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Life and Death, Presence and Absence:

The Alchemy of the Archive in Posthumous Documentary Theatre

Introduction

At its core, dramatic performance can be considered a series of signs and signifiers. Frequently, the things that create a reality onstage represent or stand in the place of other things from other times. As theatre scholar Catherine Love comments, "whenever we see something on stage, it inevitably enters a representational relationship" (2017, 38). The stage lighting might evoke sunlight or moonlight, the set may represent a certain location at a specific time and place, and the actors' bodies become the bodies of others. Consequently, woven deeply into our theatre-going culture is an unspoken contract between actors and audiences in which we agree to suspend disbelief and pretend. Actors work earnestly to construct illusions of recognisable humanity and audiences allow and endow them with reality. This alchemistic aspect of a theatrical experience can be transformative and although the gulf between imagination and reality seems to lessen in documentary theatre, a degree of suspension of disbelief is still required. When theatre-makers seek to stage reality by re-presenting word-for-word the real lived experiences and events of real people, audiences still grant the performance, particularly the actors, a level of transformation.

Be it Marc Antony in Shakespeare's history plays, American Airlines Pilot Beverley Bass in the Broadway musical *Come From Away* (2017), or Oscar Wilde in Moisés Kaufman's documentary play *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997), when real people are represented on stage, they tend to be "absent— unavailable, dead, disappeared" (Martin 2006, 9). The presence of these real yet absent people become dependent on the corporeal existence of others. As both a literal body, tangible in space and time, and a symbol of those absent, the actor enables us to imagine, remember, and (re)construct elements of reality, people, places, and things beyond our reach. Considering the phenomenology of stage presence, Jane Goodall remarks that,

> one of the strangest paradoxes of stage presence is that, the more powerfully it draws us into the here and now, the more palpably it seems to connect us to a time zone that stretches beyond the boundaries of natural life, to invoke the supernatural. (2008, 169-170)

Theatre-makers, actors, and audiences have become adept at working together to conjure presence in the face of absence, and through the here and now of the present, acknowledge absence beyond the boundaries of the living. This article explores the intersection of presence and absence in documentary theatre, specifically, how the deceased, and the archives in which remnants of them remain, might be evoked across time and space and figuratively resurrected on stage.

This discussion primarily focuses on an original documentary play titled *What Remains: The Love and Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson* (2024). Constructed as the creative practice component of my PhD research,[1] *What Remains* explores the enduring love and at times tumultuous marriage of poet and novelist Vita Sackville-West and diplomat turned politician Harold Nicolson. The play is composed entirely of documentary materials, including diary entries and a selection of letters from the hundreds Harold and Vita wrote to one another during their 50-year relationship. Together they are celebrated for their innovative garden design at Sissinghurst which, now owned and maintained by the National Trust UK, is viewed by thousands of visitors annually. Outside of the UK, Vita is primarily recognised and remembered by her, at the time scandalous, affairs with women during her marriage to Harold – notably with modernist writers Violet Trefusis and Virginia Woolf. Consequently, told largely as an epistolary narrative, *What Remains* represents a relationship so recognisably 'human' and a love so steadfast that audiences can connect and relate to Harold and Vita's story decades after their deaths.

Distinct from other kinds of biographical and history plays that include historical figures and draw from real events but devise fictional dialogue, I define *What Remains* as a work of 'posthumous documentary theatre.' Conceptualised as a distinct subgenre of documentary theatre, the term posthumous documentary theatre "refers to theatre that is constructed primarily from pre-existing documentary materials such as letters, diaries, personal writings etc., after the death of those documents' originator(s)" (Mooney 2024, p. 12). Exclusively constructed after the death of its subject(s), "it is the combination of real people, real time, real place, *and* real words that distinguishes posthumous documentary theatre from other kinds of historical drama" (Mooney 2024, 14).

What Remains and posthumous documentary theatre can be further contextualised by considering existing plays that represent the deceased by re-presenting verbatim their documentary materials. Some of these include Eileen Atkins' *Vita & Virginia* (1995), a play that resituates the correspondence between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf into a live long-form conversation between the two women. Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner's *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) is similarly edited from the deceased Corrie's written emails and diaries, and Sarah Ruhl's *Dear Elizabeth: A Play in Letters from Elizabeth Bishop to Robert Lowell and Back Again* (2012) also re-presents a selection of

the letters exchanged by the poets during their 30-year correspondence. United in their representation of the deceased in their own words on stage, I regard these works as products of a posthumous documentary theatre process and by considering these plays specifically through the lens of posthumous documentary theatre (as opposed to under the more general banner of documentary and verbatim theatre) this discourse offers a unique facet to broader understandings of theatre of the real and identifies an area of discussion ripe for further exploration.

Analysis of three specific documentary plays provides the foundation from which this article reflects on *What Remains,* specifically, how it draws inspiration from and develops the dramaturgical elements such as direct quotations from archives, metatheatrical devices, and audio recordings utilised by others working in the field. By reflecting on *What Remains* alongside Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde,* I consider how the physical presence of the archival documents of the dead on stage can work to commemorate past lives. Examination of Alecky Blythe's use of audio recordings in *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008) and *London Road* (2011) contextualises my discussion of the aurality of reality in *What Remains* and how the idiosyncrasies of verbatim speech can imbue documentary theatre with an air of reality and authenticity distinct from other performances of history.

Gross Indecency and the Documents of the Dead

Constructed from fragments of letters, historical newspaper articles, court transcripts and official documents, *Gross Indecency* follows a resurrected Wilde as he navigates arguably the most theatrical spectacle of his career. The play reconstructs verbatim transcripts from Wilde's three 1895 trials in which his relationships with men were deemed acts of 'gross indecency' and his struggle to defend the morality of his art in a court of law (Kaufman 1998). The play offers a contemporary representation of historical figures and events and uses the physical presence of books and papers onstage to perform its citations and explicitly acknowledge its archival origins. In the author's note prefacing *Gross Indecency*'s script, Kaufman instructs that included in the performance space should be "a long table covered with books from which the narrators quote. This should be the same level as the audience" (1998, Author's Note). The books that Kaufman refers to are (or at least are representative of) the compendiums of documentary source material that inform the play's content, including court transcripts, correspondence, and Wilde's published works. The directive that the documentary source material resides on "the same level as the audience" is intriguingly specific. It suggests that Kaufman wanted the archive to exist not above or below, but equally on the audience's level, perhaps to prevent or bridge any physical or architectural gap between the historical world of the play and the contemporary world of the audience in which it is being performed.

In *Gross Indecency* the documentary source material functions not just as the jumping-off point or inspiration for the work. The play is not 'based on' the documentary material rather, the theatre-maker and actors' interaction(s) with the documentary theatre *is* the play. Therefore, having the documentary material exist (literally) on the same level as the

audience might also serve to physically indicate that the play's content comes not from some place of higher imagination, nor has its source material been reduced to unseen 'base' research, but that it comes from the same 'real' world as the audience. In other words, the historical documentary material and its present-day audience reside in "an equal level of reality" (Elias 2021, 23). Kaufman's decision to physically represent documentary source material onstage reflects a desire to tangibly bring the past into the present and 'liberate' historical documents from any potential confines of the archive. Unlike in a museum where it can appear that "time is frozen" (Crane 2006, 100), in *Gross Indecency* the documents of the dead are not static or fixed in time as things that cease to progress after the death of their originators. They are instead resituated in the evolving present and made live once more.

Posthumous documentary theatre can be profoundly commemorative. One could go so far as to suggest that commemoration is an inherent quality of the form. Documentary theatre practitioner Molly Flynn suggests that "to commemorate someone or something is to remember that person or that event and to remember is to mark a person or an event as absent" (2020, 13). Oftentimes to commemorate is to remember. Museologist Susan Crane comments that "forgetting is a naturally occurring process which museums disturb" (2006, 100). Works of documentary theatre such as *Gross Indecency* can similarly be considered interventions against the process of forgetting. Despite theatre's essential ephemerality, the reconstructed Oscar Wilde is made live not just vicariously in the actor's body in space but is recalled, recontextualised, reconsidered, and revitalised in the minds of the audience. The play invites the audience to participate in an act of commemoration, to think of something or someone(s) in their absence, and as the audience acknowledges aspects of past lives via present ones, they prevent the dead from completely disappearing beyond recall into the void of the past.

When reflecting on their physical performance of citations in *Gross Indecency* Kaufman and McAdams (2018, 164) comment, "we created many moments with our source books. . . An actor would approach the table, pick up a book, quote the title and the author, and start reading from it." For example, the play begins as follows:

> *The actors come on stage. The actor playing Oscar Wilde holds up a copy of De Profundis and reads:*
>
> **Actor** This is from *De Profundis* by Oscar Wilde:
>
> 'Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, present and future are but one moment in the sight of God. Time and space are merely accidental conditions of thought. The imagination can transcend them.' (Kaufman 1998, 9)

The metatheatricality of this moment operates on multiple levels. Firstly, the presentational style of performance; the actor citing their source material and then reading it directly to the audience, instantly acknowledges the audience's presence, breaking the fourth wall. This makes the presence of the actor telling *a* story visible (Kaufman 1998) and foregrounds the theatrical event as one of direct and self-aware communication of documentary material from the actors to the audience. Secondly, this

immediate and explicit reference to the play's source material identifies *Gross Indecency* as a representation that is "highly self-conscious about its own status as a collage of appropriated historical texts" (Bottoms 2006, 61) and establishes the play as the "performance of documents as documents" (Martin 2013, 38). Furthermore, the selected *De Profundis* quote suggests a self-awareness of the transcendent nature of posthumous documentary theatre itself. Wilde deconstructs linear conceptions of time and space, deeming them "conditions of thought," and this could reflect the 'created' nature of time in posthumous documentary theatre, where a sense of the past and present, the live and dead can exist not just simultaneously but harmoniously.

The Aurality of Reality: Audio in London Road and The Girlfriend Experience

Similar to Kaufman, British verbatim theatre veteran Alecky Blythe frequently cultivates a sense of harmony between the present and absent in her work by aurally representing the source material of her documentary subjects. Blythe's work is characterised by her self-titled 'recorded delivery' technique. This involves actors wearing headphones during the performance through which an audio script, edited together from the original recorded interviews with documentary subjects, plays. The actors then speak along in time with the recording to ensure their vocal delivery matches the people they are representing onstage as closely as possible, preserving the individual "voiceprint" of their documentary subjects (Brown quoted in Cantrell, 2013, p. 141). In addition to the recorded delivery technique, Blythe has incorporated some of this verbatim audio from interviews into several of her productions, playing it over the theatre PA system for audiences to hear. Both *The Girlfriend Experience* and *London Road* open with audio recordings.

The stage directions for the beginning of *London Road* instruct:

> ACT ONE
> Section One
> *Church hall just off London Road.*
> *The original audio recording of* RON*'s opening speech is heard over the PA in the auditorium. It fades out as* RON *starts to sing.* (Blythe & Cork 2011, 5)

Belfield identifies that "the use of the audio recording instantly reminds the audience that what they are about to hear are real words from real people" (2018, 75). However, this moment also highlights that the actor onstage is not the 'real' Ron, but a representation of him. In a moment of aural fusion, the recording of the 'real' Ron fades out as the actor-Ron onstage begins to sing and the relationship between 'reality' and 'theatre' in documentary theatre is encapsulated. Evocative of a Venn diagram, at the intersection of original and reproduction, Ron simultaneously exists in two spheres, as both a real person and a documentary character. He is momentarily "caught in between the representational process of playwriting and the actuality of the real events themselves" (Stuart-Fisher 2020, 34). The 'reality' of the text as it was originally spoken and its overt theatrical re-presentation converge to create what Patrick Duggan deems 'authenticity effects' (2023, 150) and it is in the overlap of these two spheres; a past real-

world reality and its representation in the (re)created reality of the theatre, that the play exists.

This is not the first time Blythe has used audio to begin her work. Her earlier verbatim play *The Girlfriend Experience* also incorporates audio in its opening moments, however, it takes the form of a recording/voice-over of Blythe herself. The first scene of *The Girlfriend Experience*: "Prologue – Technique," begins as follows:

> **Alecky** (*voice-over*). I feel like I should explain – what I'm doing with m- microphones an' stuff like that - / just so that you know –
> **Tessa** Mmm – We did sort of / - a bit.
> **Poppy** Yeah –
> **Alecky** (*voice-over*). Um (*Beat*.) – I kindof make (*Beat*.) – um (*Beat*.) – they're sortof documentary plays. (*Pause*.) But – I don't – *film* anything (*Beat*.) – I just re*cord* – hours and hours of-of – audio. (*Pause*.) Um (*Beat*.) – and I – edit it (*Beat*.) (Blythe 2008a, 5)

Like *London Road*, this use of audio draws the audience's attention to the real-world origins of the play's content. However, the inclusion of Blythe's theatre-maker voice adds another layer that more explicitly displays the editorial process of the play's creation. The audience is introduced to Blythe as an interviewer, theatre-maker, and playwright but she also identifies herself as an editor: "I just record – hours and hours of-of – audio. . . and I – edit it." In the 2008 production of *The Girlfriend Experience* directed by Joe Hill-Gibbins at the Royal Court Theatre, during the play's opening scene, while "the woman on the audio replied to Blythe's introduction, the actors repeated their words so that the audience heard both the actual women and the actor's voices" (Cantrell 2013, 150). The audio then faded out so only the actors' voices remained. Seeking to indicate an intimate and unedited relationship with the archive, "the decision to stage the moment at which the actors stepped into the role very clearly created an alienating effect. It was designed explicitly to demonstrate to the audience that the actors were repeating the words they were hearing via headphones" (Cantrell 2013, 150).

Such a dramaturgical approach to the opening moments of *London Road* and *The Girlfriend Experience* cultivates a sense both of authenticity and alienation. Developed from the traditional Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, notions of alienation, estrangement, and distancing are frequently associated with documentary theatre, with practitioners such as Kaufman (1998) citing Brecht's techniques as inspiration for their work. Inspired by Kaufman and Blythe, the remaining discussion offers examples of dramaturgical strategies used in *What Remains* that sought to make present the absent by cultivating a sense of alienation. By drawing attention to the process of theatrical representation and 'estranging' the story and marking it off from naturalism (Maloney 2013), *What Remains* sought to produce a distinct kind of alienation that had the "ability to blend distance with closeness" (Woods 2019, 195).

What Remains: Surrounded by Evidence of Time

A practice capable of participating in remembering, documenting, and representing the past, posthumous documentary theatre can also be a kind of historiography, a term used here to refer to the writing of history. Historiography is a process of 'storying' (Macfie 2015; Martin 2013; Munslow 2007) and any form of documented history, while about real people and events, is still to some degree always imagined and fictively constructed. Histories are "not found *in the past"* (Macfie 2015, 36) but are created and remembered in the present. Posthumous documentary theatre also 'stories' its real-world source materials. The documentary source material is usually edited, organised, and arranged into a performable historical narrative or 'story' for its audience. Similar to written histories, "the documentary is not in the object but in the relationship between the object, its mediators (artists, historians, authors) and its audience" (Reinelt 2009, 7). The documentary takes place in the gap between the now and then, between the present and the absent, as it searches for truth. As Valentine (2018, 23) comments, "a story does not simply 'exist in the ether' but was 'constructed' by the person writing it." Reflecting on *What Remains,* I now analyse some of the strategies that might be used to dramaturgically represent the inherent subjectivity of history on stage in documentary theatre.

Inspired by the physical presence of source material on stage in *Gross Indecency*, one of the central elements of dramaturgy and production design that sought to evoke a simultaneous sense and acknowledgement of past and present in *What Remains* was the use of paper on stage. One of my favourite moments of the performance that took place in The Playhouse at the Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts on 7 September 2022 in Aotearoa New Zealand, was when the actors, celebrating Harold and Vita's wedding, tossed handfuls of paper up into the air like a flurry of confetti (expertly captured in Ben Whitehouse's photo – see Figure 1)[2]. Although Harold and Vita's real-life marriage took place over a century ago, the unpredictable shower of paper, how each page twisted and turned in the air and where it landed was inherently dependent on the conditions of the present moment in which it occurred. This moment was unable to be repeated in exactly the same way and encapsulated the ephemerality of theatre. It could also be considered a physical metaphor for how the representation of history, in both theatre and other mediums, is similarly always shaped by the conditions of the time in which it is being re-presented. The performance of posthumous documentary theatre takes place at a certain moment in space and time, and the audience is an essential and active part of shaping the conditions of that moment. Like the currents of air that may influence the pages' descent to the ground, the audience's perceptions and interpretations of the theatrical event dictate how it 'lands' and ultimately decide the meaning(s) that are made.

Reflecting on Vita's reluctance to refurbish or upgrade her writing room, her son, Nigel Nicolson comments that "as the wallpaper peeled and faded, and the velvet tassels slowly frayed, she would never allow them to be renewed. Her possessions must grow old with her. She must be surrounded by evidence of time" ([1973] 1999, 203). The throwing and dropping of paper became a recurring motif in *What Remains*, resulting in

Figure 1. *Actors Megan Goldsman, Lily Whitehouse, and Conor Maxwell celebrate Vita and Harold's wedding.* Rehearsal image by Ben Whitehouse, 2022.

the stage becoming strewn with abandoned 'letters' (see Figure 2). The gradual accumulation of the pages on the floor served as a physical representation and tangible evidence of the passing of time and became a visual marker of the performance's progression. It also became a persistent reminder that *What Remains* is largely constructed from source material written in the past and that from the archival materials of the deceased Vita and Harold, the live actors draw the 'life' of their performances in the present. Furthermore, representative of the historical source material from which *What Remains* was wrought, the papers carpeting the stage formed the literal foundation on which the actors stood, so that they too became surrounded by evidence of time.

In *What Remains t*he actors interacted with and manipulated the pages in different ways, ripping them, taking them from others' hands, offering them outwards, gently letting them fall to the ground or tossing them aside (see Figure 3). Additionally, numerous times throughout the play, they used the paper to perform a kind of physical citation for the source material. For example, when reporting historical headlines, Megan and Conor held up newspapers, physically referencing the original publication format of the words they were speaking (see Figure 4). Other times they would appear to read articles to the audience directly from the newspapers (see Figure 5) or read aloud letters from the loose pages strewn across the performance space (see Figure 6).

Figure 2. Megan, Lily, and Conor in as paper begins to cover the stage. Rehearsal image by Ben Whitehouse, 2022.

Figure 3. Megan exalts Vita's love for Harold, tossing papers in the air. Rehearsal image by Ben Whitehouse, 2022.

Figure 4. Megan and Conor with newspapers aloft, cite source material. Rehearsal image by Ben Whitehouse, 2022.

Figure 5. Megan reads a historical newspaper article from the *Auckland Star*. Rehearsal image by Ben Whitehouse, 2022.

Figure 6. Megan reads one of Vita's letters. Rehearsal image by Ben Whitehouse, 2022.

This overt tactile acknowledgement of the source material was both a dramaturgically and ethically motivated convention and was, in part, inspired by *Gross Indecency*. Reflecting on the play Stephen Bottoms comments, that *Gross Indecency's* performance text cultivated a kind of "theatrical self-referentiality" and suggests that this "is precisely what is required of documentary plays if they are to acknowledge their dual and thus ambiguous status as both 'document' and 'play'" (2006, 57). The physical performance of citations in *What Remains* similarly sought to recognise the real-world document origins of the play's source material while simultaneously highlighting the re-presentation of that material as a play. The actor's interaction with paper onstage in *What Remains* and the physical citation of source material sought to present the audience with a commemorative yet dynamic re-presentation of Vita and Harold's documentary material. However, perhaps more importantly, it exposed "the mechanics of theatrical magic – how one thing stands in for another, how transformations occur" (Love 2017, 35), drawing attention to the work as an act of exploration and subjective representation and storying of history.

The Audio Montage

Another key element of *What Remains*'s performance text that aimed to draw attention to both the absent and the archive was the use of audio recordings. When reflecting on life writing practices, biographer Hermione Lee suggests that "the opening move sets up the whole approach. And this will vary depending on the subject" (2009, 125). Inspired partly by Blythe's use of recorded verbatim audio, *What Remains* opens with a prologue in the form of an audio montage. This proceeds Harold and Vita's physical appearance

onstage and marks the commencement of the performance text. The script for *What Remains* begins with the following stage directions:

> *The three actors are already onstage/in the performance space.*
> *The Audio Montage plays.*
> *When it finishes, MOMENT 1 begins.* (Mooney 2024, 174)

Underscored by the sound of typing, the Audio Montage was edited together from recordings of the first few introductory rehearsals with the actors. It is primarily the theatre-maker's voice the audience hears as they are thrust into the aurally re-presented world of the rehearsal room. This 'opening move' sought to foreground the creation process of *What Remains* and relocate the play away from a fictive context (Stuart-Fisher 2020). The Audio Montage offers the audience insight into what it was like to be in the actors' 'shoes' during the process of creating *What Remains,* for they, similar to the actors at the beginning of the rehearsal process, listen to Missy introduce Harold and Vita's letters and her relationship to them. This draws attention to the audience-performer relationship and sets the audience up as co-creators of meaning (Duggan 2013). Moreover, "in acknowledging the audience and the fact that 'this is theatre', [the audience] become explicitly bound to an ethics of spectating as much as the performers are tied to an ethics of making the work" (Duggan 2013, 148).

The distinct everyday vernacular preserved verbatim in the recordings instantly grounds the Audio Montage not in the historical world of Harold and Vita, but in the recognisably 'real world' and recent past of the actors' rehearsal room. This aimed to signpost *What Remains* as a theatrical experience that sought to be not simply a time-travelling ride through history, but a research activity and self-aware exploration of posthumous documentary theatre practice. Furthermore, the Missy character is introduced not as an aloof or objective historian, but as an emotionally invested, subjective, and even slightly uncertain theatre maker and researcher. In the Audio Montage, my statement that "there's something about them [Vita and Harold's letters] that I want to hear them out loud" (Mooney 2024, 223) alludes to my personal, romanticised, and almost whimsical relationship with Harold and Vita's letters. Then, a few seconds later, the audience hears me openly question what *What Remains* could be, "you know, is this a documentary play? Is it a love story? Who knows" (224). These comments help to set up *What Remains* as the product of an inherently personal and explorative endeavour. As Bottoms (2006, 65) comments, "the inclusion of such material invites the audience to question the role and assumptions of the interviewer-actors and writer-director in making the piece, just as they are asked to scrutinize the words of their interviewees."

An obviously edited amalgam of different clips of audio, the Audio Montage can be viewed as a microcosm of the play as a whole. Similar to how evidence of textual montaging remains visible in other moments in *What Remains,* the patchworked construction of the Audio Montage was not concealed but was deliberately collaged so as not to sound or resemble an organic whole. The audio excerpts come from multiple recorded group discussions with the actors that took place over several weeks in different locations, some in person and others via online video Zoom calls. Consequently, the audio quality; how echoey the room was, and the proximity of the speaker to the recording device, differ between soundbites. Mirroring the actors' efforts to deliver Harold and Vita's letters word for word as they had been written - a common trope of documentary theatre - the Audio Montage re-presents the audio material, aside from its obvious truncation, as unedited as possible. With the intent to re-present the recordings in a way that aurally displayed their 'quotation marks' and make their recontextualization audibly evident, I did not adjust or edit the sound levels of individual audio clips to be uniformly regulated. In this way, as Fisher Dawson comments, "the montage acts as an authenticating sign" (1999, 46) of the archive.

Playwright and poet Sarah Ruhl states that "language invents worlds" (2015, 79) and it is from Harold and Vita's language, preserved in their letters and diaries, that the actors and I constructed and invented a representation of their world on stage in *What Remains*. In the re-presentation of source material that is inherently reflective, such as diaries and letters, the telling or reporting of action can sometimes be "criticised for burdening the audience with too much expository information" (Maloney 2013, 170). Yet, it can also present the audience with vivid "verbal images" (Wake 2018, 117). To construct and comprehend these reported verbal images and invent the theatrical world, the audience must navigate the sometimes chaotic rhythms and idiosyncratic uses of language synonymous with personal writings and verbatim speech. Consequently, as Blythe (2016) reflects, documentary theatre frequently invites a very forensic approach to listening.

In the performance of *What Remains*, while the Audio Montage played, the actors were static onstage listening along with the audience. Aside from stillness, there was no observable layer of visual or physical storytelling to accompany the words. The audience had to rely only on what they heard to build a picture and make sense of what was going on. As an 'opening move' the Audio Montage gave the audience an encounter with a different kind of archive while also foreshadowing the 'forensic approach to listening' often associated with documentary theatre. This prepared the audience for the rest of the performance, during which, largely by listening, they had to continually invent (and maintain) worlds.

The Theatre-Maker and Actors as Characters

The Audio Montage was just one of the ways *What Remains* began to explore strategies of alienation in documentary theatre. The other more obvious method was the inclusion of myself and the actors as characters in the play and the construction of the theatre-maker/actor throughline. Summerskill (2020, 41) suggests that "it is by no means a

common practice for playwrights creating scripts from interviews to include the interviewers' voices in their productions" and that "in much verbatim theatre work, it is only the narrators' words that will be used in the script, not your own" (103). Many documentary theatre practitioners make sure to omit their voices from their scripts. Yet, as evidenced earlier in this discussion, some such as Blythe (2008a, 2011, 2014) choose to include themselves as an interviewer or theatre-maker character in their work, re-presenting their own verbatim dialogue alongside that of their documentary subjects.
When initially approaching the publishers that represent Vita and Harold's literary estate about permission to use a selection of their published material to create *What Remains*, I was not certain of the exact amount of their material I would be permitted to use. Due to copyright restrictions, there was a possibility that my use of Harold and Vita's material would be limited, and therefore insufficient to construct an hour-long piece of theatre. In preparation for such an outcome, I considered alternative archival documents that could be used to supplement Harold and Vita's material while still serving my research objectives. This prompted me to consider the possible dual purpose of the material gathered from my recorded group discussions with the actors. In addition to serving as a useful research method and mode of documentation, I was inspired by theatre-makers such as Blythe, Kaufman, and New Zealand director and playwright Stuart McKenzie (who have all represented themselves and their theatre-making processes in their plays) to explore how testimony from these discussions and the inclusion of myself and the actors as characters could work dramaturgically to contextualise the archive in *What Remains*.

Reflecting on her experience as a documentary theatre-maker, Blythe comments, "I am not just a voyeur, I am also a participant" (2008b, 86), and this is part of the reason she has frequently included herself as a character in her verbatim plays. However, the nature of, and opportunity for, participation differs among practitioners and projects. Theatre-makers such as Blythe who construct their work from recorded interviews with living subjects, can participate in the documentary theatre process in a way that posthumous documentary theatre-makers cannot. To some extent, they can influence the nature of the material they collect as they gather it, whether by asking certain questions or steering the interview in a particular direction. They are not working from an archive but building one.

Although posthumous documentary theatre-makers work largely with pre-existing material and cannot interact with their subjects, "biography is bound to incorporate the relationship of the writer and their subject, even if only subliminally. There is no such thing as an entirely neutral biographical narrative" (Lee 2009, 134). It became clear early into the creation of *What Remains* that my 'relationship' with Harold and Vita and how I felt about their documentary material was and would continue to influence both consciously and subconsciously the nature of *What Remains*. Furthermore, as we moved through the rehearsal process, the actors began to develop their own personal relationships with the archive which additionally impacted our dramaturgical decision-making and construction of the performance text. Consideration of this led to the expansion of the theatre-maker-as-character convention to include the actors and the development of the theatre-maker/actor throughline.

In *What Remains* excerpts from our recorded group discussions are juxtaposed with Harold and Vita's historical documentary material. Consequently, our theatre-maker/actor 'rehearsal chat' became the contextualising lens or frame through which the audience encountered the archive and Harold and Vita. This placed autobiographical performance (mine and the actor's exploration of Harold and Vita's material), and the performance of history (the verbatim representation of that documentary material onstage) in dialogue (Heddon 2008). The intertwining of historical documentary material and the actors' contemporary response to it enabled *What Remains* to explore practices of posthumous documentary theatre, re-presentations of history, and historiography itself.

In *What Remains* the actors were required to shift between representing Harold and Vita and performing themselves as characters, and this brought with it a unique layer of metatheatrical intricacy. The performance involved the actors representing past versions of themselves, speaking about a play that will happen in the future, which they are currently performing in the present. The complexity of the actor-as-character convention is also subtly alluded to in *What Remains* when I suggested to the actors that "when we're kind of us … speak – talk how we talk" (Mooney 2024, 196) In other words, when delivering their own past verbatim testimony, do so in their everyday voice/accents. However, the fact that I say "when we're *kind of* us" instead of simply 'when we're us' is revealing. The hesitant and non-committal nature of the phrase 'kind of' indicates my awareness that, even when portraying themselves onstage, the actors will always be performing a *version* of themselves.

This links back to the potential tension between presence and absence at play in a representation, specifically the conclusion that no matter how seemingly 'real,' 'truthful,' or 'authentic' a re-presentation, it will always be bound by the limits of representation. It can never be the thing itself. Even though Conor *is* Conor, he cannot transcend his temporal existence in space and time, he can only ever be the Conor of the present moment. Thus, even when performing himself, because it is a self from the past, he can only ever be *a version* of that past self, modelled from the memory of that past Conor. *What Remains* was not aiming to be the most 'right,' 'perfect' or 'truthful' representation of Harold and Vita or the documents they left behind. It is more concerned with being a representation of a representational process and a dialogue between the archive and its present absence on stage. The inclusion of Missy and the actors as characters aimed to continuously expose the missing of it all and to not only show the audience our navigation of how the past and the dead might be resurrected in the present but also invite them to consider their own relationship with the absent and the archive.

Transformation in What Remains

The representation of the absent in the bodies of the present could be considered a kind of transformation, which can be a contested concept in documentary theatre. Some practitioners suggest that transformation is an inherent part of documentary theatre actors' work. There are numerous terms used to describe the actor/documentary subject relationship that imply a degree of transformation, incarnation, manifestation, or

embodiment. For example, earlier in this discussion, I described the moment between the recording of 'real' Ron and actor-Ron at the beginning of *London Road* as a moment of 'fusion,' a word that could be perceived to have transformative connotations. Aotearoa New Zealand-based actor/researcher Cindy Diver describes actors in documentary theatre as "avatars" of their interviewees (Graham 2017, 120) and Blythe and Cork (2011, x) similarly commented in the introductory note prefacing the script of *London Road* that "the actors find they are inhabited (or possessed) by the voices they represent."

While documentary actors may feel that they become vessels or vehicles, inhabited, possessed, or even haunted by the voices of their documentary theatre subjects and are therefore 'transformed', some documentary practitioners contrastingly discourage notions of transformation in their work. For example, Paul Brown suggests that "the best way" for actors to think about performing documentary theatre is:

> to say to yourself as an actor, 'well, I'm not trying to transform into this person, I'm trying to tell the story to the audience.' As soon as you identify as a storyteller rather than as an actor transforming, it feels a lot easier. (Mumford 2010, 98)

Director Kate Gaul similarly reflects that frequently in documentary theatre, "the actor [is] confronting the audience as the actor . . . the actor is always the actor and they report the words of the character. The transformation process is taken out" (Mumford 2010, 98).

In one respect, the Audio Montage and theatre-maker/actor throughline in *What Remains* sought to disrupt the notion of 'transformation,' as it identified the actors as storytellers, reporters, and agents of the archive positioned outside Harold and Vita's narrative. I did not encourage the actors to disappear or 'transform' into any of their roles. During rehearsals, I expressed to Lily that I did not want her to try to mimic me to the minutest detail when playing Missy on stage. Rather, similarly to Megan and Conor's approach to Vita and Harold, I suggested she try and find a version of Missy that was in harmony or a middle ground somewhere between Lily and Missy. As we concluded in the following excerpt from one of our recorded group discussions during the rehearsal process, the Missy character ended up being a kind of hybrid of both of us.

Lily A challenge for me in this process was finding a way to represent you [Missy] that wasn't me, because I think initially, I was saying your lines more how I would say them. So more like going up at the end – a rising inflection at the end of a sentence. Whereas your intonation is more downward. So, then it's trying to find a balance between not being you [Missy] but having an essence of you that isn't me. And I guess that was -I know we don't have 'characters' per se in verbatim theatre, but that was how I got into the Missy character.

Missy I think it is a character, and it has to be. I refer to myself in *What Remains* not as 'me' or 'I' but as the 'Missy character' because how I view myself in

> the play is inherently tied to you now Lily. Yes, the words came from me, but I don't always think about that when I read them. I think about you saying them and I think about the Missy character as being like some kind of meeting point–
>
> **Lily** A kind of hybrid.
>
> **Missy** –of me and you, and to me that's perfect. And I think it's the same for you, Megan and Conor, as well. I don't think of you as being Harold or Vita, I think of you as Megan and Conor reading it, or representing it, and I love seeing 'you' in there. . . It's about finding how that person fits in you. It's not about trying to 'become' them or be something that you're not because what makes them [Harold and Vita] live now is that they are in you. So, to deny the 'you' part of the equation is I think to do a disservice to the act of re-presentation.
>
> **Lily** And also unachievable. Like that's impossible – to be somebody else.

Actors cannot be somebody else – as Lily articulates "that's impossible" – nor can they fill the empty space that the dead leave behind. Yet, although the actors were not aiming for 'transformation' in *What Remains*, it seemed that our verbatim speech had an inherent transformative power that encouraged the audience to believe in Lily as Missy. After the performance, multiple audience members remarked how 'spot on' Lily was as Missy. Even people who know me well, including my brother, reflected that she sounded "exactly like me", implying that Lily had successfully 'transformed' into Missy. Documentary practitioner Robin Belfield identifies "like with documentary films or news items, when something is presented as truth, an audience will more often than not receive it as such" (2018, 105). While Lily did not feel like she was presenting herself as *being* Missy, many different aspects of the dramaturgy, the audio montage and preservation of verbatim speech in the theatre-maker/actor throughline, actively encouraged the audience to endow Lily with the qualities of Missy. Thus, in *What Remains*, and perhaps many other works of documentary theatre, it was not the actor that transformed, but the audience and the suggestive power of the theatrical event itself that transformed the actor.

In *What Remains* the actors and I strove to build a dramaturgy that would continuously make the audience cognisant of the play as a (re)constructed subjective reality. Correspondingly, the Audio Montage and theatre-maker/actor throughline were both devised as strategies to produce a sense of metatheatricality and audience alienation that could invite the audience inside the construction of *What Remains* while acknowledging the Vita and Harold's perpetual absence. This sought to give context to the process of Harold and Vita's re-presentational resurrection, while also preventing transformation and disrupting the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. Yet, on reflection, I realise that transformation is the very quality upon which *What Remains* is predicated.

Conclusion

Flynn identifies that "theatre can come to constitute a ritual space" (2020, 67) in the sense that theatre, like a ritual, has the potential to construct a transitional or liminal space in which, "entities are neither here nor there; they are both betwixt and between" (Turner 1969, 95). Furthermore, as Ruhl remarks, "ritual conjures the invisible" (2020, para. 6) and "theatre, like ritual, creates a space for transformation" (Flynn 2020, 68). In posthumous documentary theatre practices such as *Gross Indecency* and *What Remains* that physically represent the deceased documentary subjects onstage, the dead are inherently transformed as they shift from being invisible, absent, and existing only in the past tense, alive only within the boundaries of memory, into something that can be of the present. There is something inherently ritualistic about that transformation. Evocative of the perceivable energy that might be felt during a moment of silence, there is a similar sense of phenomenon produced by a theatre audience collectively thinking of something in its absence, and it is this that can make the invisible visible, endow the living actors with the spirit of the dead, and grant transformation.

Favorini comments that "documentaries tend to make history an object rather than a subject" (2008, 76), and this is true in the sense that Harold and Vita's letters, as historical artefacts, are objects or things receiving an action as opposed to people or things doing an action. Yet, in the process of crafting *What Remains*, I also found the opposite to be true. As I alluded to earlier in this discussion, multiple documentary theatre actors have reflected that they have felt 'possessed' by the absent voice of their documentary subjects and that the faithful recreation of archival source material can be "quite transformative" (Blythe as cited in Megson 2018, 224). In other words, the actors become subject to the 'power' of the object(s) they represent. Adams states: "People whose voices have outlived their bodies through the words they wrote by hand on paper. That's a magic only letters and a few other types of private writing can achieve" (2023, 160). There is magic in Harold and Vita's letters. Their words vividly preserve the vitality of their lives that were, and when said out loud, embodied, and given life onstage by the actors are these historical objects not transformed into something more? While the deceased Vita and Harold cannot technically be subjects in the sense that they cannot 'do' anything, their representation on stage makes it feel as if they can, if only for the duration of the performance.

At the outset of *What Remains*, I likely would have argued that relationship between the absent and the present, the actor and the archive in posthumous documentary theatre is not transformative. Yet, after undertaking *What Remains,* I have come to recognise that representation and transformation are far from exclusive, and that to deny the potential for transformation out of a perceived sense of ethical consideration to documentary subjects would be to deny "theatrical magic – how one thing stands in for another, how transformations occur" (Love 2017, 35). It would be to deny the very thing that arguably makes theatre, theatre. Furthermore, it would be to deny the unique commemorative function of posthumous documentary theatre as a vehicle that allows us to make the past present and our dead alive.

There is power in the missing, absent, unavailable, dead and disappeared. The absent can be a presence supremely felt. Thus, perhaps to navigate 'the missing of it all' in documentary theatre is to acknowledge what can't be reached, and to acknowledge the performance text, the actors, and the historical narrative as representations and stories that search for truth. "Documentary theatre cannot truly resurrect those we've lost, that would be a miracle beyond even the magic of theatre" (Mooney 2023, 172). However, posthumous documentary theatre can make the archive live. It can reach through time to a past reality. It can help us remember and ensure we don't forget. It is a form of theatre that resides somewhere in the space between presence and absence where transformations occur and where the missing of it all can live once more, if only for a night.

Notes

1. Content included in this article has been adapted from chapters of Mooney's (2024) PhD Thesis, "Posthumous Documentary Theatre: Re-presenting Historical Documentary Material on Stage."
2. The photos included in this article were kindly taken by Ben Whitehouse during rehearsals for *What Remains*. The copyright for the images is attributed to by Missy Mooney.

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