



FEATURE

Scripting the Unscripted: exploring the theatre of real life

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Scripting the Unscripted: exploring the theatre of real life

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Abstract

Scripting the Unscripted: Exploring the Theatre of Real Life is a reflection on the profound impact of verbatim theatre. Rooted in personal experiences attending verbatim theatre productions, this piece delves into the transformative power of storytelling. Verbatim theatre emerges as a vital convention, breaking traditional barriers and carving out space for voices beneath the surface to rise and be heard. Verbatim theatre amplifies the longstanding tradition of the theatre, constructing the scripted words from the spoken words of real people to cultivate connection, (de)construct narratives, and spark reflection. Underscoring the unique convention of verbatim theatre, *Scripting the Unscripted* emphasizes the dynamic creation process that not only communicates stories, but also deepens our understanding of humanity.

Keywords: verbatim theatre, convention, storytelling, human experience, authenticity

Introduction: Verbatim and Identity

Identity and story are interconnected. Story forges the path we walk to come to know our authentic selves. As a theatre practitioner, educator, and early-career Indigenous scholar, I not only recognize the power of storytelling; it's in my blood. In truth, I believe it's in all of us. I have come to learn about the pieces of my *self* and where I come from through the oral tradition of storytelling. As a storyteller, I have been fluent in the language of theatre for as long as I can remember.

Verbatim theatre stands out in the dramatic landscape by embracing story and embodying a process that allows participants and audiences alike to delve into the depths of the human experience. A form of documentary theatre, verbatim theatre is constructed using the spoken words of real people (Cantrell, 2013). Malleable in form, verbatim theatre can extend beyond the spoken word to include excerpts from news sources and journal entries. Echoing the sentiment that "the arts are able to access that which is otherwise out of reach" (Leavy, 2017, p.14), verbatim theatre allows us to tune into the humanity of others and, in turn, the humanness of ourselves. *Scripting the Unscripted: Exploring the Theatre of Real Life*, seeks to shed light on the essence and accessibility of verbatim theatre as a convention through which we can authentically communicate the deeply rooted issues of the world while also uncovering the layers of our humanness.

Verbatim as Visceral

I can still remember the scent in the air: musky woods. I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into. I was sitting in a dark, dank basement theatre to see a production of Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*. I was twenty-two years old, and theatre was *everything*. Within moments of the piece beginning, I was stunned. I had never borne witness to such a tragic, real-life story told through such a tender, truthful lens:

“Stephen Mead Johnson: The fence – I've been out there four times, I've taken visitors. That place has become a pilgrimage site. Clearly that's a very powerful personal experience to go out there. It is 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.” (Kaufman, 2001, p.34).

My body didn't leave the theatre until long after the curtain had closed. I was transformed after being taken to a place completely foreign and yet entirely familiar. Foreign in that my rose-coloured glasses – naïveté – couldn't possibly fathom a world full of so much hate. Familiar in that I understood and felt deep resonance in every word. The tragedy had heart. The storytelling that unfolded before me was redefining theatre as I knew it.

The words spoken of the residents of Laramie, Wyoming, are the cacophonous assembly of the spectrum of reactions in the events leading up to and following Matthew Shepard's tragic death. The Tectonic Theater Project company members' reflective journaling weaves its way through the voices of the town, offering the audience a way into the evolution of their thoughts and reactions as the story progresses.

As I witnessed the performance, there was deep resonance with Matthew Shepard's story, and eerie alignment with the way it was so rawly shared. I was particularly drawn to the *moments*. Defined as a “process of creating and analyzing theater one moment at a time” (Kaufman and McAdams, p.43), Moment Work offers the playwright the “freedom to create individual, self-contained theatrical units (moments) and then sequence these units together into theatrical phrases or sentences that will eventually become a play” (p.29). Matthew Shepard, the person around whom the story evolves, is present only by name. His life is shared through moments illustrated by the voices of the sixty-six characters who ensure his presence is palpable.

I've since travelled to Laramie a number of times, stopping along the way to direct the piece with a group of awe-inspiring youth. Engaging with *The Laramie Project* has become a touchstone in my trajectory as an artist, educator, and scholar.

As I harken back to my time as a high school drama teacher, I fondly remember the drama classroom as the brave space for experimenting, sharing, and learning. I wasn't expecting a particular field trip to take this notion to an entirely new level, nor was I expecting it to leave an indelible mark on the students. In the fall of my earlier years as a teacher, I had the honour of taking a group of students to the theatre – many for the first time – to see a verbatim theatre production. First presented at the Summer Works Festival in Toronto in 2009, *The Middle Place* takes place in an unhoused youth shelter in Rexdale – a vibrant but troubled 'middle place' sandwiched between the different affluence of downtown Toronto

and the outer suburbs. Andrew Kushnir, a Toronto playwright, ventured to the shelter, video camera in hand, to talk with those living and working there. His play, *The Middle Place* is crafted out of the transcripts from these interviews (Nestruck, 2011). In a review of the play, *Torontoist* columnist Steven Fisher (2011), writes: "Kushnir has done an extraordinary thing in weaving all the material together and presenting the varying experiences of his subjects. Their stories resonate in the telling and offer a rare and humanizing glimpse into an understandably guarded and mistrustful community" (para. 2). *The Middle Place* sheds light on the admissions and revelations from the anonymized residents about their backgrounds, hopes, and intentions, and how they came to be at the shelter:

"The major narrative is the journey of the outsider who is entering the shelter world, but certainly what we encounter from the youth range from people who have come from abusive homes, youth who are finding their way through school and to try to find their legs again. And there's also an entire facet of it that's about plugging into their hopes and dreams – where they want to end up and who they want to be. It's really surprising what they talk about in this play and the kind of depth of wisdom that is the by-product of their challenging journeys so far. It is, in and of itself, inspiring." (Reason, 2010, p.6)

The experience within the theatre itself and bearing witness to *The Middle Place* was transformative. The theatre space – what has historically had connotations of only being for the privileged, entitled, and wealthy – was completely accessible to this group of inner-city, senior high school students. What's more is that they were witnessing the unfolding of stories that resonated with their own in so many ways and, with that, they felt seen and heard. Seeing them leaning in, listening attentively; not fidgeting or talking with one another – eyes glued to the characters on stage – I could feel that they were truly engaged. I can declare this with confidence as many of the reflective writing pieces submitted after our experience at the theatre indicated as much. We were lucky enough to participate in a talkback after the performance and the students were enthralled. Here stood four actors who had just performed a beautifully challenging piece of theatre now ready and willing to answer any and all questions from a captive audience. The questions were insightful and the discussion fruitful, so much so that it continued as we made our way back to the school. The journey home felt ever-so-slightly different – the students were walking proudly and with confidence, all the while extending the discussion that started at the theatre, where they had arrived just a few hours ago, not knowing they would leave with a heightened sense of identity. It was as though they were assured in their newfound ability to think critically about their place in the world. To date, journeying to *The Middle Place* remains one of the most profoundly defining moments of my teaching career.

The most pivotal and paradigm-shifting experience I've had with verbatim theatre was *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. I was twenty-seven years old, just four years older than Rachel was when she died, when I first saw the piece. Based on the diaries of Rachel Corrie and edited by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is the story of a young peace activist from Olympia, Washington, who was killed in Gaza defending a Palestinian home from demolition. Entangled in political controversy, Rachel's words, lifted directly from her diary, are soul-piercingly relatable:

"I'm Rachel. Sometimes I wear ripped blue jeans. Sometimes I wear polyester. Sometimes I take off all my clothes and swim naked at the beach. I don't believe in fate but my astrological sign is

Aries, the ram, and my sign on the Chinese zodiac is the sheep, and the name Rachel means sheep but I've got a fire in my belly. It used to be such a loud blazing fire that I couldn't hear anybody else over it." (Rickman and Viner, 2008, p.9)

The audience members, positioned as her friends and family, are captivated by only Rachel on stage for the entirety of the play's ninety minutes. During this time, we are the confidant of her inner-most thoughts, the keeper of her darkest secrets, and the witness of her untimely death.

Steeped in political dispute, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is verbatim theatre at its most socially just and scrutinizing. It is also theatre created posthumously, without explicit permission from the writer herself to share her words – an ethical enigma. By giving voice to Rachel through an actor, the play empowers her story and amplifies her message; however, it also raises questions about whose voice is being heard and interpreted. Regarding consent, or lack thereof, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* poses a moral dilemma: "whether the material has been edited together authenticates the play's truths or not is a question that must remain unanswered, because we have no access to the testimony Rachel would choose to perform had she lived" (Fisher, 2020, p.95). The words chosen, as compelling as they are, were selected by an *other*. When consent cannot be obtained, the artistic practice of verbatim theatre stands on a precipice. Although many types of verbatim theatre aim to document historical events, turning real individuals into characters portrayed by actors is a complex process fraught with ambivalence, requiring careful navigation between reality and fiction (Fisher, 2020). Power is inevitably at play. While the play serves as a means of preserving Rachel Corrie's legacy, through the dramatization of her diary entries and email correspondence, the play exerts power over how she is remembered and what aspects of her activism are emphasized. Peters and Burton (2023), highlight the importance of ethics in practice as the notion pertains to verbatim theatre creation: "Ethics of practice in a creative context is all about action and creativity, and finding the liminal porosity between a principle and its manifestation in the creative work" (p.166). *My Name is Rachel Corrie* exemplifies the delicate balance between ethical storytelling and artistic expression. In navigating this precarious terrain, the play is an invitation to audiences to reflect on the broader implications of voice, consent, and the representation of real lives on stage.

Verbatim as Convention

If, as Neelands and Goode (2015) argue, conventions can be seen as "part of a dynamic process that enables participants to make, explore and communicate meaning through theatre form" (p.1), then verbatim theatre is, indeed, a convention. The author – curator of words – has the privilege of assembling the myriad sources (e.g., interview transcriptions, news excerpts, journal entries), into a throughline to share the collective story with an audience, offering an open-hearted lens through which to view a reality of our time:

"The use of the term 'verbatim' serves to align it with some notion of the 'authentic' and 'truthful'. 'Verbatim' and indeed 'documentary,' or even 'autobiography,' operate as signifiers that propose a relationship of veracity to the supposed facts and it is this relationship to 'truth' that makes these performances so potentially powerful." (Heddon, 2009, p.117 as cited in Fisher, 2020, p.79)

Then, there's the rehearsal process. This is where the heart of verbatim theatre lives: the process is the convention. The product is a metabolization of the nuanced granularities that unfold throughout the curating, devising, and rehearsal processes. Whereas genre can be defined more broadly as a category of form or composition, convention is, quite simply, how something is done. Verbatim is a particular kind of way theatre is done, and it is an example of how we “[bridge] the *thinking* to the *doing*” (Peters and Burton, 2023, p.171). The verbatim way leans heavily on process where, one might contend, the organic magic of the theatre truly surfaces. By encompassing a vast range of human experiences, emotions, and stories, the process of verbatim theatre is a “human activity with a very, very wide embrace” (Gallagher and Booth, 2003, p.249), fostering empathy and understanding across the spectrum of perspectives and experiences. Neelands emphasizes that conventions “are the palette of colours, but they don't make a picture ... it's how you then put the brush in and make the picture which is the point” (Cooper, 2019, p.101). Verbatim theatre, as a practice, distinguishes itself in the realm of drama by facilitating an engaging process that enables participants to explore the intricacies of the human experience.

Verbatim as Necessity

Theatre need not be restricted to the confines of fictional storytelling. Some of the most powerful experiences I've witnessed in the theatre have been those of a verbatim nature. In the way it effortlessly brings unheard voices to the surface, letting the outsider in, verbatim theatre is the beautifully provocative bridge we need to help us come to better know ourselves, as well as each other, on a deeply human level. In this sense, verbatim theatre defies containment. The process – the communal nature of convention within the creation of verbatim theatre – make space in the classroom and applied settings alike, offering opportunities to collaborate, (de)construct, and connect.

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