

## Sentences from the Archive

### Jen Webb

We don't know what the next sentence should be.  
(Schwartz 2002: 260, on September 11 2001)

The creative field has long been considered a social space that is ideally placed to reflect and intervene in the social world. Creative practice is frequently used as a means to address the effects of trauma: psychologists and other therapists engage their patients in drawing, writing and performing trauma as a way to exorcise the demons of the past, and recast personal history as a more bearable narrative. On a macro scale, many creative practitioners see it as part of their role, as artists, to tackle trauma, disaster and human rights infringements, and present exhibitions, suites of poems, movies and theatre productions that deal with the sorrows and disasters of life. A vast body of such creative works exists; a considerable body of critical writings on and analyses of such works exist. This paper adds to the latter, by looking at theatre productions that explicitly tackle major social trauma: specifically, the trauma of the September 11 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, and the traumas that followed.

Of the art forms, writing and theatre are, in the perspective of John Carey and others, particularly well-suited to the work of confronting injustice and disaster because written and spoken work is capable of criticism in a way that visual or sonic art is not: work made in language is both coherent and articulate (2005: 177). Yet in the wake of September 11 2001, many novelists expressed a loss of faith in their practice, in its capacity to respond to the events of that day, and even in the value of imaginative work at all. Jay McInerney clearly expresses the attitude that is touched on by a number of other novelists in post-September 11 interviews and essays:

Most novelists I know went through a period of intense self-examination and self-loathing after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. I certainly did. For a while the idea of 'invented characters' and alternate realities seemed trivial and frivolous and suddenly, horribly outdated. (2005: 4)

The novelists were not alone in their sense that their previous lives had become 'outdated'. Many commentators insisted that the events of September 11 had initiated a new world order: that something new had emerged in history, that 'On September 11, the world changed' (Goodman, 2001: 31). Of course it had not changed – not in any real way, except for those who had lost loved ones or those who were caught up in the wars and political changes that followed September 11. Still, like Jay McInerney, novelists including Don DeLillo, John Updike, Ian McEwan, VS Naipaul and Zadie Smith turned from fiction to essays, and in a sort of channelling of Adorno's notion that Auschwitz constituted the end of poetry, they spoke – often brokenly – about the failures of fiction in the face of real

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

trauma. Indeed, for VS Naipaul, 'fiction is no longer adequate to make sense of the world' (Donadio, 2005: 8). For these writers, it seems, the story had lost its way and failed in its purpose. New Yorker Lynne Schwartz wrote, poignantly, of her sense of this attitude:

We cling to our stories, we take root in our stories like the nymph who took root in a tree and became its prisoner. Unlike her, we will regain our shapes – almost. We will do what is needed; we will write the next sentence. Only not yet, not here on the bleak brink of November. (Schwartz, 2002: 262)

She was right, of course; now, in 2009, many of the writers who turned away from their practice have found a way to 'write the next sentence', and have published a post-September 11 novel: so many that it has become something of a genre itself. Still, fiction is in some trouble. As the *New York Times*' Rachel Donadio points out, a significant number of journals, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Paris Review*, *GQ* and *Esquire* have radically reduced the amount of fiction they publish, and book publishers too have said very bluntly that there are much stronger markets for nonfiction than for fiction (2005: 27). This change in publishing practice and in reading habits is not, of course, simply an effect of September 11; before that event, nonfiction sales outstripped fiction, and documentary film and theatre received very positive critical and public attention. However, the continued shift towards nonfiction may be associated with an uncertainty about what reality is, and how to distinguish between the empirically actual and the imagined. For some commentators, the actual is more remarkable, less credible, than the content of works of the imagination; Alex Houen writes, for instance, that the attack on New York was 'A trauma that is so real it can only be experienced as a kind of fiction' (2004: 419). Certainly there was a filmic and performative quality about the events of that day, and many viewers have said that their first reaction, on turning on the television, was that they had arrived in the middle of a movie. Aeroplanes do not become bombs, except in Hollywood thrillers; major buildings at the heart of Western cities do not collapse in rubble, smoke and ash. Moreover, although the attack on New York was an historical event, it was presented as a sort of television drama – and not very good drama at that. Martin Amis wrote, in an essay first published just a week after the attacks on New York, that 'such a *mise en scène* would have embarrassed a studio executive's storyboard or a thriller-writer's notebook' (2008: 4). Well, life has never been as convincing as fiction. But in the mediated world we now inhabit, when communication technology provides a permanent and constantly moving screen between the self and the world, it can be difficult to know what is real, and what is just another story.

Arguably, though, uncertainty about the status of fiction versus nonfiction is a problem only for those who live in the privileged West; for others, September 11 and its aftermath would perhaps be framed not as drama, but as just another day in a long series of traumatic days:

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

The attacks on New York and the Pentagon resulted in the loss of what was initially reported as 6,500 lives (later reduced to around 3,000). By contrast, tens of thousands of people died in Russia's two invasions of Chechnya; some 19,000 Eritrean soldiers were reported as killed in the two-year war with Ethiopia; CNN reported that war-related deaths in east Congo were estimated to have reached 2 million by June 2001; and many hundreds of thousands have lost their lives in conflicts in Cambodia, the Balkans, East Timor, Iraq/Iran, Somalia and Ethiopia/Eritrea. But the reportage of these events came nowhere near the treatment of 11 September, possibly the most widely publicized event since World War II. (Schirato and Webb, 2003: 4)

This is not to deny the suffering of those caught up in the events of that day, and of what followed; but it is to point out the extent to which the "real" event of September 11 came to most of us first as mediated "drama", and only subsequently as actuality. If people in New York and Sydney were able to read the first footage of the planes striking the Towers as a movie, it is probably fair to say that this is because extreme violence comes into our social lives almost exclusively as fiction. Our traumas are more likely to be personal and local than of the scale suffered by people in Eritrea, Chechnya or Iraq; our novelists are accustomed to writing about personal and local trauma, but have had less experience, overall, in producing effective fiction about massive tragedy, widespread destruction and community trauma.

The problem of fiction, and the difficulty novelists faced in finding the heart and the point of view from which to 'write the next sentence', seems to have found a particularly interesting resolution in much of the theatre that has been produced since September 11. Drawing on a substantial history of documentary works within the world of theatre, a great many productions have addressed the events of that day and all that followed, some of them being presented only weeks or months after September 11. Titles include Anne Nelson's *The Guys* (2002), which explored the effects on firemen of the loss of their comrades; Bill Leavengood's *Steve* (2002), which tested how mainstream Americans and Muslims might relate; Rehana Mirza's *Barriers* (2002), which examined the effects of that day on the lives and identities of American Muslims; and Wednesday Kennedy's *Last Night in New York* (2002), which placed the lives of individual New Yorkers under a microscope. Others took the great sweep of contemporary history as their topic, investigating global events such as the invasion of Iraq and of Afghanistan (David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (2005), or Richard Norton-Taylor's *Called to Account* (2007)); the scandal in Britain about weapons of mass destruction (Richard Norton-Taylor again, with *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry* (2003)); the torture of prisoners by US military personnel (Peter Morris' *Guardians* (2007)); the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay (Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's *Guantanamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'* (2004)); or the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia (version 1.0's *CMI: A Certain Maritime Incident* (2005)). These are just

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

a few of the flood of productions that directly tackled recent traumatic events and their aftermath.

Much of this theatre seems to be informed by a similar logic to that which informed novelists in the months after September 11: that fiction lacked relevance, and therefore reality was where creative energies should be directed. This goes against Alex Houen's notion that September 11 initiated a trauma 'so real it can only be experienced as a kind of fiction' because, at least in the first years after 2001, it was not addressed through works of the imagination, but through factual accounts in the form of media and governmental reports, witness testimonies, and fact-based writing and performance. Like the novelists who in their expressed incapacity to 'know what the next sentence should be' turned to the essay form, many playwrights turned to the archives, observation and interviews to extract existing sentences, plot and dialogue, becoming compilers rather than constructors of characters and scenes: so much so that Aleks Sierz complained, 'the trend towards verbatim theatre . . . seems to put the imagination on the back burner' (2005: 59).

This trend was not, of course, a direct effect of the terrorist attacks and the rise of what was called the 'war on terror'. Realist or nonfiction theatre has been rising in importance since at least the 1960s, a development that can be attributed in part to the narrowing perspective presented in news broadcasts, and the invisibility, in mainstream media, of alternative voices and viewpoints about local, historical and social events (for a rich discussion on this, see Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007). Such productions have escalated in the past decade. Carol Martin offers an explanation for this: 'Contemporary documentary theatre represents a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history – the complex ways in which men and women think about the events that shape the landscapes of their lives' (2006: 9). Perhaps. Perhaps too it is in response to the continuing contraction of perspectives in the mainstream media, perhaps it is the result of writers and directors finding creative energy in the genre, perhaps it is simply a response to fashion. Whatever the cause might be, the result is the increasing emergence on stages across London, New York and Sydney of what is variously called witness theatre, documentary theatre, archival theatre, verbatim theatre, reality theatre, actuality theatre, theatre as journalism, theatre of fact, or what Richard Schechner calls 'believed-in theatre' (1997). The form has many names, but the underlying principles are the same – to tell complex stories about actual, usually traumatic, events; to interrogate official accounts of those events; and to offer a revision of the "what is known", the taken-for-grantedness of contemporary or recent events through the reorganisation of factual and experiential material in a theatrical manner.

Documentary theatre is the term I will use in this paper; not because I am not equally interested in nuances of meaning and representation offered by the other terms and the subgenres they represent, but because it can act as an umbrella term for a broad genre. Indeed, in the US, "documentary" tends to be the term

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

applied generally to nonfiction productions (see Dawson, 1999; Martin, 2006; Bottoms, 2006), though in the UK (and in Australia) there is a more strictly applied separation between “documentary”, or productions drawn from the archives, and “verbatim” theatre, or works that rely on interviews and observations. The forms share a similar concern – to tell a story that is not being told elsewhere, or from that perspective, in public. Verbatim theatre is sometimes said to have the advantage of being able to tell stories that have not made it to the archive, but as Stephen Bottoms points out, this ‘tends to further obscure the world-shaping role of the writer in editing and juxtaposing the gathered materials’ (2006: 59). Moreover, it is not the only nonfiction form that steps outside the archives: documentary theatre too draws on directorial perspectives, interviews and conjecture. As Martin points out, ‘it is precisely what is not in the archive, what is added by making the archive into repertory, that infuses documentary theatre with its particular theatrical viability’ (2006: 11). So documentary and verbatim theatre are distinct forms, but bear what Wittgenstein terms a family resemblance, and consequently there is considerable slippage between them; the same sort of slippage, in fact, that can be identified between fact and fiction, or real and imagined. The borderline between such categories has long been understood to be thoroughly blurred, because as soon as humans are involved in narrative, they are in a mediated and mediatised space, in the domain of representation rather than “reality”.

Both documentary and verbatim work according to the logic of substitutionary representation: a stand-in fills the space created by the absence of the original – the speaking subject, the words preserved in the archive. Substitution is one of the more widely understood meanings of representation – a model stands in for the Ideal, a word stands in for an object, an individual stands in for a population. It is not the thing itself, but its delegate; and thus it is never the “truth” or actuality that is present at the moment of representation, but something that is a little off-key. Nonetheless, such substitution does allow subjects to communicate with one another, to reflect on ideas and events, and to revisit – for the purpose of reflection but not for witness – something that demands attention. It brings into our present, and into our presence, an idea; and ideas can be mobilised for social effects. A verbatim or documentary theatre production has the potential to pose as an authentic re-presentation of the event, though it is in fact an event of the event, a re-enactment. Reenactment is not merely a sort of pageantry, or role play of life in past centuries, and it is not merely an acting out of an event that came before. Its focus is to bring history into the present, and allow a reinvestigation of what we thought we knew; to allow participants to confront difficult situations or to reframe old traumas so that they can be viewed in a new light, faced down, rewritten. Vanessa Agnew writes of reenactment that its concern is:

one of conversion from ignorance to knowledge, individualism to sociability, resistance to compliance, and present to past. These conversion experiences take the form of testimonials: reenactors attest to profound

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

experiences that are markers on the hard road to knowledge. (2004: 330-31)

Viewed in this light, it is possible to argue that a great advantage of addressing trauma through theatre is that it makes the unique replicable and thereby less terrible; it takes the exceptional and renders it part of the quotidian; it takes the abstract and embodies it; takes the distant and brings it close to home. It can confront social trauma directly by making it, and/or its effects, visible; can wring from its privileged audiences a sense of empathy and fellow-feeling for the "others" who have been traumatised; and can make the ephemeral news story a "real" event.

Possibly too, for those who have suffered trauma, verbatim or documentary theatre can allow a distancing of the self from the event or its effects: a distancing that, for Sigmund Freud, is critical for recovery. In his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1959), Freud defines melancholia as the state of suffering a loss that cannot be identified: not because we fail to notice that something has been lost, but because we do not acknowledge it to ourselves. Mourning, by contrast, is undertaken in response to an acknowledged loss, and is involved with reality principle because the bereaved person realises that 'the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object' (1959: 244). It is, in other words, the work of separation so that healing can begin. The melancholic does not begin this work: does not separate from the lost object, does not view that loss and review the self (1959: 245), and thus cannot rebuild his or her identity. On a macro scale, it could be argued, something similar occurs: if the traumatised community does not separate from the kernel of pain, it cannot begin to heal. What theatre can do is put the trauma or the traumatised on stage, and allow the audience to view this from the space between: between audience and actor, between seating and stage, between reality and representation. The actual and metaphorical space thus institutionalised can provide the opportunity to separate, and to begin the process of healing.

Because they deal with actual events, usually in the actual words spoken or written at that event, verbatim and documentary theatrical productions often appear to be doing work closely related to journalism, which similarly relies on interviews and archival research. Interestingly, not a few of the writers of such theatre are journalists rather than professional playwrights, and typically they work in a way that is very close to investigative journalism. The playwright/compiler may interview witnesses, visit the scenes of events, observe people in places of interest, trawl the archives for information, and organise facts into story. But what they do with this material is very different from journalism. Director Nicholas Hytner, speaking about his production *Stuff Happens*, explains that:

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

What it aims to do is, in a sober fashion, set out the story of the two or three years leading up to the declaration of war and to ask 1,200 people every night to think about it and feel it in a more focused fashion, collectively and more deeply than they are able to do simply by reading the accounts day by day in the newspapers. We're not journalists, we're theatre people. Our job is to engage the audience in passionate and visceral response, which journalism, even at its best, doesn't aspire to. (2008)

Of course it is not possible to 'set out the story' of those years leading up to the declaration of war without also framing that story, and casting it in a particular light. Journalists, along with the writers and directors of verbatim or documentary theatre, mediate and interpret events for their publics. But Hytner's central point is the distinction between passionate engagement and information, a distinction that formally exists also between the fields of theatre and journalism. Readers may – often do – become passionate about the news, but the first obligation of journalism is to inform. Theatre, unless it is willing to be didactic or tendentious, has the obligation to elicit that 'visceral response', and when it is well done, documentary theatre does precisely this, while also bringing in evidentiary material which audience members are implicitly encouraged to consider. This lends it credibility and an authority that fictional works often lack.

Jacques Derrida writes, in this respect, of the authority of the archive, and hence of work that is associated with the archive. He traces the etymology of the word back to 'the *archons*, those who commanded' and goes on to state: 'The archons are first of all the documents' guardians' (Derrida, 1998: 2). Documentary theatre, in its act of drawing its script directly from the archives, may be said to draw, simultaneously, the status of guardian of the originary texts, and hence 'the hermeneutic right and competence . . . the power to interpret the archives' (Derrida, 1998: 2). This is not all it does, though: because it reorganises, reinterprets and reenacts the archival material in the staging of a show, it can be argued that theatre in fact subverts the authority of the archive (in a way that, say, a biography does not). In this respect, one might say, theatre takes on the authority of the archive, but redirects it: draws on the properties of the archive that are, Derrida asserts, 'at once *institutive* and *conservative*' (Derrida, 1998: 7), and produces something new, that yet maintains the truth of its origin.

Writers on theatre have, of late, been commenting on the sheer volume of productions that fit the genre of documentary and verbatim theatre, and the galvanic effect this mode is having on contemporary theatre (see, for example, Luckhurst, 2008; Williams, 2007; Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007; Martin, 2006; Hammond and Steward, 2008; Young, 2009). They note too the focus of much contemporary theatre on events that have a political aspect, that are associated with trauma, suffering or malign activity. In this it draws on a tradition that has been firmly established and explicated at least since the early years of the twentieth century. Following the established tradition, much documentary or verbatim theatre takes on political issues and events, and challenges official,

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

governmental accounts. Because of this political attitude, it is sometimes denied the identity of “real” theatre, or theatre that has an effect. John McCallum, for instance, writing about the SIEV X disaster, notes that verbatim theatre is often seen as simply ‘preaching to the converted’ (2006: 136), and I have been told that documentary theatre is ‘mere agitprop’ (though when I questioned the person who made this judgment about Brittain and Slovo’s *Guantanamo*, it transpired that my interlocutor had not in fact seen the production).

Documentary theatre is often political, certainly, but it is not, or not necessarily, agitprop. Rather, as Jonathan Kalb points out, it is about recovering history, and encouraging critical thinking about historical moments – not in an earnest or didactic manner, but ‘as a species of fun’ (Kalb, 2001: 13). ‘Fun’ may seem the wrong term to describe either critical thinking, or the content of much documentary theatre. Consider, for instance, *Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom.’* The title alone (for this Australian) smacked of irony – the American spelling of ‘honor’, and the American obsession with ‘freedom’, each term taking on a horrible irony in the face of that egregious instance of abuse. The content deals with the trauma of capture, in many cases torture, and incarceration with no certainty of a fair or timely trial in an appallingly uncomfortable situation very far from home. The production could easily have relied on shock, leaving audiences distressed and devastated. But the production I saw (at London’s New Ambassador theatre, 2004) had extremely high production values, and was entirely engaging: funny, moving, vibrant and theatrical.

The compilers of this work were ideally suited to the task: Victoria Brittain is a researcher at the London School of Economics, and a journalist with a long record of reporting on human rights abuses; Gillian Slovo is an established writer who has published on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and is also the daughter of South African activists Joe Slovo and Ruth First. Both, then, have close and personal experience of trauma, and of witnessing to trauma. Their script was performed on a small stage, with a sparse set flanked by wire cages like the cells in which Guantanamo detainees are held, and with little else but a couple of tables and chairs, and a basin in which detainees washed themselves before prayer. On stage were actors embodying officials like Donald Rumsfeld and Jack Straw, lawyers and advocates, the relatives of detainees, and the detainees themselves. The actors played several parts, moving seamlessly between identities, and always speaking directly to the audience rather than to each other. Behind the speaker, other actors in orange jumpsuits dozed on their mattresses, exercised obsessively, read, or prayed. The pace, the organisation of the archival material, and the enacting, through voice and physical gesture, of trauma, loss, shock and outraged, combined to form a supple account of the events and attitudes that framed that whole period. And yes, it was very “political.” The play is focused on a political situation, was compiled not only from personal stories and letters, and interviews with the (now released) Tipton Three and family members of other detainees, but also from media reports, legal

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

opinions about the Guantanamo naval base *cum* prison in Cuba, and official records. It tackles political events, and takes up a position on those events. It unashamedly criticises the US decision to break rules of human rights engagement and to deny the detainees the protections guaranteed under the Geneva Convention. But it is not “only” political in the sense of tackling public events. Rather, it gives voice to those who do not have a voice; and it reprises the words of those who have perhaps too much voice. By putting words back into the mouths of the speakers – whether Rumsfeld, a young detainee or the grieving brother of someone lost in the Twin Towers – the play restores the human to history, and calls on audiences to remember, and to reconsider what they thought they knew of those events.

*Guantanamo*, like much documentary theatre, also draws to the audience’s attention the extent to which what we do in “real life” is scripted; and the extent to which the script, and how it is performed, has material effects on people’s lives. Judith Butler’s work on gender indicates how constructed norms come to have the effect of reality, and necessity. She writes that gender is not factic, but an effect of:

the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (1990: 33)

Like gender, repeated stylisations – in fact, performances – are part of the script of being alive in a particular place, time, culture and context. We can negotiate that script to some extent; we can try out different interpretations of it; but each person’s culture will allow only a limited range of performances. How individuals and groups deal with traumatic events, with political repression or with acts of violence and war, is determined by a variety of factors, including the extent to which they have internalised the social norms, and the role they play in their society. Documentary theatre picks up on this principle of the performativity of social reality by restaging events, reenacting them, and thus demonstrating that there could be alternative productions of the same actuality. It also draws attention to the part language and discourse play in the formation of social realities, and hence in the life chances and life experiences of people associated with that reality. For example: the US government’s decision to call their war in Afghanistan ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ makes it almost inevitable that the people the American military personnel encountered in combat would be seen as the enemies of freedom, and thus “properly” subject to force. The motto of the prison camp operation, *Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, likewise makes the camp itself, and whatever happens there, appear to be on the side of the angels. It is honorable; it is a defence of freedom; and we know this because of how it is named. As a corollary, those detained in the camp must be the enemies of honour and freedom. This “script”, crafted by politicians and military personnel, allows people who almost certainly are, for the most part, democratic and humane individuals to reduce other individuals to what Giorgio Agamben terms ‘a

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

state of exception' (1998: 29), where those excluded from the political community are located – without rights, and without legal identity. They do not have a part in the script of that social order; and for years now, several hundred men and boys have been cast in the role of outsider, staged in that state of exception, and denied any real part in society.

Documentary theatre has a significant part to play in examining and critiquing this script. Not only does this mode of theatre bring moments of trauma back into the public domain; not only does it critically engage with how a government, a society or a community dealt with that trauma; but also, and of equal importance, it is capable of restaging that 'state of exception' and providing an identity and a voice – a social role – to those rendered outsiders. It is capable of taking official statements, such as 'honor' or 'freedom', and interrogating their meaning and their use. It is capable of inviting audiences to call authorities to account. By putting powerful individuals and representatives of powerful institutions on stage, in the body of an actor speaking the words they have uttered or written, the political process is made transparent and available for critique. By putting on stage those who are in a state of exception, and making their words audible in the mouths of the actors embodying them, audience members are made aware of the fact that they are not really outsiders, but members of a community, people who like us come with a history, a personal script, with their own perspective on events, and their own argument about the traumas that have led to this point.

In a production like *Guantanamo*, where the actors speak directly to the audience, there is a constant reminder that language and discourse have brought events into history, and language and discourse can re-examine those events and, perhaps, reframe them so that the outcomes are different. When *Guantanamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'* was first staged in 2004, several of the British detainees had already been released into UK government custody, and negotiations were underway to bring the other British citizens out of that 'state of exception'. It took more time for the Australian citizens – first Mamdouh Habib and later David Hicks – to be restored to political life within the Australian community. It would be difficult to argue that the play had any effect on the British or Australian governments' interest in protecting their citizens, or on the US government's interest in maintaining the script of honour and freedom, or the performance of exclusion and debasement. So perhaps the naysayers are right, and it only preached to the converted, only allowed middle class audiences a way of confirming their own view of the world without actualising any political changes. Certainly a number of commentators see little political value in verbatim or documentary theatre. Jonathan Kalb writes, 'My general experience over the past two decades has been that group documentary plays are almost always disposable, their full power dependent on the ephemeral newsworthiness of their topics' (2001: 22). Maybe so; but after all, news media is itself ephemeral, but still has profound effects in shaping collective identity and a collective memory. Perhaps this theatre does more than the critics suspect; and at the least, it has put on the public record an alternative perspective on public events, especially

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

those involving trauma, war and infringements of human rights, and allows a different argument, and a different “truth”, to be recorded.

*Guantanamo* is very much a British play, though it also ran successfully in the US. It did not, however, tell an Australian story, though Australians were caught up in the nightmare of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. Something that is very much an Australian story is the treatment of asylum seekers by our government. A number of Australians and Australian theatre groups have taken up the challenge to produce theatre that seeks to interrogate the “truth” of the situation of refugees and detainees either held in Australia or incarcerated under the so-called ‘Pacific Solution’, and to counter the official secrecy that seemed to be the government’s policy.

Perhaps the most egregious example of the Howard government’s policy on refugees resulted in the disaster that in 2001 became known as SIEV X (the acronym standing for Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel, unknown). SIEV X was a fragile Indonesian fishing boat containing around 400 people seeking to enter Australia as refugees (from the perspective of many people) or as “queue-jumpers” or “illegal aliens” (from the perspective of the government). The vessel foundered and sank, with the loss of 353 lives (mostly women and children). In 2002 an Australian Senate Select Committee – that has become known, in an Orwellian newspeak, as ‘A Certain Maritime Incident’ – investigated several maritime incidents involving asylum seekers entering, or attempting to enter, Australian waters, including the SIEV X tragedy. The Senate committee stated:

While there were reasonable grounds to explain the Australian response to SIEV X, the Committee finds it extraordinary that a major human disaster could occur in the vicinity of a theatre of intensive Australian operations, and remain undetected until three days after the event, without any concern being raised within intelligence and decision making [sic] circles.  
(Parliament of Australia, 2002)

That is to say, it was a preventable disaster, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it was an inevitable effect of the government’s discursive construction of desperate asylum seekers as being outside the social order: as being those who belong in a ‘state of exception’, those who possess only what Agamben (1998) terms *zoë*, and what Hannah Arendt terms ‘the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human’ (1951: 297). In each case, the notion is that the individual has biological but not political life, and hence has no rights and is not recognised by the system. Arguably the fact that the asylum seekers were in that state of exception, from the perspective of the authorities, meant that they could remain unseen, unprotected, and left to die.

Sydney-based theatre company version 1.0 took this event, and the committee hearing, and crafted out of the Hansard transcript of the inquiry a performance that puts on stage the senators and witnesses involved in the SIEV X inquiry, and

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

reinvestigates their testimony. This production, *CMI: A Certain Maritime Incident*, does not perfectly fit the mould of either documentary or verbatim theatre. John McCallum calls it a 'mock-verbatim piece' (2006: 138) because this carnivalesque production constantly signals that it is theatre, and not reenactment; however, it might be more accurate to point out that it is not really a verbatim theatre work at all. *CMI* is drawn from the documentary archive rather than from interviews. It is not about the oppressed outsiders but, as one of the collaborators and performers David Williams notes, 'was primarily about Australians, and the ideological acts performed by elected and other representatives' (2008: 202). Only rarely does an actor speak directly to the audience, something Robin Soans (director of *Talking to Terrorists*) insists is at the heart of verbatim theatre (2007). Thus overall, and despite the designation used by many of its reviewers, it does not constitute what is conventionally understood as verbatim theatre.

It was, however, most certainly theatrical. The play begins with a child, performing as Defence Minister Peter Reith, reading out a statement on the veracity of the Children Overboard scandal: clearly a playful or tongue-in-cheek piece of casting, and one designed to foreground the performative nature of the production, to refuse the metaphysics of actuality, and to assault the "dignity" of the Australian authorities in charge of the debacle. The actors throughout take up self-reflexive poses, and change their identities throughout the production, denying the suspension of disbelief that would permit viewers to identify with senators and other witnesses to the inquiry. The production includes wildly over-the-top scenes, physical theatre, fictionalised elements and a sometimes surreal mode of performance. It is as much black comedy as it is documentary theatre. The spinning of the senators on their chairs, like bored schoolchildren, the act of leaping onto furniture, shouting over the top of each other, offering ludicrous propositions and finally collapsing into a bacchanalian party that marked the end of the inquiry: all marked the production as a piece of often chaotic, often undergraduate-style theatre, rather than a sombre Senate inquiry. Yet in doing so, it performed a serious function – to remind viewers that something outrageous had been perpetrated, and that it was not being taken seriously by those in authority, those called to provide witness to the Senate inquiry.

Towards the end, following the party scene, the production style shifts into a more solemn, indeed a grim mood as the actor taking the role of Tony Kevin recounts evidence of the sinking of SIEV X. Kevin is a retired diplomat who appeared before the Senate inquiry to give testimony about the events that conspired to result in this tragedy, and the human effects. Among the evidence he provides – a chronology of events, substantiation of his account, and a naming of the main actors – is a harrowing narrative of a survivor's experience, and her witness to the death of her children and her fellow travellers. A crawl along the back of the stage silently scrolls the stories of the dead; a recorded voice recounts the human horror of that ship's sinking; and one actor lies still and naked on a table while other actors, like undertakers, wash his body in

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

preparation for burial. This mood shift is one that has been warmly received by a number of critics, but for me it struck a false note. The logic of the clowning approach to the Senate inquiry suggests, as John McCallum also notes (2006: 138), that Parliament and its various arms are only performance, and not truly parts of a sovereign body. I was willing to suspend disbelief and enjoy the riproaring production, and its heavily comedic critique of government, but was annoyed and unconvinced by what seemed to me a last-minute acknowledgement of the genuine suffering of the SIEV X passengers, the lost and the surviving. It is perfectly possible to argue that this is also how they were treated by the Australian media and public; but in a documentary production that brought onto the stage a savagely funny and sometimes grotesque representation of government, this felt like a reduction to the mean. Still, one false note does not render a production null, and the performance as a whole did indeed insist that something had gone wrong with our government, with its policies and procedures, and with its recognition of the human. As Alanna Maclean wrote, in her review of the Canberra production:

This piece of what is now referred to as verbatim theatre starts with the tangle of words and evasions and ends up with the only thing that may count – the body on the slab, the common destination. (2004: 9)

If verbatim (or, to be precise in this case, documentary) theatre achieves nothing else, it can at least create a gap in the discourse about power, identity and control, and allow its audiences to recall that both ourselves, and those we perceive as outsiders, share the bond of humanity and all its sufferings. And it does more, of course. Frequently it presents a fine theatrical production. Frequently it attracts sufficient media attention to allow an issue to be reexamined. Frequently it takes up arms against the damage that is done to ordinary people. And it does this in the medium of both power and everyday life: language, discourse and performance. It is rarely possible that trauma can be excised, that the past can be forgotten, but perhaps it is possible to deflect it, or subvert its effects. Judith Butler writes, 'There is no purifying language of its traumatic residue, and no way to work through trauma except through the arduous effort it takes to direct the course of its repetition' (Butler, 1997: 38). Theatre, especially documentary or verbatim theatre that take language and all its traumatic residue, and directs the course of its repetition, is perhaps the best way, outside of a change of government policy, to tackle real world trauma: theatre takes those utterances, and repeats them; and in the process it relocates them. And if trauma is, as Anthony Kubiak insists, 'that "which never ceases to hurt"', then theatre that deals with pain, offers a history of pain, reenacts 'the perceptions of pain, and the pain of perception' (1991: 22) may be an important aspect of the process of coming to deal with that pain – it is acknowledged, it is put on record, and it is not trivialised. This is a part of the work of dealing with history; because after all, as Lacan wrote, 'history is not the past. History is the past insofar as it is historicized in the present . . . When all is said and done, it is less a matter of remembering than of rewriting history' (1991: 13, 14). He is, of

## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

course, describing how in the history of the analysis and individual traumas and complexes are synthesised and recast; but it has resonance for traumas and histories that are larger than those of the individual. History is always being made, both in its actual events, and in how those events are written and rewritten.

Neither documentary theatre nor formal history can offer actual truth, or a real account; both are representations; both are shot through with politics and interested interpretation. But a value of documentary theatre is that in its obvious theatricality, it provides an ongoing reminder that the truth is not “out there”, but is constantly being made and remade; and that it is up to individuals as well as governments to keep an eye on the stories we tell about ourselves and others. Let me finish with the words of a theatre critic, writing about Soans' *Talking to Terrorists* and about theatre more generally:

A question that is frequently asked about verbatim theatre is whether it really has any place in the theatre at all. . . . putting this material in a theatre, rather than on television or in a newspaper, makes it more focused. It allows the audience to concentrate harder and lends the evening a vital edge of being an activity undertaken as a community. (Haydon, 2005)

Whether this is logically valid, or merely appealing, the notion that documentary or verbatim theatre – ‘believed-in’ theatre – can raise the quality of community life, and allow a focus on current events, strikes me as being as good a reason as any to support the future of this form.

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## Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

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