amy Tooth Murphy (2020), based on their research on older lesbians. Tooth Murphy freely admits that not 'all LGBTQ people are the same' (2020: 37), but she argues that, in the case of LGBTQ oral histories, 'the perception of this shared identity is invaluable in overcoming many other social and cultural differences, placing the emphasis on a mutual understanding of the issues faced as members of a marginalised and historically oppressed group' (37).

In interviews with lesbian and gay contributors for oral history projects or verbatim theatre work, it would be hard to claim definitively whether the level of disclosure is greater on account of a shared sexual orientation than it might be with a heterosexual interviewer. But taking into account the observations of Traies and Tooth Murphy, as well as my own experiences, it appears to be the case that narrators who clearly state that it is because they share the same sexual orientation as the interviewer that they agreed to be interviewed, will feel more comfortable about speaking openly and at length about very personal matters. However, in many interview situations, for academic research or verbatim theatre purposes, a shared sexual orientation will frequently speak only to one part of the identity

of those involved in this exchange. Following the directive of feminist theory and practice, I now reflect upon other existing subjectivities and identities between myself and the contributor Miremba, in the interviews I conducted with her for, and about, the play, *Rights of Passage*.

Even though we share the same sexual orientation, the fact that Miremba is black and that I am white, reflects probably the most important power imbalance between us in an interview situation, and more generally. The initial thinking behind Crenshaw's premise of intersectionality, as outlined in her article 'Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' was that:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women (1989: 149).

The heightened danger of exploitation by myself, as a white verbatim theatre playwright working with a contributor such as Miremba, is also reflected in Crenshaw's statement in the same article, where she states: 'not only are women of colour in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women*' (1989: 154).

Examining other differences between myself and Miremba, I note that, although our educational differences were not so apparent (Miremba had attained her first degree and, prior to leaving Uganda, had intended to apply to study for an MA), the other main inequality between us was our differing states of residency in the UK. I had full residency and she had no claim to residency but was applying for asylum. My resident status allows me to work in whatever area I chose and to earn an income, and I am entitled to benefits, should I be unemployed. As an asylum seeker, Miremba was not able to gain any form of legal employment and was, at the time, living on hand-outs from friends. She had no permanent place to live and, in the time before she applied for asylum, as well as during that process, she had a constant fear of being deported. Furthermore, although I had spent four years working on interviewing people for my play before I applied for research and

development funding from the Arts Council, by the time I met Miremba, I was being paid for creating the play, whereas – as is usually the case in verbatim theatre work – Miremba received no payment for her interviews.

Daphne Patai states: ‘the world will not get better because we have sensitively apologised for privilege; nor if, from the comfortable heights of the academy, we advertise our identification with the oppressed or compete for distinction as members of this or that oppressed group’ (1991: 150). This comment might appear a little harsh, but there is undoubtedly some truth in Patai’s observation. She argues that ‘ultimately we have to make up our minds whether our research is worth doing or not, and then determine how to go about it in ways that let it best serve our stated goals’ (150). Although she is referring to the development of feminist interviewing practice almost three decades ago, the relevance to current verbatim theatre work is that, as playwrights who employ interview content in our scripts, kindly provided by those who perhaps do not always receive the recognition they deserve for making this work happen, we must take individual responsibility for addressing any risks to contributors and focus on how the theatre project might ultimately benefit them, the wider public, and ourselves. Our decisions can be informed by employing critical reflexivity and part of that process involves identifying the positionality of the playwright, since this can have a significant impact upon the contributor’s experience.

Looking for beneficial possibilities for contributors is one way to operate with the feminist concept of reciprocity, a matter which I now address, again, in relation to *Rights of Passage*. I suggest that, during the production process for that play, some of the lesbian and gay contributors were afforded the opportunity to move from a place of shame to one of pride, in relation to their sexual orientation. As with older lesbians and gay men who share their stories with a theatre company or for an oral history project, issues relating to shame can seriously impact lesbian and asylum seekers and refugees who have suffered persecution in their home countries on account of their sexual orientation and who still face persecution within their own communities and in detention centres. Barry O’Leary, a solicitor and immigration lawyer writing about lesbians and gay men seeking asylum, states: ‘by the nature of their claim, they will come from a country where they are continually told that to be lesbian or gay is to be “immoral”. These feelings do not disappear immediately, even in the relatively enlightened environment of the UK’ (2008: 93). Calogero Giametta

reaches a similar conclusion from his study of asylum claimants, observing that LGBT asylum seekers who 'do not have support from their families or ethnic minority social workers [...] have grown to feel ashamed of who they are as well as what has happened to them' (2016: 61).

The need for LGBT asylum seekers to belong to groups where they can meet and be supported by other LGBT asylum seekers is vitally important to many, before, during, and after the process of applying for asylum. I suggest that throughout the production process of *Rights of Passage*, Miremba, and Contributor A to the composite part of Hamed found a similar level of support and validation from their involvement: firstly, as interviewees; then as audience members, and Contributor A as a member of one post-show discussion – during which they experienced an environment in which their sexual orientation was not judged or shamed, but fully celebrated. Contributor B was interviewed on Skype from Scotland and was not able to attend any of the performances, and Izzuddin had come to the UK many years previously and so, by the time I interviewed him, was in full time employment and had found his own gay social support networks. Consequently, I am not including these two contributors in my analysis.

In this production, the lesbian and gay asylum seekers who gave their stories to be used in the script were interviewed by a lesbian (myself), their 'characters' were acted by lesbian and gay cast members, and the play was performed over a six-week period to audiences mainly comprised of LGBT people. The publicity for this play was largely dispersed to my own database (predominantly LGBTQ attendees to my previous lesbian and gay-themed productions) and to LGBTQ organisations and LGBTQ asylum groups. Building on the discussion of Eileen's experience in *Gateway to Heaven*, where I contend that the shared sexual orientation she had, not only with me as the playwright, but also with the actors in the theatre company and with a large proportion of the audience members, I suggest that the issue of positionality can not only impact contributors' relationship with the playwright but also has a bearing upon their relationship to other people involved in the production process.

One of the men who made up the composite character of Hamed in the script (Contributor B) spoke to me at length about a series of questions he had been asked by Home Office officials, lawyers, and judges – and several of these scenes were dramatised for

the play. At one point in the script, during a section when the audience sees Hamed firstly imprisoned by the Home Office, then detained in a centre, and then sent to various locations around the country while his assessment was made, an exchange between him and an interviewer is staged, in which Hamed is asked if he knows the opening hours of a London gay nightclub called G.A.Y. Late. This is an extract from the play:

HOME OFFICE

WOMAN: Can you tell me where G-A-Y Late is?

HAMED: What?

HOME OFFICE

WOMAN: G-A-Y Late. Where is it?

HAMED: I don't understand.

HOME OFFICE

WOMAN: You say that you lived in London when you first came here, so surely you know where the gay clubs are and what time they close?

HAMED: I only lived in London three weeks.

HOME OFFICE

WOMAN: So you can't tell me where G-A-Y Late is?

HAMED: No. I didn't go out to a club, and then I was put in jail.

*HOME OFFICE WOMAN shakes her head.*

HAMED: *(To audience)* Now I know that after 12 o'clock G-A-Y, it's closed, and after the G.A.Y is G.A.Y Late. You can stay there from 12 to 3 o'clock, and after that, 3 to 5 o'clock is Heaven. Heaven is still open. But I'd only been here for three weeks. So for that they said:

HOME OFFICE

WOMAN: You are not gay.

*HOME OFFICE WOMAN EXITS*

HAMED: OK, fair enough, thank you. Thank you for telling me that I'm not gay!

(Summerskill, 2016:45)

In every show on the tour, the audience laughed uproariously at this exchange, thereby acknowledging not only the nonsensical bureaucratic hurdles faced by lesbian and gay

claimants, but also the absurdity of a gay man having to somehow prove his own sexual orientation, and it being disbelieved. Each time this I heard this audible reaction during the show, I had a strong sense that it came from audience members who were lesbian or gay themselves. I interpreted this as an 'insider' response to the content of this scene, made by people who knew something about the gay scene and the clubs mentioned and who also understand that the realisation of one's sexual orientation is an internal discovery, and not something that can be determined by anyone other than the individual. But, although I am aware that this interpretation is speculative, during the performances of this scene there was a palpable feeling in the theatre space of sympathy for anyone who is in a situation of having to somehow 'prove' their sexual orientation. I therefore suggest that the contributors who attended the show might also have experienced a sense of validation at hearing others laughing at the absurdity of the lines of questioning they had personally undergone during their asylum interviews.

Each of the four main contributors to *Rights of Passage* had experienced prejudice and persecution in the past. But, for three of them, the prejudice they encountered had not ceased when they arrived in the UK as they sought acceptance in communities or religious groups, and the trauma they had experienced was not only historical, but ongoing. Owing to the advanced age of the contributors to *Gateway to Heaven* and the relative social and legal freedom afforded to them in the UK over recent years, it is likely that they had found opportunities to speak about matters relating to their sexual orientation over their lifetimes, other than during my interview with them. They have also experienced the freedom to reflect at leisure upon memories of past traumatic events from a place of safety. However, this was not the case for the lesbian and gay asylum seekers I interviewed for *Rights of Passage*. Although I did not have shared experiences of the kinds of prejudice they had suffered in their countries of origin, it is my understanding that talking in depth to an attentive listener about horrendous incidents which relate to our shared sexual orientation provided an opportunity for contributors to narrate and compose those memories in a safe situation where they would not be judged.

The atmosphere of the interviews for the play therefore differed considerably from that of their asylum interviews. As Rebecca Christine Smith-Sivertsen explains in her study of case procedures of LGBTI asylum claims in Denmark: 'the case workers receive no specific

training on how to handle asylum cases where the applicant is LGBTI, meaning that they often have to rely on their own Western-biased perceptions and stereotypical conceptions on how LGBTI persons should behave and look' (2016: 1). Those seeking asylum on account of their sexual orientation and gender identity are at a disadvantage in this process because there is no membership card for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, and more weight is given to the subjective perceptions of the interviewer as to whether or not a claim is valid. In contrast to asylum interview situations, during the interviews for *Rights of Passage*, there was no requirement for contributors to demonstrate any performativity of their sexual orientation. I could have replicated Ros Horin's working methods by interrogating my contributors about their experiences in a way that implied that I doubted the validity of their stories and their claims to be lesbians or gay men, but the purpose of the interview was to hear about their experiences of being lesbian or gay. Since they had all responded to various call-outs for lesbian and gay asylum seekers, I accepted their sexual orientation unquestionably, rather than viewing it with any doubt.

My main concern, as the playwright and producer, was to create a safe environment for the contributors during the interviews and I endeavoured to do this by revealing my own sexual orientation to them and outlining how I intended to use their stories, with their full permission, in a forthcoming script. However, because of the inherent power imbalances referenced above, I cannot know how safe or supported the contributors actually felt during this process. Smith-Sivertsen states that, within her research, 'many [asylum seekers] talked about being very scared and uncomfortable with talking to police or authorities/state personnel about their SOGI since they have been used to concealing it – not the least from authorities – in fear of persecution' (2016: 38). She cites one interviewee who explained to her that his fear in this situation 'made it difficult for him to discuss personal and traumatic experiences, and he believed that this hesitance was what made the caseworker not find him credible' (50). The high level of trepidation experienced by some LGB asylum seekers in interview situations is often a consequence of how they have been viewed or treated on account of their sexual orientation by those in positions of authority in their countries of origin. Knowing this led me to endeavour to provide a distinctly contrasting environment for contributors, in which they could experience being listened to by an interested interviewer

of the same sexual orientation who could sympathise, if not empathise, with their stories of prejudicial treatment from their families and wider society.

Narratives of persecution are sought by the UK border agency and the Home Office in the stories provided by asylum seekers, and similar narratives were sought by myself as a playwright looking for dramatically moving and even shocking incidents from the contributors' lives. But the main difference in these processes is that, for the Home Office, a claimant has to prove their sexual orientation, and prove the level of persecution and trauma they would suffer if they were returned to their country of origin. Therefore, for lesbian and gay asylum seekers, the focus of the asylum interview is on convincing others of their sexual orientation and the veracity of their accounts. However, in an interview for a verbatim play, the same kind of stories they share are ultimately employed to engage, educate, and inform a wider public about matters relating to lesbian and gay asylum seekers and therefore, the main difference therefore lies in the purpose of the interview.

Informed consent is a critical part of verbatim theatre processes with LGB asylum seekers since it enables contributors to fully understand the implications of participating in a project which intends to expose the life-threatening extent of homophobia in many countries, increase the wider public's awareness of why LGBT asylum seekers travel to other countries for safety and highlight the seriously problematic interrogation procedures employed to determine an applicant's sexual orientation. When the theatre makers of a play about homophobia and the contributors share the same sexual orientation, benefits can subsequently be identified in the form of a greater level of trust in the project and sense of safety in the interview situation. But, clearly, when there is a racial difference between the contributors and the playwright, shared sexual orientation must not be conflated with shared experience.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine ethical concerns that arise when asylum seekers or refugees share their stories with a theatre company, for use in a production. The four sections have all focused on areas in which the interconnection between the contributors' involvement and the theatre project are of utmost importance: choices around theatrical representation of contributors; dangers of re-traumatisation during the

interview process; beneficial possibilities afforded to contributors during this work, and how the positionality of the theatre makers in relation to the contributors can produce a closer alliance, the recognition of a shared understanding of prejudice, a feeling of safety in the interview situation and a sense of validity when contributors attend the performance.

Section One detailed the reasons why non-economic migration is a key subject of contemporary verbatim theatre and a presentation of selected productions demonstrated how contributors who are asylum seekers or refugees experience differing levels of engagement, depending on the playwright and the theatre company. In most verbatim productions, however, contributors are potentially at risk of being re-traumatised when they share narratives of persecution. The interviewing part of the verbatim theatre process has been noted as potentially problematic because, for an asylum seeker, it may repeat an adverse experience within the asylum process. Additionally, Salverson has frequently observed what she refers to as theatre makers 'privileging' trauma when they seek dramatic content to employ in their productions (2001: 122).

The ethical concerns that arise for playwrights working with interview material from members of this population are inherent in the creation of all dramatic representations of 'real' stories provided by vulnerable contributors and those who come from marginalised communities. Theatre practitioners working with asylum seekers and refugees are encouraged by scholars such as Jeffers, to critically reflect upon their practices and to interrogate working methods which may harm the contributor. But when there is an imbalance of power between theatre makers and contributors, there are no risk-free encounters and, by virtue of enjoying full citizenship of the country where asylum seekers are applying to reside, playwrights and actors will usually hold a position of greater power, safety and privilege. One of the ways this ethical hurdle can be overcome is if the playwright, producer, and actors in the piece are, themselves, asylum seekers and refugees in the country where the play is produced. This scenario is rare; but as Isobel Blomfield and Caroline Lenette, in their research on ethical considerations that arise in collaborative projects with asylum seekers and refugees, state: 'there is now a broader push for storytelling "driven" by people with refugee lived experiences to inform practice and research approaches alike so that artists' (or researchers' or institutions') agendas do not overshadow or overpower the co-creation process' (2018: 325).

RISE (Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees) is the first refugee and asylum seeker organisation in Australia to be run and governed by refugees, asylum seekers and ex-detainees. A prominent statement on their website reads: 'Nothing about us without us' (Riserefugee.org, [n.d.]). In 2015, in a set of guidelines on the website entitled: 'Ten things you need to consider if you are an artist – not of the refugee and asylum seeker community – looking to work with our community', Blomfield and Lenette observe that the organisation offered advice to artists and researchers 'on the key aspects they need to consider, especially in terms of representation, before approaching people from such backgrounds to collaborate' (2018: 325). One of the comments directed to those wishing to work creatively with members of the group was: 'you may be talented at your particular craft but do not assume that this automatically translates to an ethical, responsible and self-determining process' (ctd. in 2018: 325). RISE's advice is profoundly pertinent to verbatim theatre practitioners who gather stories from members of vulnerable or marginalised communities and employ them in productions.

Variations in form of co-created productions might temper accusations of appropriation or exploitation in verbatim theatre work; but not all playwrights elect to work in this way, even with vulnerable populations. Instead, many seek ways in which their artistic or ideological vision can be realised whilst, at the same time, endeavouring to mitigate risks of harm to their contributors. Sections Three and Four of this chapter explored some of the ways in which contributors' participation in verbatim theatre can afford them a beneficial experience. Ethical vigilance can take the form of theatre makers providing a supportive atmosphere for contributors, especially during the interview process, which includes attentive listening and offering post-interview support, if required. An examination of interview guidelines in oral history scholarship, where much has been written about the interviewing of immigrants and victims of trauma, can also inform and enhance the quality of work of verbatim theatre makers.

One additional way to mitigate the danger of re-traumatisation is to ensure that the theatre interview is not conducted too soon after an asylum-claim interview. Bacon mentions that the mental state of a contributor must be taken into consideration by the playwright who should also assess how far into, or away from, the asylum interview process contributors are in relation to their own claim. I suggest that another means of mitigating

the danger of re-traumatisation is by ensuring some level of commonality of experience between the interviewer and the contributor, as occurred in *Rights of Passage*. This is important for building trust and creating confidence in the playwright and the project and can result in the contributor providing a rich narrative, which produces greater possibilities for the playwright at the scripting stage.

Bacon's comments about her company's working practice show how contributors felt that the stories they told enabled their narratives to be heard by a wider audience and that the plays provided a public platform for issues relating to asylum to be discussed. I have suggested that the experience of sharing their personal stories with a theatre company for the purpose of creating a play affords contributors an opportunity to compose and narrate their own testimony in a way they choose, rather than the way the Home Office might force them to do. I suggest that further possibilities of validation for contributors to *Rights of Passage* occurred because the playwright, the actors and most of the audience members shared the same sexual orientation. Moreover, within a verbatim theatre production of this kind, it is arguably the case that opportunities were also created for contributors to move from a place of shame about their sexual orientation, to one of pride and celebration.

Paget, writing about what he terms 'the current vogue' for verbatim theatre, suggests that it 'feeds, as it did at other times, off the energy produced by the engagement of performers with source interviewees and in the sense of validation achieved by both groups' (2010: 177). In theatre created from interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, when theatre makers operate with ethical vigilance and engage in reflexive practice, and when playwrights have at least some degree of shared experience with the contributors, not only can the risks of this work be mitigated, but, as Paget suggests, a sense of validation by both groups can also be achieved.

## Conclusion

This thesis has provided an in-depth investigation into matters, both practical and ethical, relating to the role, value and experience of contributors to verbatim theatre processes. It has examined the ways in which their level of involvement can vary, depending on the working practice of the theatre makers and it has discussed how contributors are treated during the interview situation and throughout the production period. It has also sought to determine how contributors view their participation in the creation of a play based on their stories. Verbatim theatre processes which draw on interview content from living people are inherently open to accusations of appropriation, if not exploitation and so ethical vigilance by practitioners is a critical concern in this work. But arguably, in addition to the risks posed to contributors by their involvement in sharing sometimes deeply personal stories which may be dramatically presented in ways over which they have no control, benefits can also be afforded to contributors, and these have also been identified.

My research has attempted to demonstrate how a shift from a 'mining' or extractive relationship to one of reciprocity and co-creation within professionally produced verbatim theatre can be facilitated by addressing the practices of theatre makers in this field; an understanding which, in turn, would significantly enhance the contributors' experience. In order to examine contributors' involvement in productions and to explore possibilities of their future role in this work, I have addressed several issues that relate to their participation: The impact of a playwright's positionality in relation to those they interview has been examined and questions about the theatre makers' duty of care, particularly towards vulnerable contributors, have been discussed. The risks of participating in verbatim theatre have been explored alongside an analysis of some of the benefits that contributors can attain, particularly in regard to possibilities of reflection and reflexivity when viewing dramatic portrayals of themselves. Following the stated need by some theatre scholars for critical self-reflexivity by playwrights, as well as for greater documentation of verbatim theatre processes and of contributors' experiences, I have included analysis of excerpts from follow-up interviews with contributors to some of my own productions. Throughout the whole of my research, the importance of interdisciplinary learning has been

emphasised, specifically from the field of oral history and, drawing upon elements of theory and practice in that discipline, I have speculated on how certain shifts in verbatim theatre practice could improve the experience of contributors. These points will now be addressed in turn.

## **Positionality**

Verbatim theatre work involves the creation of dramatic representations, firstly in a script and then, on stage of contributors and the words they spoke during an interview. The question of 'who is speaking for who' in research that draws upon interview material for its findings has been addressed in several disciplines including oral history and feminist studies but not yet to any great extent within verbatim theatre scholarship. One of the ways this matter can be examined is for theatre playwrights to identify their positionality in relation to those they interview. This step involves recognising power imbalances, since it is often the case that contributors to verbatim theatre work come from a population or community who hold less power in society than the theatre makers. After noting their positionality, theatre makers can then explore potential benefits that could be afforded to contributors who come from the same population or who share some of the same lived experiences as the theatre makers. Additionally, the risks for contributors who come from a different community from those with whom they share their narratives, can also be assessed.

Within some professionally-staged verbatim theatre work and also in the field of applied theatre, there is a prevailing understanding that the 'outsider' positioning of playwright can bring a degree of much-needed objectivity to the creation of a script based on interview (or trial script) content. My thesis has demonstrated that, in contrast to this viewpoint, when a playwright holds an insider positioning – as someone who either shares the same identity as the contributors or some of the same lived experiences – there is a potential, not only for contributors to hold a greater level of trust in the playwright and the project, but also for them to feel safer when disclosing extremely personal and sometimes traumatic memories. The reflective analysis presented of Eileen's experience in *Gateway to Heaven* shows how a shared identity enabled her to not only trust the playwright's work but also to gain a sense of validation of her life experiences during the production process. Furthermore, it is argued that a contributor can feel able to disclose personal matters

relating to prejudice more so than that they might with an outsider, which can subsequently provide richer dramatic possibilities at the script-writing stage.

The example of Eileen's experience therefore demonstrates how a playwright holding an insider positioning has the potential to enhance verbatim theatre work, especially when contributors come from marginalised communities. In this instance, the playwright's subjectivity can be viewed as a beneficial quality, since it can result in greater access to previously under-documented testimony. Further synergies might emerge from an exploration of the insider positionality of playwrights working with interview content provided by a range of other minority communities, for example, members of the BAME population. Such a development has the potential to open a new and vibrant area of discussion which has previously not been explored in verbatim theatre practice and scholarship.

### **Duty of Care**

Feminist interviewers claimed that they should operate with a duty of care towards their narrators, originally when women interviewed other women, but also when narrators were in some way vulnerable or oppressed. Since the history of both oral history work and verbatim theatre is firmly rooted in seeking testimonies from those whose voices have frequently been neglected in historical documentation, there is a higher probability in both areas of work that those who are approached for their stories might have suffered injustice, trauma or prejudice in some form. In such cases, the concept of oral historians operating with a duty of care towards their contributors is one that could naturally be extended towards contributors in verbatim theatre projects. This thesis has examined how such a duty of care might look in relation to vulnerable contributors, in particular to those who were interviewed for the play *Hearing Voices*.

In that production, decisions had to be made by the playwright about when and how people who were mentally ill could be approached for their stories and whether they were fully capable of understanding the nature of the intended dramatic project. Another ethical concern that arose in this piece, which has not previously been interrogated to any great extent more generally in verbatim theatre scholarship, relates to the type of consent that is sought, not only from vulnerable contributors, but within all forms of verbatim theatre

work. Whilst there are standard guidelines for oral history projects about this matter, in verbatim theatre processes, practitioners' choices are generally informed by their own moral compass or, when working with an academic institution or with an organisation that has existing consent guidelines, they must adhere to those.

Other ways in which theatre practitioners can operate with a duty of care towards contributors can be observed in the working methods of *Ice and Fire*, as discussed in Chapters Two and Eight. When contributors are approached for interviews, they are invited to attend other shows produced by the company to see the way in which their interview content will be employed. When the script is created, contributors are asked if they are happy with the material that will be used and, if they are not, the playwright will readily agree to change any part of the interview in accordance with the contributors' wishes. Some theatre practitioners have raised concerns about how interviewing asylum seekers or refugees who have previously undergone harrowing asylum interviews procedures might re-traumatise them; in particular, Wake warns of the 'dangers of repetition' (2013: 104) in such processes and Jeffers observes that contributors are frequently asked to repeat stories of victimhood (2008: 217). Such in-depth examinations into contributors' backgrounds and specific circumstances prior to their interview for a theatre project can result in productive discussions on how the level of care shown towards them by theatre makers during the interview and production process might be improved. Additionally, identifying where the asylum seeker or refugee is in their process or whether vulnerable contributors have recovered sufficiently from any trauma before they are asked to share their narratives can also enhance their experience and mitigate risks of harm.

### **Risks and benefits for contributors**

Those who share their stories with playwrights come from many different sectors of society and verbatim productions address a vast range of subjects. Some contributors are highly aware of their legal rights around any possible misrepresentation of them or their interview content. Others have far less understanding of what they are agreeing to at the point of being interviewed by a playwright. But verbatim theatre is ideally suited to telling the stories of those who have historically been underrepresented or whose narratives are not widely heard in society and it is quite possible that some contributors may be reluctant to

challenge any part of the interview process or question the final theatrical portrayal of their characters and the words they spoke if it made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. David Hare's observation, cited in the Introduction, that 'people like talking to theatre people, and they trust them' (Hammond and Steward. 2008: 70), therefore exposes a deeply problematic fault line in this work which might possibly reflect a slightly arrogant attitude by some theatre makers who assume that contributors are simply grateful when asked to participate in artistic ventures.

The inherent possibilities of appropriation or exploitation in this work mean that practitioners have to make numerous ethical choices during the production process, all of which can potentially impact the contributors. Playwrights must decide who they will seek to interview and how they will approach them, the manner in which they will conduct the interview, what form of consent will be sought from the contributor, whether contributors will be sent their interview excerpts to review before the script is finalised, and whether contributors will be invited to the rehearsal process or a rehearsed pre-production playreading, or the final production. Furthermore, the decisions that playwrights, directors and actors make about how the interview content is employed in the script and how the contributors are dramatically portrayed on stage are also matters of ethical consideration.

Participating in verbatim theatre processes can potentially be a risky venture for contributors, but my research has examined how it can also provide beneficial opportunities. Verbatim theatre productions where actors are employed allow anonymity for contributors who might not want to be publicly identified (such as some asylum seekers or refugees). However, they may still share the aims of the theatre makers in wishing to publicise matters relating to injustice and oppression which can be dispersed through dramatic means to a wider audience than would otherwise have known about these subjects. In order to involve contributors beyond the interview stage, playwrights can send them their interview excerpts for approval and invite them to attend post-show discussions. As I have demonstrated, these stages of participation often afford contributors a greater sense of agency in the project and can help them feel that they are, in some way, co-creators in work which is essentially artistic in its purpose, but frequently has political and social aims as well as educational value.

I have also shown how verbatim theatre processes can create possibilities of reflection and even reflexivity for those who are interviewed and who see their stories performed. This was the experience of Debbie in *Hearing Voices*, as revealed in her written and oral accounts about her involvement in that production. Through the narration of Debbie's *exact* words by the actress who played her and the dramatisation of incidents which she had previously recounted but saw afresh and with renewed understanding when performed on stage, Debbie was able to reflect critically, not only upon her own mental illness, but also upon the harsh ways in which she has been treated over the years by the psychiatric system. Furthermore, her participation in a post-show discussion with an audience of hundreds allowed her to speak out and speak back to those in positions of power and influence.

### **Self-reflexivity by theatre makers and documentation of contributors' experience**

In oral history work, project leaders are encouraged to engage in a process of critical self-reflexivity which consists of identifying their own agenda, subjectivities and positionality in relation to the project and the narrators. It also involves acknowledging power dynamics within the interview and assessing their impact upon the process. This includes examining how power imbalances can impact narrators in regard to their level of trust in the project and the extent of disclosure of their narratives. The reason why the oral historian takes these steps is because narrators will be affected, to some extent, by the power dynamics, and I contend that this is also the case in interviews conducted for verbatim theatre projects.

Inherent power imbalances exist between the playwright, who has (usually) initiated the work and who has a firm idea of the aims of the production, and the contributor, who might have a minimal understanding of the kind of project in which their narratives will be employed. Additionally, there can be other inequalities between the playwright/interviewer and the contributors, since frequently verbatim productions are created by theatre makers who hold more power in society than those whose stories they dramatically present. When power imbalances are identified by playwrights, they can then seek ways to mitigate possibilities of harm that might otherwise be present within an exchange where contributors provide the source material for a play.

Bill McDonnell has called for playwrights to employ ‘thick description’ when documenting their practices and there are several ways in which the level of self-reflexivity evident in oral history work can be emulated by verbatim theatre practitioners. One way that has been discussed in this thesis is for playwrights to use the tools of intersectionality to identify their subjectivities in regard to the narrators and the project. In this way, for example when addressing the matter of positionality, rather than simply seeing themselves in terms of insider or outsider in relation to their contributors, playwrights can endeavour to identify exactly what similar, different or overlapping identities they have with those they interview and they can then analyse how these findings might impact their work.

If playwrights working in all economies of theatre – small-scale or more mainstream and commercially viable – were to document their work more thoroughly and frequently than is currently the case, then other practitioners and scholars would be able to compare and contrast working methods and also ensure that ethical concerns are being adequately addressed. My research has noted that there is only a small amount of scholarship upon which to draw when examining the experience of contributors, but I have suggested that increased documentation by theatre makers on their working practices would significantly enhance understandings of ethical issues in this work which impact those who are interviewed. Until we hear directly from contributors themselves, we cannot fully analyse their experience and so one important way to learn about how it can be assessed and improved – as demonstrated in this thesis – is for follow-up interviews to be conducted with them, thereby producing a distinct kind of knowledge which can inform academic scholarship and verbatim theatre processes alike.

### **Relevance of oral history to this research**

The fact that verbatim theatre is one of the very few areas of work based on interview content provided by living people that does not have any collective ethical guidelines upon which practitioners might draw has led me to turn, throughout this thesis, to existing guidelines, theory and practice within the closely related discipline of oral history. Oral history and verbatim theatre work have both, historically, paid close attention to highlighting previously neglected areas of social and political concern by interviewing people about their personal experiences and the significance of the interview situation in

both disciplines is paramount. Discussions on the practice and theory of oral history have therefore been addressed in regard to how they could be productively implemented in verbatim theatre processes.

Understandings around oral history theory and practice shifted significantly after Michael Frisch introduced the concept of 'shared authority' to that field. The view that interviewees were, to some extent, 'mining' information from narrators for research purposes was replaced by an understanding that it was not so much the oral historian who was producing the research but that a joint venture was being undertaken between the interviewer and narrator. A new form of knowledge was thereby created through the narrator bringing stories about their lived experience to the interview, and the interviewer bringing historical expertise in the form of analysing the interview content. The performances of *Like a Family* were improvised, rather than created using 'exact' verbatim but, in a discussion of that piece of work, I have demonstrated how Pollock and her student-actors regarded the narrators and audience members as 'experts', and how she understood their participation during the shows and afterwards as a contribution to the co-production of a new form of knowledge and meaning making for the community.

The notion that a verbatim theatre piece could be seen as a co-creation between contributors and theatre makers is one that is sometimes accepted in applied theatre, but rarely in professionally produced theatre based on interviews. Contributors generally have little or no artistic input in the production process and this is because the view held by many theatre makers is that their work is a creative venture, requiring the expertise of professional artists to interpret the theatrical vision of the playwright or director. But there are other ways in which contributors can benefit from their involvement – several of which have been explored in this thesis – and they frequently relate to the degree of personal or political agency that a contributor can attain within the production process.

One of the ways that theatre makers can involve contributors beyond the interview stage is by sending interview excerpts to them for their approval, at the point where the script is being finalised. Although this does not occur in all verbatim theatre work, there seems little reason why it should not be a standard form of practice which would mitigate some accusations of appropriation and afford contributors a greater sense of agency in the production process. Inviting contributors to a play-reading for their feedback before the

final play is staged is another way to involve them in the work. An increased level of public acknowledgement of the value of those who were interviewed could also be made possible by theatre makers always including the names of those who are happy to be identified as contributors in the theatre programme or the script, if one is published.

The concept of reciprocity was introduced in feminist studies in relation to the interview situation. Discussions were held about what benefits narrators might be able to gain in return for their invaluable contributions to other people's research projects. Currently, in some areas of research, people who agree to be interviewed are paid a small stipend either for filling in surveys or, occasionally, for participating in an oral history project. This is rare in verbatim theatre work, but perhaps it is timely to re-assess this matter. Theatre makers are in a position to secure grants, pay wages and occasionally make financial gains from their productions. Contributors, on the other hand, whose narratives provide the content of the script are seldom, if ever, financially compensated. The subject of reciprocity in verbatim theatre is therefore one that is also deserving of closer attention. Other than paying contributors for their interview time and content, it would not be unreasonable to ask theatre companies to budget for travel expenses for contributors to attend the final production or take part in a post-show discussion and offer two tickets to each contributor. Alternatively, following Jenifer Scanlon's suggestion that 'researchers must develop a take-and-give methodology' (1993: 640), theatre companies could seek ways to support any groups or organisations who have provided contributors or who work in areas that the play addresses.

## **A final word**

This thesis is the first of its kind to examine the role, value and experience of contributors to verbatim theatre work. It has demonstrated that even though the 'role' of a contributor is fundamentally regarded as one of providing interview content to be employed in a script, it can extend to an involvement in the theatre process beyond the interview, whereby a contributor is given the opportunity to approve scripted excerpts and be invited to participate in post-playreading or post-show discussions. The 'value' of a contributor – who is essential for the creation of a script – is slightly harder to quantify and can depend on individual theatre practitioner's understanding of that term. But it can inevitably be

enhanced when contributors' narratives are not solely regarded as information to be mined by playwrights for their script content, but as a form of co-created knowledge, produced between the theatre makers and those who share their stories. The 'experience' of a contributor will always be one that is highly subjective and will vary from person to person and from production to production. But my research has argued that one of the best ways to secure informed knowledge about this matter is for theatre practitioners to interview their own contributors, asking them how they felt about their various stages of involvement in the production process. Such a practice would, arguably, greatly improve future verbatim theatre work and serve as a reminder to theatre makers that, when creating artistic work from the testimonies of 'real' people, ethical concerns must always be foregrounded.

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated how a close dialogue with oral history scholarship can enhance verbatim theatre processes in relation to the contributor and I have discussed a variety of small-scale productions where contributors come from marginalised communities, demonstrating how this work requires a high level of ethical vigilance. I have also outlined ways in which the practitioners' duty of care to those who so generously share their narratives can be improved. The argument that an insider positioning of a playwright can afford notable benefits to contributors from minority populations has been outlined and the possibilities of reflection and even reflexivity by contributors to this form of work have been detailed and analysed. Finally, I have proposed a series of recommendations, including follow-up interviews with contributors by playwrights and the creation of ethical guidelines by practitioners and scholars that would, I suggest, yield fruitful results for contributors in particular, and for the practice of verbatim theatre more generally. The creation of plays based on interviews with living people, especially members of marginalised communities and vulnerable populations, shows no sign of abating in the current theatrical landscape, but the role, value and experience of the contributors must now be placed at the forefront of verbatim theatre scholarship and practice, since neither would exist without the generously shared stories of those who are interviewed.

\*

## Appendix 1. 'Eileen's' scene from *Gateway to Heaven* (2019).

EILEEN: I left school at fifteen and worked in a shop till I was seventeen when I joined the Navy. I had no education to speak of but I'd seen the Wren's magazine and the glamour of something like that was uncontrollable for me! The day I left home I was terrified because I hadn't really thought it through and my mother was sort of hanging on my legs to stop me. I had my first relationship with a woman when I was twenty-one. I suppose we were all a club within a club. It was like a sub culture. The pinky rings were usually the telling factor, you used to wear one if you were gay.

*EILEEN and another woman show each other their rings*

EILEEN: You wore a little signet ring with an onyx stone in it and it could be any colour. Your partner would buy you one. And after a while life became quite rich because you felt you were part of an inner sanctum with people who understood you and shared your career.

You did four year stints in the Wrens and when you got to twelve you could sign for your pension. Well I'd been there ten years when one day they called me in to see the Officer In Charge....

*EILEEN ENTERS in uniform. She stands to attention  
in front of an officer (sitting behind a desk)*

EILEEN: Petty Officer Ward. Ma'am.

OFFICER: Stand at ease.

*EILEEN stands at ease*

OFFICER: Under section seventeen, paragraph eight of the official secrets act I have evidence here to suggest that you are a lesbian.

*OFFICER displays letters to EILEEN*

OFFICER: Are you acquainted with Petty Officer Angela Carol?

EILEEN: Yes.

OFFICER: And in what capacity do you have connections with her?

*PAUSE*

OFFICER: These letters imply that the relationship you had with her was of an intimate nature. Would you say that was the case?

EILEEN: Yes.

OFFICER: And you are aware that your response indicates that you are admitting that you *are* a lesbian?

*PAUSE*

OFFICER: And you therefore understand that this contravenes the Naval Discipline Act, Article Nine, section B. Do you deny or agree with this charge.

EILEEN: No, I mean yes...yes I am.

OFFICER: You have admitted that you are a lesbian and as such, under the stated terms of the Naval Discipline Act we can conclude that your service career will consequently in effect be terminated immediately. The Regulating Chief will inform you of how that process will operate. You will now report to the Chief Wren Regulator who will advise you as to leaving dates and procedure.  
Dismissed.

*EILEEN stands back to attention, reverse turns and makes to leave*

EILEEN: Well what was I meant to do? I wasn't going to lie. She had evidence right in front of her and in that split second it seemed better not to lie...to be called a liar would have seemed worse than being a lesbian to me.

I was in shock. I just couldn't believe it but basically my career was at an end from that moment on. I can still see myself standing on the steps waiting for my taxi to take me back to my bed sit in Earls Court. My uniform and equipment and pay book had all been handed in. There was tremendous shame involved in that... and of course I was out without a pension.

(Summerskill, 2019: 63)

## Works Cited

- Abdullah, Hannah. 'Interview with Rimini Protocol'. 2019, Goethe-Institut, USA.  
<<http://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/kul/sup/sen/tsi/irp.html/>>. Web. Accessed 7 Aug 2019.
- Afolabi, Taiwo. 'Becoming Ethical Through Relational Interaction: An Examination of a Performance Among Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria'. *Performing Ethos* 8 (2018): 3-18. Print.
- Alcoff, Linda. 'The Problem of Speaking for Others'. *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-1992): 5-32. Print.
- Amnesty.org.au. 'Defending Human Rights: Refugees.' [n.d.],  
<<http://www.amnesty.org.au/campaigns/refugees/>>. Web. Accessed 10 May 2017.
- Anderson, Michael and Linden Wilkinson. 'A Resurgence of Verbatim Theatre: Authenticity, Empathy and Transformation'. *Australasian Drama Studies* 50 (2007): 153-169. Print.
- Armitage, Sue. 'The Stages of Women's Oral History'. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Ed. Donald Ritchie. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2010. 169-82. Print.
- Bacon, Christine. Skype interview. By Clare Summerskill. 24 August 2016.
- Baglia, Jay and Elissa Foster. 'Performing the "Really" Real: Cultural Criticism, Representation, and Commodification in *The Laramie Project*'. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 19:2 (2005): 12-45. Print.
- Bannertheatre.co.uk. 'Wild Geese. 2004-2006'. [n.d.]  
<<http://bannertheatre.co.uk/portfolio/wild-geese-20042006/>>. Web. Accessed 27 June 2019.
- BBC.com. 'Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts'. 4 March 2016,  
<<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911/>>. Web. Accessed 27 June 2019.
- Beatty, Bess. *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 89:3 (1988): 191-193. Print.

- Beck, Sarah. *Appropriating Narratives of Conflict in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre: A Practice-as-Research-Led Investigation into the Role of the Playwright*. 2016. Goldsmiths College University of London, PhD Thesis. <[http://research.gold.ac.uk/19101/1/MED\\_thesis\\_BeckS\\_2016.pdf/](http://research.gold.ac.uk/19101/1/MED_thesis_BeckS_2016.pdf/)>. Web. Accessed 14 Sept, 2019.
- Belfield, Robin. *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theatre*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2018. Print.
- Beresford, Peter and Kathy Boxhall. 'Where do Service Users' Knowledges Sit in Relation to Professional and Academic Understandings of Knowledge?' *Mental Health Service Users in Research: Critical Sociological Perspectives*. Ed. Patsy Staddon. Bristol: Policy Press, 2015. 69-86. Print.
- Bhimji, Fazila. 'Collaborations and Performative Agency in Refugee Theatre in Germany'. *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 14:1 (2016): 83-103. Print.
- Bloomfield, Isobel and Caroline Lenette. 'Artistic Representations of Refugees: What is the Role of the Artist?' *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 39:3 (2018): 322-338. Print.
- Bohmer, Carol and Amy Shuman. 'Producing Epistemologies of Ignorance in the Political Asylum Application Process'. *Identities* 14:5 (2007): 603-629. Print.
- Bolton, Gillie. *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*. London: Sage, 2010. Print.
- Boon, Richard. 'David Hare in Interview with Richard Boon. National Theatre, London'. 27 January 2004. <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/platforms/platform-papers/david-hare-on-the-permanent-way/>>. Web. Accessed: 10 January 2014.
- Bornat, Joanna. 'Reminiscence and Oral History: Parallel Universes or Shared Endeavour?' *Ageing and Society*, 21:2 (2001). Print.
- Boschma, Geertje. 'Accommodation and Resistance to the Dominant Cultural Discourse on Psychiatric Mental Health: Oral History Accounts of Family Members'. *Nursing Inquiry* 14:4 (2007): 266-278. Print.
- Bottoms, Stephen. 'Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?' *The Drama Review* 50:3 (2006): 56-68. Print.
- Boyd, Nan Alamilla and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, Eds. *Bodies of Evidence: The*

- Practice of Queer Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2012. Print.
- Brown, Paul, Ed. *Verbatim: Staging Memory and Community*. Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2010. Print.
- Bryan, Brooke Blackmon. 'A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History by Michael Frisch. Review'. *Oral History Review* 44:2 (2017): 380-382. Print.
- Canton, Ursula. *Biographical Theatre: Re-presenting Real People*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Print.
- Cantrell, Tom. *Acting in Documentary Theatre*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- Cantrell, Tom and Mary Luckhurst, Eds. *Playing for Real: Actors on Playing Real People*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Carbado, Devon. W, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Vicki M. Mays and Barbara Tomlinson. 'Intersectionality: Mapping the Moments of a Theory. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10:2 (2013): 303-312. Print.
- Cheeseman, Peter. *The Knotty*. York: Methuen, 1970. Print.
- Claycomb, Ryan. M. '(Ch)Oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject and Progressive Politics'. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. XV111:2 (2003): 95-121. Print.
- Collins, Patricia Hill and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. Print.
- Cooper, Charlie. 'Thousands attempt suicide while on NHS waiting list for psychological help'. 16 Sept 2014. The Independent, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/thousands-attempt-suicide-while-on-nhs-waiting-list-for-psychological-help-9734284.html>>. Web. Accessed 26 Sept 2019.
- Corden, Anne and Jane Millar . 'Qualitative Longitudinal Research for Social Policy: Introduction to Themed Section'. *Social Policy and Society*. 6:4 (2007): 529-532. Print.
- Cox, Emma. 'Concealment, Revelation and Masquerade in Europe's Asylum Apparatus: Intimate Life at the Border'. *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5:2 (2016). [n.pag.] Print.

- . Theatre and Migration. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.
- . Ed. *Staging Asylum. Contemporary Australian Plays About Refugees*. Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2013. Print.
- . 'The Intersubjective Witness: Trauma Testimony in Towfiq Al-Qady's *Nothing but Nothing: One Refugee's Story*'. *Research in Drama Education* 13:2 (2008): 193-198. Print.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color'. *Stanford Law Review*. 43: 6 (1991): 1241-1299. Print.
- . 'Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. 140. (1989): 139-167. Print.
- Davies, Kerry. 'Silent and Censured Travelers? Patients' Narratives and Patient's Voices: Perspectives on the History of Mental Illness Since 1948'. *Social History of Medicine* 14 (2001): 267-92. Print.
- Debbie. Personal interview. By Clare Summerskill. London. 16 Feb 2007.
- Debbie. Review of *Hearing Voices*, by Clare Summerskill. 30 May 2009.
- Debbie. 'Re: *Hearing Voices* play.' Message to Clare Summerskill. 9 May 2010. Email.
- Debbie. Personal interview. By Clare Summerskill. London. 12 Feb 2012.
- Derry, Caroline. 'Lesbianism and Feminist Legislation in 1921: The Age of Consent and Gross Indecency between Women'. *History Workshop Journal* 86 (2018): 245-267. Print.
- Dowd Hall, Jacquelyn, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Junes, and Christopher B. Daly. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2012. Print.
- Dunt, Ian. 'Outcry against Britain's gay deportations goes global'. 24 April 2014, <<http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2014/04/24/outcry-against-britain-s-gay-deportations-goes-global/>>. Web. Accessed 12 May 2016.
- Edgar, David. 'Why has this decade seen the rise of a vibrant theatre of reportage?'

26 Sept 2008,  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/sep/27/theatre.davidedgar/>>. Web.  
Accessed 20 Nov 2018.

'Eileen'. Personal interview. By Clare Summerskill. London. 23 Nov 2004.

'Eileen'. Personal Interview. By Clare Summerskill. London. 14 Feb 2012.

Elvgren, Gillette. A. Jr. 'Documentary Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent'. *Educational Theatre Journal* 26:1 (1974): 86-98. Print.

Favorini, Attilio. 'Representation and Reality: The Case of Documentary Theatre'. *Theatre Survey* 35:2 (1994): 31-42. Print.

---. 'History, Memory and Trauma in the Documentary Plays of Emily Mann'. *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*. Eds. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 151-166. Print.

Forsyth, Alison and Chris Megson, Eds. *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Fosl, Catherine and Lara Kelland. "'Bring Your Whole Self to Work": Identity and Intersectional Politics in the Louisville LGBTQ Movement". *The Oral History Review* 43:1 (2016): 138-152. Print.

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1990. Print.

---. 'Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process'. *The Oral History Review* 30:1 (2003): 111-13. Print.

Geertz, Clifford *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, Inc , 1973. Print.

Giametta, Calogero. 'Narrativising One's Sexuality/Gender. Neo-Liberal Humanitarianism and the Right of Asylum'. *Sexuality, Citizenship and Belonging. Trans-National and Intersectional Perspectives*. Eds. Francesca Stella, Yvette Taylor, Tracey Reynolds, and Antoine Rogers. New York: Routledge, 2016. 55-72. Print.

Gibson, Janet. 'Saying It Right: Creating Ethical Verbatim Theatre'. *NEO: Journal for Higher Degree Research Studies in the Social Sciences and Humanities* 4 (2011): 1-18. Print.

- Gilbert, Paul and Bernice Andrews, Eds. *Shame - Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology, and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1998. Print.
- Gluck, Sherna Berger and Daphne Patai, Eds. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Hamer, Emily. *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians*. London: Cassell, 1996. Print.
- Hamilton, Paula and Linda Shopes, Eds. *Oral History and Public Memories*. Philadelphia: Temple U P, 2008. Print.
- Hammond, Will and Dan Steward. *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*. London: Oberon Books, 2008. Print.
- Harpin, Anna. *Madness, Art and Society: Beyond Illness*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. Print.
- Heddon, Deidre. *Autobiography and Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- . 'To Absent Friends: Ethics in the Field of Auto/biography. In: Haedicke, S.C., Heddon, D., Oz, A. and Westlake, E.J. (eds.) *Political Performances: Theory and Practice*. Series: Themes in theatre (4). Rodopi: Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009. 111-136. Print.
- Hoffman, Marella. *Practicing Oral History to Improve Public Policies and Programs*. New York: Routledge, 2018. Print
- hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround, 1991. Print.
- Iceandfire.co.uk. 'About Us'. [n.d.], <<http://iceandfire.co.uk/about-us/>>. Accessed 7 Sept 2019.
- ilga.org 2019. 'State-sponsored homophobia. 13<sup>th</sup> Edition Lucan Ramón Mendos. [https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA\\_State\\_Sponsored\\_Homophobia\\_2019.pdf](https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2019.pdf)
- Inchley, Maggie. 'Touring Testimonies: Rebalancing the Public Realm Through Human Rights Activism in *Asylum Monologues* and *Seven*.' *Lateral* 5.2 (2016) [n.pag.]. Print.
- 'Izzuddin'. Personal Interview. By Clare Summerskill. London. 3 July 2016.

- Jeffers, Alison. *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.
- . 'Looking for Esrafil: Witnessing 'Refugitive' Bodies in *I've Got Something to Show You*'. *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*. Eds. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 91-106. Print.
- . 'Dirty Truth: Personal Narrative, Victimhood and Participatory Theatre Work with People Seeking Asylum'. *Research in Drama Education* 13:2 (2008): 217 -221. Print.
- . 'Refugee Perspectives: The Practice and Ethics of Verbatim Theatre and Refugee Stories'. *Platform* 1:1 (2006): 1-17. Print.
- Jirotka, Janis Arbeit von. *Performing Other (Hi)stories: Die Asyl-Monologe. Representation of Refugee's Voices in Theatre*. 2015. Humboldt University of Berlin, B.A. <[https://blogs.hu-berlin.de/mediaiaaw/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2016/05/BA-Janis-Jirotka\\_Ausschnitt.pdf/](https://blogs.hu-berlin.de/mediaiaaw/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2016/05/BA-Janis-Jirotka_Ausschnitt.pdf/)>. Web. Accessed 14 Sept 2019.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. 'Put a Little Honey on My Sweet Tea: Oral History as Quare Performance'. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44:3 (2016): 51-67. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.
- Kaufman, Gershen and Lev Raphael. *Coming Out of Shame: Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives*. New York: Doubleday, 1996. Print.
- Kaufman, Moisés. *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Random House, 1998. Print.
- . *The Laramie Project*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001. Print.
- . Leigh Fondakowski, Greg Pierotti, Andy Paris, and Stephen Belber. *The Laramie Project and The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. New York: Vintage, 2014. Print.
- Kondo, Dorinne. '(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre'. *Theatre Journal* 52:1 (2000): 81-107. Print.

- Langellier, Kristin. M. 'Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know for Sure'. *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19 (1999): 125-144. Print.
- Leung, Canice. 'Where do the most refugees come from?' 20 June 2019, MSN News, <<http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/where-do-the-most-refugees-come-from/ss-AAD7a95/>>. Web. Accessed 21 June 2019.
- Lewis, Rachel. 'Deportable Subjects: Lesbian and Political Asylum'. *Feminist Formations. Project MUSE* 25:2 (2013): 174-194. Print.
- Linden, Sonja and Christine Bacon. *The Asylum Monologues*. 2006. (Unpublished).
- Luckhurst, Mary. 'Verbatim Theatre, Media Relations and Ethics'. *A Concise Companion to: Contemporary British and Irish Drama*. Eds. Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. 200-223. Print.
- Lyons, Charles. R, and James, C. Lyons. 'Anna Deavere Smith: Perspectives on Her Performance Within the Context of Critical Theory'. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* Fall (1994): 43-66. Print.
- Maedza, Pedzisai. *Performing Asylum: Theatre of Testimony in South Africa*. African Studies Collection 66. Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2017. Print.
- . *Theatre of Testimony: An Investigation in Devising Asylum*. 2013. University of Cape Town Department of Drama, MA Dissertation. <[https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/item/6930/thesis\\_hum\\_2013\\_maedza\\_p.pdf?sequence=1/](https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/item/6930/thesis_hum_2013_maedza_p.pdf?sequence=1/)>. Web. Accessed 9 May 2017.
- Martin, Carol. *Theatre of the Real*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- McDonnell, Bill. 'The Politics of Historiography: Towards an Ethics of Representation'. *Research in Drama Education* 10:2 (2005): 127-138. Print.
- McKirdy, Carol. *Practicing Oral History with Immigrant Narrators*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Megson, Chris. 'What I'm Aspiring to be is a Good Dramatist': Alecky Blythe in conversation with Chris Megson. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 6:1 (2018): 220-233. Print.
- Miles, Nathanael. *No Going Back: Lesbian and Gay People in the Asylum System*.

London: Stonewall, 2009. Print.

'Miremba'. Personal Interview. By Clare Summerskill. London. 8 Oct 2015.

Morss, Rebecca, Heather Lazrus and Julie L. Demuth. 'The "Inter" Within Interdisciplinary Research: Strategies for Building Integration Across Fields'. Wiley Online Library 17.1 (1997). [n.pag.] <<https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1111/risa.13246/>>. Web. Accessed 26 Sept 2019.

Moses, Antoinette. *Constructing the Real: An Examination of Authorship and Ownership in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre*. 2009. University of East Anglia, Doctoral thesis. Retrieved from, <<https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/10575/>>. Web. Accessed 26 Sept 2019.

Myerhoff, Barbara and Marc Kaminsky, Eds. *Remembered Lives: The work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older*. U of Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1992. Print.

Myerhoff, Barbara and Jay Ruby. 'A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology'. *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older*. Eds. Barbara Myerhoff and Marc Kaminsky. U of Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1992. 307-340. Print.

Nagel, Erica. 'An Aesthetic of Neighborliness: Possibilities for Integrating Community-Based Practices into Documentary Theatre'. *Theatre Topics* 17:2 (2007) 153-168. Print.

O'Leary, Barry. "'We Cannot Claim Any Particular Knowledge of the Ways of Homosexuals, Still Less of Iranian Homosexuals...": The Particular Problems Facing Those Who Seek Asylum on the Basis of Their Sexual Identity.' *Feminist Legal Studies* 16:1 (2008) 87-95. Print.

Oralhistory.org. 'Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History'. Adopted October, 2009, <<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>>. Web. Accessed 6 January 2016.

Paget, Derek. 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and its Continued Powers of Endurance'. *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*. Eds. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 224-236. Print.

---. 'Acts of Commitment: Activist Arts, the Rehearsed Reading, and Documentary Theatre'. *New Theatre Quarterly* 26: 2 (2010): 173-193. Print.

- . 'New Documentarism on Stage: Documentary Theatre in New Times'. *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 56:2 (2008): 129-141. Print.
- . *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*. Manchester: Manchester U P, 1990. Print.
- . "'Verbatim Theatre": Oral History and Documentary Techniques'. *New Theatre Quarterly* 3:12 (1987): 317-336. Print.
- Patai, Daphne. 'US Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?'. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Eds., Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. London: Routledge, 1991. 137-153. Print.
- Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, Eds. (Fourth Edition). *The Oral History Reader*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. Print.
- . Eds. (Second Edition). *The Oral History Reader*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- . Eds. (First Edition). *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Peters, Sarah. 'The Impact of Participating in a Verbatim Theatre Process'. *Social Alternatives*. 36:2 (2017): 32-39. Print.
- Plummer, Ken. *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*. London: Sage, 2001. Print.
- Pollock, Della. *Personal interview*. By Clare Summerskill. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 4 Sept 2014
- . Ed. *Remembering: Oral History Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.
- . 'Telling the Told: Performing Like a Family'. *Oral History Review* 18:2 (1990): 1-36. Print.
- Portelli, Alessandro. 'What Makes Oral History Different?' *The Oral History Reader*. Eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London: Routledge, 1998. 63-74. Print.
- . *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1997. Print.

- Preston, Sheila. 'Introduction to Ethics of Representation'. *The Applied Theatre Reader*. Eds. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston. New York: Routledge, 2010. 65-69. Print.
- Refugeecouncil.org.uk. 'Tell it Like it is. The Truth about Refugees and Asylum.' [n.d.] <<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/tell-it-like-it-is-the-truth-about-refugees-and-asylum/>>. Web. Accessed 27 June 2019.
- Reinharz, Shulamit. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
- Riserefugee.org. [n.d.], <<http://riserefugee.org/>> Web. Accessed 14 Sept 2019.
- Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History. A Practical Guide*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2003. Print.
- . Ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2010. Print.
- Robinson, Rony. *Personal Interview* Clare Summerskill, Sheffield. 5 Feb 2014.
- Royalholloway.ac.uk. 'Royal Holloway University of London: Research Ethics Guidelines'. 16 May 2019, <<http://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/iquad/collegetpolicies/documents/pdf/research/researchethicsguidancenotes.pdf/>>. Web. Accessed 14 Sept 2019.
- Ruby, Jay. 'Speaking For, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside' in *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* by Jay Ruby. London: University of Chicago Press, (2000): 195-219. Print.
- Saavedra Montes de Oca, Olga Lidia. 'Opening Other Closets: Remembering as a Transgender Person and as a Family Member'. *Oral History Journal* 45:2 (2017): 81-95. Print.
- Salverson, Julie. 'Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury'. *Theater* 31:3 (2001): 119-125. Print.
- . 'Transgressive Storytelling or an Aesthetics of Injury: Performance, Pedagogy and Ethics'. *Theatre Research in Canada*. 20: 1 (1999): 35-51. Print.
- . 'Performing Emergency: Witnessing, Popular Theatre, and the Lie of the Literal'. *Theatre Topics* 6:2 (1996): 181-191. Print.

- Scanlon, Jennifer. 'Challenging the Imbalances of Power in Feminist Oral History: Developing a Take-and-Give Methodology'. *Women's Studies International Forum*. 16:6 (1993): 639-645. Print.
- Schweitzer, Pam. *Reminiscence Theatre: Making Theatre from Memories*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007. Print.
- Sheftal, Anna and Stacey Zembrzycki. 'Who's Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety about Ethics'. *The Oral History Review*. 43: 2 (2019): 338-366. Print.
- Shopes, Linda. 'Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities'. *The Oral History Reader*. Eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. 261-270. Print.
- Simon, R. and Armitage-Simon, W. 'Teaching Risky Stories: Remembering Mass Destruction Through Children's Literature'. *English Quarterly* 28:1 (1995):27-31. Print.
- Sitzia, Lorraine. 'A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?' *The Oral History Review* 30:1 (2003): 87-101. Print.
- Smith, Daniel, B. *Muses, Madmen, and Prophets: Hearing Voices and the Borders of Sanity*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Smith, Graham. 'The Making of Oral History. Ethics and Legal Understanding.' 2008, Making History.  
<[http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral\\_history.html](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html)>. Web. Accessed 27 February 2016.
- Smith-Sivertsen, Rebecca Christine. *LGBTI Asylum Seekers. A Qualitative Study of the Case Procedures of Asylum Claims Based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity*. 2016. Roskilde University (Denmark), Master's Thesis. Web.  
<<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43033273.pdf>>. Web. Accessed 14 Sept 2019.
- Stuart Fisher, Amanda. "'That's Who I'd be if I Could Sing": Reflections on a Verbatim Project with Mothers of Sexually Abused Children'. *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31:2 (2011a): 193-208. Print.
- . 'Trauma, Authenticity and the Limits of Verbatim'. *Performance Research* 16:1 (2011b): 112-122. Print.

- . Developing and Ethics of Practice in Applied Theatre: Badiou and Fidelity to the Truth of an Event. *Research in Drama Education*. 10:2 (2006): 247-252. Print.
- . 'The Playwright in Residence: A Community's Storyteller'. *TDR: The Drama Review* 48:3 (2004): 135-149. Print.
- Summerskill, Clare. "'It's Telling Your Story to Your Family": Reflections by an Older Lesbian on Being Interviewed for a Verbatim Theatre Production". *Oral History* 48:1 (2020): 66-74. Print.
- . *Gateway to Heaven - the Play*. London: Tollington Press, 2019. Print.
- . 'The Importance of Being Gay: The Perils and Possibilities of LGBTI Asylum Seekers' Involvement in *Rights of Passage*'. *Research in Drama Education* 23:2 (2018): 282-288. Print.
- . *Rights of Passage*. London: Tollington Press, 2016. Print.
- . 'Hearing Voices: Creating Theatre from Stories Given by Mental Health Service Users'. *Inside Out/Outside: Creative Positions in Adult Mental Health*. Eds. Karen Partridge and Sue McNab. London: Karnac, 2014. 227-239. Print.
- . Ed. *Sharing Our Past, Shaping Our Future*. London: Stonewall, 2014. Print.
- . 'Performing Our Experience'. *Asylum, the Magazine for Democratic Psychiatry*. 20: 2 (2013): 16-18. Print.
- . *Gateway to Heaven: Fifty Years of Lesbian and Gay Oral History*. London: Tollington Press, 2012. Print.
- . *Hearing Voices*. London: Tollington Press, 2010. Print.
- . 'Hearing Voices. Part 1.'. 17 Nov. 2010. YouTube. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02hUsBm8ptQ/>>. Web. Accessed 19 August 2016.
- Svich, Caridad. 'Moisés Kaufman: "Reconstructing History Through Theatre" - An Interview'. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13:3 (2003): 67-72. Print.
- Sweeney, Angela. 'Sociology and Survivor Research: An Introduction'. *Mental Health Service Users in Research: Critical Sociological Perspectives*. Ed. Patsy Staddon. Bristol: Policy Press, 2015. 1-9. Print.
- Szostak, Rick. 'The State of the Field: Interdisciplinary Research'. *Issues in*

*Interdisciplinary Studies* 31 (2013): 44-65. Print.

Taylor, Philip. *Applied Theatre. Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003. Print.

Thercs.org. 'LGBT Rights: A Commonwealth Approach to LGBT Equality'. 2015. The Royal Commonwealth Society, <<http://thercs.org/our-work/campaigns/lgbt-rights/>>. Web. Accessed 11 Sept 2019.

Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963; 1980. Print.

Thompson, James. *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003. Print.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1978. Print.

Thompson, Paul and Joanna Bornat. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. (Fourth Edition). New York: Oxford U P, 2017. Print.

Thomson, Alistair. 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History'. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Ed. Donald A. Ritchie. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2010. 78-95. Print.

---. 'Anzac Memories. Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia'. *The Oral History Reader*. Eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London: Routledge, 1998. 300-310. Print.

Tooth Murphy, Amy. 'Listening In, Listening Out: Intersubjectivity and the Impact of Insider and Outsider Status in Oral History Interviews'. *Oral History* 48:1 (2020): 35-44. Print.

Traies, Jane. 'The Perils of the Recording: Ethical Issues in Oral History with Vulnerable Populations'. *Oral History* 48:1 (2020): 75-85. Print.

UKLGIG.org.uk. 'Written submission to the independent review into the welfare in detention of vulnerable persons'. 29 May 2015. UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group, <[http://uklgig.org.uk/?page\\_id=1225/](http://uklgig.org.uk/?page_id=1225/)>. Web. Accessed 14 Sept 2019.

UNHCR.org. 'Figures at a Glance'. [n.d.] UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, <<http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html/>>. Web. Accessed 27 June 2019.

---. 'Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

428 (V)'. 14 Dec 1950. UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-in/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3ae69ee64&query=UNHCRpercent20Statute/>>. Web. Accessed 2 March 2017.

Valentine, Alana. *Bowerbird: The Art of Making Theatre Drawn from Life*. Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2018. Print.

Wake, Caroline. 'To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in *Through the Wire*'. *Modern Drama* 56: 1 (2013): 102-125. Print.

Walmsley, Jan. 'Life History Interviews with People with Learning Difficulties'. *The Oral History Reader*. Eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London: Routledge, 1998. 126-144. Print.

Weiss, Peter. 'Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre'. Trans. Michael Batallion. *World Theatre* 17: 8 (1968): 375-389. Print.

Wilkinson, Sue and Celia Kitzinger. 'Representing the Other'. *The Applied Theatre Reader*. Eds. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010. 86-93. Print.

Winslow, Michelle and Graham Smith. 'Ethical Challenges in the Oral History of Medicine'. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. (Ed) Donald A. Ritchie. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 372-388. Print.

Yeo, Colin. 'Detained fast track asylum process suspended.' 2 July 2015, <<http://www.freemovement.org.uk/detained-fast-track-asylum-process-suspended/>>. Web. Accessed 23 Nov 2016.

Young, Stuart. 'The Ethics of Representation of the Real People and Their Stories in Verbatim Theatre'. *Ethical Exchanges in Translation, Adaptation and Dramaturgy. Series Themes in Theatre*. Eds. Emer O'Toole, Andrea Pelegri Kristic and Stuart Young. Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017. 21-42. Print.

Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Third Edition. Rowman and Littlefield: London, 2015. Print.

---. 'Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research'. *Oral History Review* 22:1 (1995): 51-66. Print.

---. *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. California: Sage Publications, 1994. Print.