

On the Ethics of Non-Disclosure: a Roundtable with Urban Theatre Projects and Collaborators

Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake

In 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', Claire Bishop discusses some uncomfortable tensions between the 'ethical imperative' of collaborative activity and the aesthetic imperative of "good" art (2006). Bishop argues that the 'best collaborative practices . . . reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception'. Sydney-based Urban Theatre Projects (UTP) have been creating socially and politically engaged works for the past twenty-seven years (formerly as Death Defying Theatre). Their stated aims are to 'reflect stories and images of contemporary life', to engage with 'diverse cultures and communities', and to 'explore new territory in contemporary arts practice and collaborative processes through a synthesis of artists, site, ideas and public dialogue'. (See their website for more information: www.urbantheatre.com.au).

Urban Theatre Projects offer two models for successfully negotiating the ethical and aesthetic antinomies of contemporary theatre practice. Of their most recent works, Back Home (2006) and The Last Highway (2008) involved director Alicia Talbot's unique public consultation process, in which community members are paid to contribute to the devising phase of a theatre work by offering expert opinion. Fast Cars and Tractor Engines (2005), and Stories of Love and Hate (2008) were collaborations between freelance artist Roslyn Oades and Tim Carroll of Bankstown Youth Development Service (BYDS). They involved the gathering, editing and staging of interviews given by residents of the Sydney suburbs of Bankstown (West) and Cronulla (South). Like the work of Alecky Blythe and Recorded Delivery in the UK, and the work of Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in the US, in these plays, the actors wear headphones and repeat the lines of community interviewees in a practice pioneered by London director of Non-Fiction Theatre, Mark Wing-Davey. [1] In the context of Sydney's 2005 Cronulla riots, which erupted as a national media event that pitted one Anglo-Australian "community" against another Lebanese-Australian "community", Stories of Love and Hate offered another way to mediate the stories and sentiments of these two communities to provide an alternate witnessing

process. We spoke to Alicia Talbot, Tim Carroll and Roslyn Oades in Bankstown, Sydney, on Monday, May 4 2009.

Caroline Wake: Prior to taking up your position as Artistic Director of Urban Theatre Projects, Alicia, I understand you worked at a health service. How has that influenced your practice?

Alicia Talbot: In 1996 I started working as an artist-in-residence at Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSHY), whose core constituency was young people who may have experiences of being homeless, mental health facilities, detention centres, substance use and low levels of literacy. Learning how to collaborate and dialogue with people who may be considered marginalised or difficult subjects has now informed what Urban Theatre Projects calls a “public dialogue” or a “community consultation” process, in which people are positioned as experts. We invite people into rehearsal on a paid basis to feed back their opinion about what they see in front of them. We don’t ask for their autobiographical narratives.

CW: Yes, Stephen Dunne noticed this in his review of *The Cement Garage* (2001) , where he wrote that ‘In a welcome change, the young people’s stories were not appropriated wholesale by performers; instead the gathered material was used as the basis for a fictional work deeply grounded in reality’ (Dunne, 2001: 18). Seven years later this still seems to be one of your guiding principles. I wonder if you could talk more about what we might call this ethics of non-disclosure?

AT: When working with people in crisis we often relate to people in terms of their problems. Rather than engaging people as a pathology, the process of public dialogue and consultation engages with people as experts. There are a number of international theatre companies who use the term “expert” – Rimini Protokoll, Quarantine, or Mammalian Diving Reflex. In my practice, the consultants or experts are asked to respond to the thematic concerns of the work. So, when I was working on this process with young people who were experiencing homelessness in a work called *The Cement Garage*, the work was about the concept of belonging. Rather than speak about their personal trauma, I asked for their opinions about the world; I

asked the consultants to feed back on what they saw. That feedback would include dramaturgical notes, script suggestions and editing.

CW: This ethics of non-disclosure might also be called an ethics of repetition. For instance, one of the things that has struck me about refugee theatre is that refugees are constantly required to retestify and occasionally this can be retraumatizing, whereas your work seems to try to avoid this cycle. Is this how you see it?

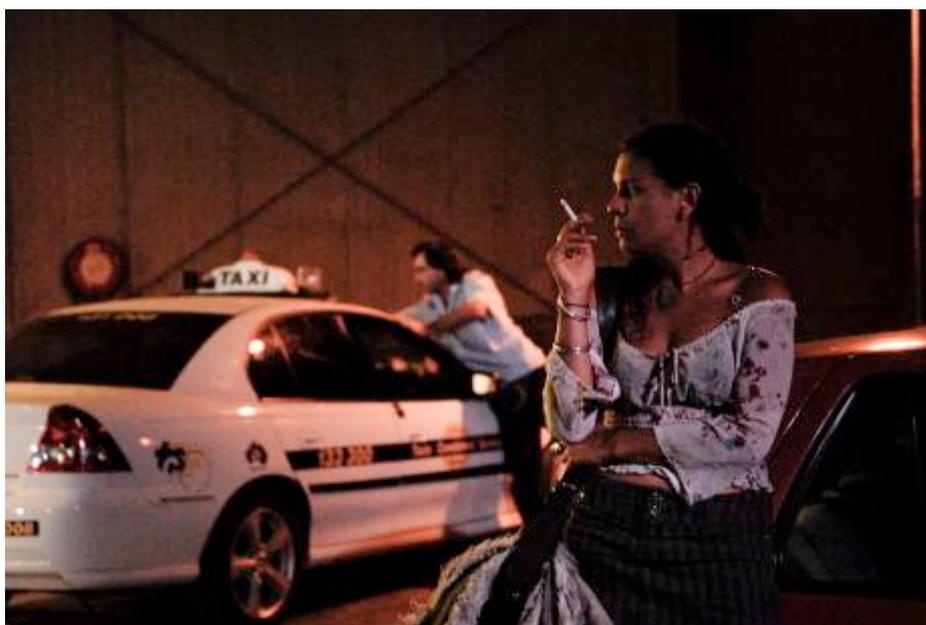


Figure 1. *The Last Highway*. Photograph by Heidrun Löhr.

AT: We need to destabilise what we expect from people in trauma. When someone is in crisis, they tell their story to the social worker, then to the mental health worker, and then to someone else and so on, until they have retold their story many times. In essence, they are reliving trauma and crisis, potentially without a sense of containment. When people are consulted instead of interrogated, they are more likely to cooperate and, ideally, collaborate. For instance, when I was working on *The Last Highway*, everyone said to me 'You'll never get street based sex workers in Western Sydney to come to anything once, let alone twice.' And yet, that became the highest attendance of any consultation group. Even more remarkably, one consultant who had worked on the highway for a number of years reached a point of feeling that she no longer had to work on the highway (but continued working in a safer environment) and another worker developed an exit plan for herself tied in with

starting a TAFE course. Both of these women directly attributed their participation in the consultation process to their decision making process. The process proved that they had something to offer, that they could deal with it, and that they were of value.

CW: How do Alicia's ethics of non-disclosure sit alongside your ethics of disclosure, Tim and Roslyn, when you're working with a form that depends on disclosure? How do you enable that disclosure, how long does it take, when does it come?

Roslyn Oades: Obviously, really honest disclosure is crucial for our work.

AT: Of course it is, oral history is all about disclosure. It's a way of gathering people's materials. But in your case it's about *how* you gather that material.

RO: I always attempt to explain what I'm doing as honestly as possible before we start recording, I use release forms, and at the end of an interview I always ask, 'Is there anything that you don't want included?' I also make a point of giving participants my phone number and offering to send them a CD of the interview. A relationship of sorts is established through the interview process and there is always room for dialogue if an interviewee feels uncomfortable afterwards (or has more to say). Having said that, while making *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* there were some stories that were disclosed to me that I did not disclose to the audience because I didn't feel that I could *both* hold them in the work *and* look after their giver.

Tim Carroll: I would argue that that is *why* you developed your working process: not to talk directly to the topic, but to talk about it tangentially. In *Stories of Love and Hate*, you didn't begin by saying, 'I want you to tell me about your experience of Cronulla.'

RO: No. *Stories of Love and Hate* was ultimately a work about a communal trauma rather than the individual. Those stories were shared by a lot of people, they were not any one person's full story. The work is constructed from a series of fragmented personal conversations woven together to form a shared story. In the making of the work, I was driven by a very specific set of questions: 'How did this event happen? How did this amount of hate explode in the community? Where did this hate come

from?’ Yet, my creative response was to talk to people about their great loves and through exploring these passions, the opposite, the shadow, appeared. As a theatrical structure, this journey allowed the audience access to beauty and empathy in both communities before drawing them into the ugly, complex territorial issues at the heart of ‘the riots’.

Bryoni Trezise: There seems to be a second aspect to both of your processes, which involves the shift from consultation, to the performing of stage ‘believability’ – a term you have used in the past Alicia – which you’ve said ‘brokers a relationship between opinions and observations of real, lived experience and artistic enquiry’ (Talbot, 2008). At the same time, other commentators have noted a stage practice that ‘blur[s] ‘the lines between what is real and not-real’ (McEwan, 2007: 135). Can you talk about how you manage these tensions between consultants and artists, artists and public, and real and not-real?



Figure 2. *Back Home*. Photograph by Heidrun Löhr.

AT: UTP creates work as a synthesis of artist, site, ideas and public dialogue, but for each new work and team of artist that is an unstable relationship. In my particular process it begins with the contract between the audience and the work, and how the public consultation process that we do has informed this relationship. As an example, even though the work is staged at a site-specific venue, the audience know

that they're coming to a piece of theatre. They have bought a ticket and they are often with other audience members. But at some point as they watch the work, there is the possibility of story taking over its theatrical constructs and evoking a sense of the real. This relates to Tim Etchells' comments on the notion of witnessing – the idea that the audience are not only spectators, but somehow ethically implicated in the events taking place (1999). In *Back Home* a lot of people felt as if they were about to become part of the violence, or that they should get up and intervene in the men's fight, or that they should even hold the men.

In *The Last Highway*, the length of the rape scene produced a profound effect on many audience members. I deliberately crafted a split stage: there were three points of focus. I was interested in where the audience would chose to look, because that questions how we deal with particular traumas. We know that they exist, but we still choose or need to look away.

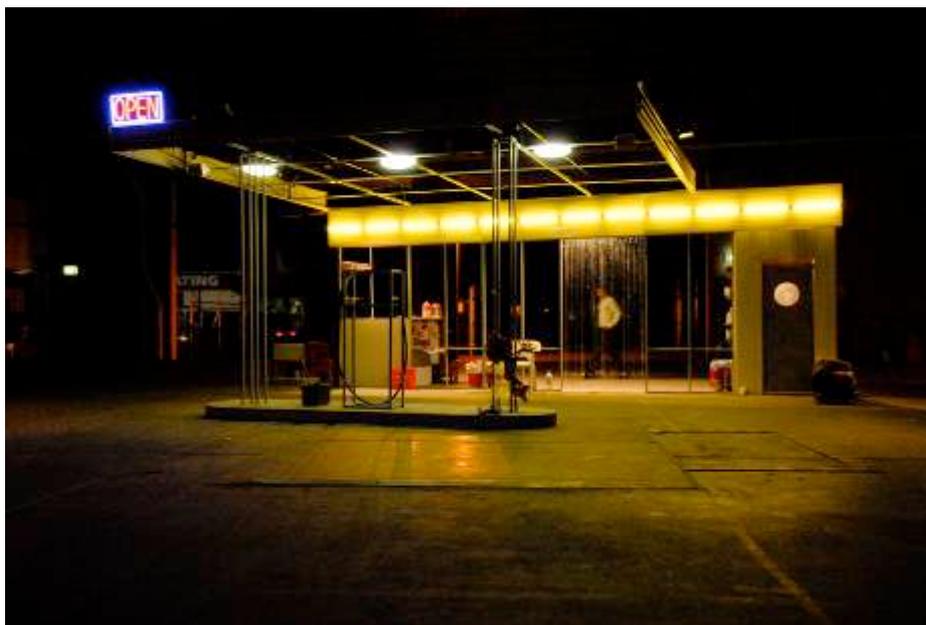


Figure 3. *The Last Highway*. Photograph by Heidrun Löhr.

BT: In terms of your recorded and replayed verbatim work Roslyn and Tim, is it more about how the “real” of the interview transcripts is received by audiences? It seems that while, on the one hand, the “truth” of the words is paramount to the success of the work, on the other hand, it is the form of the tape recorder/listening device that also somehow makes those words seem inherently unstable?

RO: Our work does sit in a context in which there is a strong interest in reality in the theatre, which is characterised firstly by a thirst for the “real”, and then secondly, by other ways of finding the “real”. Our work fits in here in two ways. The interviewees’ words are being given to the audience with fidelity – with as much fidelity as the actors can achieve, in that they are listening exactly to the recordings and are replaying to the audience the exact timing of the interviewees’ speech. This creates a documentary feel, because obviously the way people speak is quite different to how actors present written text. While this is all presented with fidelity, we then cast against type – which is essential when four cast members are representing 28 characters. While there is something very unreal about this, it is what liberates the audience to explore the believability of the whole scenario, because they’re not being asked to believe that Mohammad is a girl, they’re just being asked to believe that he is saying the words of a girl. Because they are not being asked to believe that “that guy” is an 80 year old woman, they are suddenly liberated to hear the truth of “her”. What they see is really at odds with what they hear. So, politically speaking, backgrounds become fluid and free in terms of gender or race. It is almost as if the audience begins to see *through* the people on stage and to instead see something real. They are then challenged to *hear* in a different way.



Figure 4. *Stories of Love and Hate*. Photograph by Heidrun Löhr.

CW: This takes me to my next question which is about the quality of listening that this type of work requires and inspires. For instance David Williams wrote about 'compulsive listening' in his review of *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* (Williams, 2005: 41). How do concepts of listening inform your work and working processes?

RO: It is very generous of people to give us their stories and opinions, especially when they are saying such strong things. It's a gift in the sense that they are brave enough to open up a conversation and say things that a lot of people are thinking in their community, but are too afraid to say. In terms of ideas of listening, the actors are not impersonating the interviewees, they're actually just reciting very precisely: this is an important difference. In this sense, there is something incredibly important in being able to say to the interviewees: 'What you're saying is going to be heard'. In the case of *Stories of Love and Hate*, people felt so misrepresented by the media – a lot of the boys from Bankstown felt particularly misrepresented – that the offer to tell their story in their words, and then have it re-heard, was potent in those circumstances.

BT: Yes, and I'm interested in the concentric circles of witnessing that UTP's work sets up in this context – particularly with regard to the inner circles of local community from which the work derives, and then outer circles of arts workers and thinkers, or the media, who travel out to the 'burbs for a "different" kind of experience – I noticed Cate Blanchett in the audience of *Last Highway*, for example. What specifically makes us into witnesses, as opposed to watchers, bystanders, spectators or voyeurs in your work? What are the different communities of witness that UTP's work assembles and how do these co-connect?

RO: A very important part of the work is that we feed back to the community. It's essential to the *truth* of the work that it goes back to the communities who created it, and those communities are all invited to be present on opening night as VIPs. At one of the school shows I asked how many of the audience were at the Cronulla riots, and most people put up their hand. Performatively speaking, that's a very interesting moment – where the watchers are also the people who have been interviewed for the work, or who have in different ways lived through its context.

CW: Speaking of the diversity of responses, how do the audiences of *Stories of Love and Hate* differ?

RO: The first season played in the Sutherland Shire and quite a few people were very keen to know how the show would be received in Bankstown. So, the show itself became a dialogue not only *about*, but *between* those two communities, and it was very important that it played to both audiences and in both geographical locations. What was even more interesting, and encouraging, was when audiences who saw the first season in Cronulla came to see the show again in Bankstown. They were interested in the reception of the work from the other community's point of view. While people in Cronulla thought that Bankstown had been represented badly, I was afraid that it would be perceived the other way around.

BT: These two communities had already formed some kind of a relationship to each other, though, through the media?

RO: Yes, in regards to their misrepresentation they were tied – that was their strongest connection. The two communities of Bankstown and the Shire were mutually bound, and part of that was because they both had really bad reputations in the press at the time.

AT: In terms of our work, one of the unique things about UTP presenting in Western Sydney and often non-conventional venues is that we have different kinds of audiences sitting next to each other. There are regular theatre-goers, first-time theatre-goers and also the community consultants who have made the work with us in dialogue. In *Back Home*, some of the Indigenous or Pacific Islander audience members laughed at the violence depicted in the work, and they were sitting next to audience members who had a completely different experience of what was taking place before them. In *The Last Highway*, one of the consultants on the project observed that in the opening night audience were her family, her clients and Cate Blanchett.

TC: I think that for certain people it can be a tiny bit titillating to see different community responses in action. Some of the Sydney Festival audiences were very interesting: to see old white ladies turn up to Parramatta Riverside and jump on the bus and listen to Greg Sims and Uncle Wes talk about Darug land in *Back Home*, for example, for them it was a real adventure. For other audiences it was a little bit dangerous to come here.

BT: Urban Theatre Projects has a strong lineage with the Community Cultural Development sector through its former incarnation as Death Defying Theatre in the 1980s. In the 90s, it shifted from being an ensemble-based model guided by a collective at Bondi Beach, to an artistic-director driven company positioned in the heart of Sydney's western suburbs – pointing to what Fiona Winning has called a 'division between cosmopolitan east and "underclass" West (Winning in Maxwell: 2). You've spoken in the past about your resistance to the framework of community theatre being applied to the practices of UTP, can you talk about how your work resists these models and why?

AT: The many practices of community theatre and community cultural development sit along a broad continuum, in the same way that a community is defined also greatly differs. Years ago I used to say that community was a group of individuals placed together according to funding categories or to social or political labels. From this way of conceiving it, I think community is a highly flawed term. Personally I often resist the label of community theatre as I like to position my work as an artist pursuing a practice that is inspired by public dialogue, consultation and working in residence, just as other artists may be inspired by working within conventional theatre spaces or playscripts.

CW: In part because of origins and in part because of its location in Western Sydney Urban Theatre Projects' work is often discussed in relation to multiculturalism. For instance, you have presented works in Carnivale the Multicultural Arts Festival, your work *Stories of Love and Hate* has been cited as a success stories in the NSW Community and Cultural Development program, and *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* dealt the Cronulla riots. No doubt you're all well aware of the fact that Australia's policy of multiculturalism has shifted radically over the past ten or fifteen years. I was

wondering about how you see these changes, how they have affected you and your organisations; how they have affected everything from your funding, to your thinking, to your casting, to your performing?

TC: We tend not to stress it too much and I'd like to think that when people open the cover of those magazines [points to BYDS magazines in the corner], for instance, it doesn't say 'This is about the great multicultural western suburbs'. In fact, you don't need to say it anymore, it just is. If you look through the author list you realise there's people from maybe twenty different countries there but we're not saying that these are people from those countries, it's just like people who live in Bankstown and who want to write. In *Fast Cars* we didn't say, 'Tell us about this because you're an Arab, tell us your Arabic story or your Vietnamese story.' I probably just came across as a big assimilationist just then but it's actually the exact opposite.

AT: The company talks about 'Stories about contemporary life,' which is full of cultures colliding in harmony and disharmony. But I would also say that we are five non-ethnic, non-indigenous people, talking about this and I guess that that canon is still very challenging. Ultimately it is about how as a nation we move towards, not representation for the sake of representation, but towards an opening of power and how it is brokered, so that all sorts of cultural fabrics and territories have control over how they are represented. If you look at this through us, we are still talking about circumstances of privilege, opportunity. The politics of representation and diversity and ethnicity sit within a much broader set of international frameworks and discussions. In the Australian context, people are desperate for stories that represent our urban existence. But there is an absence of new works by writers that actually grapple with contemporary stories that reflect the place that Australia is, as a cosmopolitan society on contested territory.

BT: The strength of works such as *Back Home* seems to be the connections they make between the multiple layers of traumatic wounding that travel largely unrecognised in mainstream narratives of Australia – the connections between colonialist histories of silencing and the contemporary invisibility of Arab identities, for example. In *Back Home*, the four male characters compete over who is the most disenfranchised by their ethnic positioning – the Palestinian NOMISE yells to his

Indigenous mate: 'Your people have been getting fucked with for the last 300 years, my people have been getting fucked with since the beginning of time'. This is at the same time as they experience all kinds of equivalencies in terms of their shared social dispossession and displacement. In *Stories of Love and Hate*, Arab-Australian identities are made differently visible through the staging of conflicting narratives within their own community: the Lebanese father is nostalgic for Beirut, and the younger kids feel that they belong to Punchbowl, but not to Australia. In all of this, there seems to be a crisis in masculinity that goes hand in hand with the silencing of these alternate narratives of identity, and I wonder if you can discuss the connection between the two?



Figure 5. *Back Home*. Photograph by Heidrun Löhr.

AT: The post-industrial positioning of men is pretty interesting. Currently I'm working on an international commission in Newcastle in an area that is considered the one of the last bastions of the white working class and people say 'Where are the men?' If I come back to trauma and healing, in that context I would talk about the post-industrial positioning of the traditional working class, and in some respects how it may relate to what is occurring with indigenous and first nation people all over the world. In both instances, we have to think about how shifts in employment relate to shifts in respect, authorship, and leadership. *Back Home* asked 'What is it to be a

leader?’ and ‘What is the notion of respect?’ *The Fence*, which is a new work I am currently making, asks the question ‘What is wisdom?’

TC: Having said that, a lot of the men in *Back Home* are really kind of physical, tough, stereotypically “masculine” guys. Likewise, a lot of the men who would have presented at the riots would have been physically fit guys.

RO: *Stories of Love and Hate* is a story of male tribes in many ways, and the word ‘respect’ came up continuously in my interviews with young men – especially disempowered voices finding and gaining respect. There’s a nostalgia around masculinity because of its displacement, for example, the young Anglo-Australian men referenced Gallipoli, while the young Arabic-Australian men referred to guns and the Lebanese war. But there’s a nostalgia for a different kind of masculinity too, for when masculinity was a clear cut thing, when you knew you could just go and fight for what you wanted and you didn’t have to dialogue about it. That’s also one of the fun things about having to have women play men is that you get to see masculinity performed, and to take that performance away from a man, and to give it to a woman, is fascinating.

CW: One of the last lines in *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* is ‘And we had hope again.’ Whatever else your work does, it seems to maintain a sense of hope, not in a sentimental way but in a critical way, what *Performance Paradigm* editors have previously called ‘critical optimism.’ Re-reading old interviews and reviews, I came across Alicia telling an interviewer ‘I think that our spirit and our sense of compassion and our generosity towards one another is radical action. This myth that we’re only interested in individualistic pursuits: I dunno about that, I dunno if that’s actually what people feel’ (Dunne 2006). It struck me as a moment of critical optimism. How does this critical optimism sustain you and how do you sustain it?

AT: I always come back to Ghassan Hage and the way he frames how society manufactures hope (2003). Like him, I think hope is very different in terms of what class and circumstance defines you. Sometimes people say to me ‘There’s no hope in your work’, but the people who I make it in dialogue with have a very different

understanding of hope and they would say that there is *profound* hope. If you have come through extraordinary trauma there's a hopefulness simply in that.

RO: For our part, we will always position the storyteller as a figure of inspiration or authority. That is something we've consistently been interested in – in offering the extraordinary in your neighbour, the extraordinary people and the extraordinary stories next door. I think that sense of dignity is really important. At one point, the ending of *Stories of Love and Hate* was 'the riots' – we'd had all these strong stories and characters drawn together by 'the riots', so our first instinct was to end with the big, climactic event. But then it became obvious that that wasn't the right shape for the work and it was really important that the story went beyond that point; that it was also about how to reclaim your dignity after you've gone through that sort of trauma. Whereas the media leaves everyone at the moment of crisis, theatre gives us chance to go beyond that.

Endnotes

[1] In fact both Oades and Blythe participated in Wing-Davey's 'Theatre Without Paper' workshops at the London's Actor's Centre in 2001 and Oades was a member of Non-Fiction Theatre from 2001 to 2002, before coming back to Australia, where she has continued to develop the form alongside Blythe's explorations in the UK.

List of Illustrations

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Figure 1 *The Last Highway*

Figure 2 *Back Home*

Figure 3 *The Last Highway*

Figure 4 *Stories of Love and Hate*

Figure 5 *Back Home*

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