Saying it Right: Creating Ethical Verbatim Theatre

By Janet Gibson

*Father Roger Schmidt:* “And I will speak with you, I trust that if you write a play of this, that you say it right. You need to do your best to say it correct.”


Father Roger Schmidt’s challenge to Moisés Kaufman and his company, the Tectonic Theater Project (TTP), who are in Laramie, Wyoming, to write a verbatim play about the effects of the 1998 torture and murder of a young gay university student, Matthew Shepard, on its townspeople, forms the heart of this paper. Many contemporary verbatim theatre-makers first collect, and then tell, the stories of others: those people not intimate, familial or close to the deviser-performers (Heddon, 2008), and especially those oppressed and marginalised by virtue of their race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, (dis)abilities and so on, from hegemonic mainstream discourses. In essence, all theatre engages and concerns others, and on many levels (writing, devising, producing, performing, viewing), as does even so-called ‘autobiographical’ theatre, as the self is relational, not just a social and historical construct (Heddon, 2008: 124). Lives are never isolated from other lives. Any work that engages with others will therefore have an ethical face.

Extensive scholarly work on ethics has not been undertaken in the field of theatre/performance studies in general; yet increasing interest has surfaced over the last ten to twenty years, much of it in tandem with the rise of verbatim theatre, which is not surprising given the numerous tendentious ethical issues it invokes. More often than not, work has focused specifically on the telling of refugee stories and/or on trauma (e.g. Schaefer, 2001; Jeffers, 2006; Hazou, 2009). Another area of burgeoning interest is ethics and spectatorship. The Levinasian notion of the face-to-face encounter has been reinterpreted and renewed to accommodate the ‘liveness’ of the theatre experience (e.g. Phelan, 2004; Grehan, 2009; Ridout, 2009). For certain other scholars in the field, ethics tends to be regarded with suspicion. It is seen as too abstract and conceptual: a moral philosophy with little room for lived performance spaces with all their issues and quandaries (Heddon, 2008: 125). Moreover, the socially constructed nature of ethical systems is well understood: “…the foolproof-universal and unshakably founded ethical code will never be found…a non-aporetic, non-ambivalent morality, an ethics that is universal and ‘objectively founded’ is a practical impossibility” (Bauman, 1993:10). Furthermore, and specific to verbatim theatre, the recent ‘intrusion’ of ethical concerns is perceived by some to be based on a naive insistence on the truthful representation of
others, concerns which have as their base a notion of fidelity to some ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ self/source and which are based on hegemonic utilitarian and/or libertarian concepts of the self (e.g. Heddon, 2008; Claycomb, 2003). Others contend that at its hub, verbatim theatre is an artistic invention. Adherence to respecting ‘true’ stories for ethical reasons can muddy this understanding (e.g. Pollock, 2005).

My intention in this paper is not to delve into the vast scholarship on ethics, nor is there scope to do so. This paper takes on Alan Read’s idea that “the transactions of theatre are deeply bound to negotiations between the self and the other which are themselves the definition of an ethics” (1993: 61; italics are mine). My argument, in general, is that the creation of verbatim theatre has complex ethical dimensions, often overlooked by both practitioners and scholars, but with which they still need to be engaged. At the very least, certain questions need to be asked about these responsibilities, and from these questions, discussions need to take place, both amongst theatre practitioners and scholars, even if answers are not to be easily found. My contribution to Schmidt’s challenge is to deepen these kinds of underdone discussions in the theatre/performance studies arena in order to tease out, and give prominence to, the complex and troubled linkages between ethics and verbatim theatre.

Schmidt’s challenge to TTP does have some worth. There are ethical responsibilities when verbatim theatre is created, especially to those from whom stories are mined. The particular thrust of my argument, following Alan Read’s, is that verbatim practitioners have, at the very least, responsibilities to negotiate with the subjects who provide the source material for their productions. The other area of my concern in this paper, in line with prior research in this area (in particular see Salverson, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1999 and 2001; Jeffers, 2006, 2008 and 2009; and Heddon, 2008), is to unsettle the view of the political usefulness of the verbatim arena as a democratic ‘truth’ forum in which the voices of the marginalised and oppressed can be heard, and in which the ‘truth’ can at last be told. However, I do also issue a caveat to Schmidt: in the making of theatre and performance pieces, which are essentially inventions, it is impossible to ever ‘say it right’, tied as this idea is to notions of mono-dimensional ‘truth’ claims. I also maintain that there may even be some value in the impulse to resist ethics in the theatre. Given the increasing codification of ethics and ethical standards of conduct in business, government and other institutional arenas, I am concerned that these paradigms, emboldened by the weight of law, and possibly without discrete reflection on specific theatre/performance pieces, may encroach on the creative practices of theatre-makers, compromising the autonomy necessary to their political and artistic efficacy. Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’ (articulated in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785/2002) is the philosophical lineage of these kinds of alarming, universally applied regulations, which could end with enforced controls on verbatim work, regardless of the differing cultural
contexts which always need to be taken into account in any ethical decision-making processes.

I start by clarifying what I mean when I use the term ‘verbatim theatre’, and by justifying my use of the term over other options. I then locate Schmidt’s challenge to ‘say it right’ as an ethical one because it implicates both truth-seeking and responsibility to others. A few words on the contested relationship between ethics and politics are followed by the consideration of some key critical issues and ethical dangers inherent in verbatim theatre creation: the problem of the interview, the manipulations of the writers and the nature and transparency of the collaboration between, and the power relationships of, subjects and writers, often purposely obfuscated in the work. This is done, in the main, through the lens of two particular verbatim pieces: Anna Deavere Smith’s Let Me Down Easy (2008), and Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project’s The Laramie Project (2001).

**Verbatim Theatre**

The term ‘verbatim’ theatre was principally exploited by Derek Paget during his extensive research into the work of those early contemporary practitioners of the form operating in the 1960s in regional Britain, amongst whom were John Cheeseman, Chris Honer, Rony Robinson, David Thacker and Ron Rose. The work of these practitioners was in the lineage of the British radio ballads of the 1950s, which culminated in Joan Littlewood’s Oh What A Lovely War (1963); as well, they were clearly indebted to the British documentary films of the 1930s and 1940s and the European plays of Brecht and Piscator (Paget, 1987: 318-319). This form of theatre was advanced to give a public voice to specific regional communities in the United Kingdom suffering traumatic events, like the closure of factories, which were their livelihood and lifeblood (Andersen and Wilkinson, 2007: 157). Providing an arena for the silent or marginalised, these theatre-makers were committed to ‘authenticity’, transcribing and feeding back to their source communities, through performance, with some exactitude and respect, life stories and oral history remembrances garnered from taped interviews (Paget, 1987). Out of these early productions, the fundamental architecture of verbatim theatre was established: the alignment of the old art of storytelling with newer technologies like taping, in order to make a performance script out of the words of the original storytellers (Brown, 2010). As well, from the outset, the relationship between documentary narrative and community identity and self-esteem was cemented.

The term ‘verbatim’ has its widest use, in recent years, in the United Kingdom (Heddon, 2008). It also tends to be the preferred term in Australia (see Andersen and Wilkinson, 2007; Brown, 2010). In the United States, this form of theatre is more usually called “…documentary theater” (Claycomb, 2003: 96), to capture its origins in the telling of
‘true’ stories and also possibly to acknowledge the migration, over the last twenty years or so, of these ‘true’ stories from documentary screen to stage. It may also be called “…the theater of testimony” (Salz, 1996 in Claycomb, 2003: 96) and there are also references to it as “…staged oral history” (Claycomb, 2003:96). There are differences as well as crossovers between these terms and the kinds of theatres to which they refer. Forsyth and Megson (2009:1-3) prefer to use the terms ‘documentary’ and ‘fact-based’ rather than ‘verbatim’. They argue that the form has continued to diversify away from its origins in interviews and storytelling, to include a more varied range of data than just interviews alone. To buttress their claims, they cite the archive, testimony, orature and anecdote, along with an arsenal of self-reflexive performance techniques.

However, in this paper, I follow Andersen and Wilkinson’s lead in privileging the term ‘verbatim’. (Andersen and Wilkinson are two Australian theatre studies scholars who have recently published on the resurgence of interest in verbatim theatre in Australia.) I agree with them that verbatim “…has now become a portmanteau term, incorporating a stylistically rich and varied product that owes its origins to spoken text but does not always perform these words literally as they are spoken” (2007:154). Furthermore, the two theatre pieces primarily scrutinised in this paper were created, on the whole, from interviews. According to Deidre Heddon, an English Theatre/Performance Studies academic, the term ‘verbatim’ theatre articulates “a form of theatre which places interviews with people at the heart of its process” (2008: 127). Given that the purpose of this paper is to prioritise ethical concerns, it is sufficient here to acknowledge the existence of a wide range of representations of this form of theatre from country to country and theatre group to theatre group, which may be based on either public or private input, or both. In a final summation of the unique characteristics of verbatim theatre, I emphasise its relationship to what Janelle Reinelt has termed, “simple facticity…the corroboration that something happened, that events took place” (2009: 10). This is a form of theatre that does not proceed solely from the imaginative exercise of a writer’s pen or a group’s devising processes.

**Problematic Intersections: Truth, Politics and Ethics in Verbatim Theatre**

Variously termed a theatre of public dialogue and of democracy, verbatim theatre has been seen by many, and by theatre practitioners in particular, for example, by David Hare, to be giving a “…‘voice to the voiceless’…” in society (Heddon, 2008: 128). It has a strong political pedigree with theatre practitioners usually devising work collaboratively in community or non-mainstage settings in order to tell other people’s stories (and sometimes their own as well), and with politico-social change as a large part of its brief. Most recent practitioners in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia have robust political reasons for working verbatim. For example, in Australia, in the period
between 2000 and 2005, there were no less than seven Australian verbatim productions
asylum seekers. Many of these productions were an effort to counteract the bureaucratic
silence, secrecy and ‘spin’ which the Australian government and media sources of the
time propagated about the so-called refugee ‘crisis’, in the wake of “what Robert Manne
and David Corlett called the fourth wave of ‘boat people’ ”(McCallum, 2006:136).
Amongst these productions were: Manufacturing Dissent (2000); Asylum (2001); Club
Refugee (2002); Citizen X (2002); Something to Declare (2003); Through the Wire (2004);

Along with certain other theatre/performance studies scholars working on the intersection
between politics, ethics and verbatim, including Julie Salverson in Canada (1994, 1996,
2009) and Deidre Heddon (2008) in the United Kingdom, I am keen to disturb the view
of the political usefulness of the verbatim arena as a democratic ‘truth’ forum in which
the voices of the marginalised and oppressed can be heard, and in which the ‘truth’ can at
last be told. In so doing, I am not denying the political potential of verbatim as a type of
new public sphere in which issues and information that may otherwise be forced
underground by big media interests, for example, can be resurfaced. In unsettling
verbatim ‘truth’ claims, I am principally taking up Linda Alcoff’s notion of “the
problematic of speaking for others (which) has at its center a concern with accountability
and responsibility” (1991: 15). Most verbatim practitioners appear to speak for, rather
than speak with the others who are the subjects of their projects (Hazou, 2009). Speaking
with, I contend, always involves a choice for negotiation instead of appropriation.
Unsettling these ‘truth’ claims is, secondarily, a reminder of the representational nature of
verbatim theatre, always at many layers of removal and interpretation from the original
source material.

In seeing themselves as the guardians of the ‘truth’ in the public sphere, some verbatim
practitioners overlook their bias in the creation of their work and the impossibility of
locating and exposing the ‘one’ truth in the fictive domain of the theatre. They may also
disregard the ways in which they appropriate material from others for their own gains:
speaking for rather than with their subjects. Some really do feel that they have a job to do
in telling ‘the truth’ and a responsibility to search out ‘justice’. Richard Norton-Taylor, a
playwright, and also the security affairs editor for The Guardian newspaper, pioneered a
related form of verbatim theatre known as ‘Tribunal Theatre’ at The Tricycle Theatre in
London. “Tribunal plays go further (than many verbatim plays) by using as their only
sources official transcripts of judicial proceedings” (Reinelt, 2009:13). Norton-Taylor has
mined documents from many public inquiries for his plays, including state inquiries into
arms to Iraq (Half the Picture, 1994) and the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal
(Nuremberg, 1996). He is unequivocal about the purpose of his projects: “…exposing the
truth has been the goal of each of our tribunal plays” (Norton-Taylor, 2008: 106). He has also said: “…truth may be a difficult concept, but the search for it and the denial of it have been constant themes for our tribunal plays” (Norton-Taylor, 2008: 108). A primary problem with this perception of themselves as guardians of the truth and their products as “the vessel which houses the conscience of a nation…ask(ing) the difficult questions others would rather leave unasked” (Soans, 2008: 17), may be a lack of regard to the ethics of their own processes, and the (often financial) rewards received by the companies and playwrights at the expense of their subjects. They may finish their particular verbatim project patting themselves on the back for the good done in getting the pressing issues they have written about to a public forum; yet they may also walk away with their names on the scripts, not those of the people whose stories they used, and, as a consequence, with their pockets full of royalties from the play, leaving the pockets of the subjects of the play, empty. In this way, some verbatim playwrights may create verbatim theatre as a political act, while neglecting ethical responsibilities to their subjects.

In many quarters of the academy, it has been variously argued that there is a lacuna between ethics and politics. Politics may in fact oblige one to engage in the non-ethical, so that the ethical cannot be understood as a basis for politics; ethics may in fact become a check on freedom and politics rather than its originary source (Bell, 2007: 6-7). I agree that if, in the transactions between self and others upon which Read (1993) bases his definition of an ethics of theatre, there are power imbalances that are not acknowledged and considered, that is, if they are naturalised, the transactions must be considered as having a political as well as an ethical dimension, especially if the political framework used is one interested in questioning and making transparent the naturalisation of these power relations.

However, rather than supporting the line of argument in which ethics and politics do not in any way connect to each other, I take up Jean Luc Nancy’s notion of their ‘violent relatedness’, an expression which captures well the sense of the multiple connections and complicities with which one is enmeshed with the other (Bell, 2007:6-7). Acknowledging their entanglement, and building on the indebtedness between them, I maintain that, at the very least, questions need to be asked about responsibilities to the others from whom stories are mined in verbatim theatre-making practices, because both lives and theatre-making practices are relational and transactional, and thus have an ethical dimension.

I will now further analyse my concerns about ethics in the construction of verbatim theatre referring, sparingly, to two verbatim theatre pieces, both of which I have seen in production: *The Laramie Project*, at 8pm, on March 14th 2002, at Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney, and Anna Deavere Smith’s latest theatrical offering, *Let Me Down Easy*, on December 5th 2009, at 8pm, in New York City, at the Second Stage Theater. (All
references in this paper will be to the plays, not to specific productions.) I have chosen *The Laramie Project* to analyse because it is an iconic verbatim play much commented on in the literature: the claims made on its behalf are worth re-examining in the light of the concerns of this paper. In contrast, *Let Me Down Easy* is a recent play, so far largely gone unnoticed in the literature, and therefore worth probing for the contribution this interrogation will make to the scholarship on Smith’s body of work.

*Anna Deavere Smith’s Let Me Down Easy*

Anna Deavere Smith, an African-American performer, Professor of Theatre Studies at New York University, and one of the pioneers of verbatim theatre in the United States, started working her site-based one-woman shows in 1982 (with her *On The Road* series). Her two most well known pieces are *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*, at the heart of which are communities polarised by race issues (Richards, 1993; Martin, 1993). Deavere Smith is always the only performer playing all of the characters on stage, whether male or female.

*Let Me Down Easy* (2008) is not based on a single historical event of political import, as is much of her earlier work, and it does not outwardly seem to deal with polarised communities. It uses testimony from the wide range of people interviewed on, to begin with, their attitudes to, and the limitations of, their bodies; and finally, their struggles against fatal illnesses and with the meaning of death. As some of the interviewees were the sick and dying themselves or health care professionals working with the dying in hospitals in America, the piece necessarily moves into the area of the availability, quality and price of health care, and because of this, traverses race relations and inequality of access to health care for people who are poor and/or African-American, immigrants or indigenous. One of the ‘characters’ in the play is Kiersta Kurtz-Burke (the point about real people becoming characters in a play is taken up later in the paper), a physician from a charity hospital in New Orleans, who recounts the harrowing tale of being left behind with her patients (poor, black, indigenous or immigrant) in a non-functioning public hospital in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, whilst evacuations of the residents of private hospitals (white, wealthy) take place. It is in this sense, as much of a political piece as her earlier work.

I will not argue the power of Deavere Smith’s work. By allowing a multiplicity of characters to speak through her African-American female body, Deavere Smith foregrounds the notion that gender is socially constructed and performative, as well as allowing a hopeful dialogue of difference that may lead to a more compassionate sense of common humanity (Dolan, 2005: 68). Her multi-vocal and achronological structures subvert, to a certain extent, the dominant hegemony of sequential and univocal forms of
patriarchal theatre (Lyons and Lyons, 1993:57). However, Deavere Smith’s creative process appears to be anchored in a power imbalance tilted in her direction, without enough regard for an ethics of negotiation with the subjects of her pieces. She appears to speak for, rather than with, her subjects. Dramaturgical control is a necessity in most theatre pieces. But in a verbatim piece, this control butts up against a contrasting necessity: the necessity for negotiation.

This need for ethical negotiation between verbatim theatre-makers and their subjects can be seen to be grounded in a problematic idea about the ownership of life stories. Della Pollock’s work interprets the oral history interview as both a public and a private performance, one that meshes with existing accounts and conversations, “an ignition point” which encompasses future new meanings with future new listeners (2005: 3). Drawing on Kelly Oliver’s (2001) contention that any one self is ontologically and ethically irreducible from other selves, Pollock argues that this self therefore cannot speak for others, as, in essence, there are no others. One inference from this, Pollock maintains, is that no one person can own a story, as all stories are rooted in tiers of recollection and storying (2005:5). Pollock also exploits Sam Schrager’s idea that oral histories are produced in narrative milieus and thus assume “…the dialogic imprint of many voices”(2005:5).

I agree that life stories are fundamentally authored by the dynamics of intersubjectivity (Jackson, 1997:23) not by autonomous subjects, and that linking self-narration to identity may perpetuate the ‘myth’ of the autonomous, coherent, and authentic self supposedly existing at the core of every human being. Yet, outside of the academy in particular, the myth of the singular ‘authentic’ self continues to thrive, most probably because of the tellers’ perceptions that their identities, that is, who they see themselves to be, are intimately connected to this “story-ing” (Rouverol, 2005: 23). Critical studies holds that identity is fundamentally discursive, that it is historically and socially constructed and that it exists within a matrix of power relations; yet this does not make the various experiences that adhere to any identity less real or felt (Bordo, 1995 in Heddon, 2008:55). Right or wrong, “people do found their conception of their lives on Nietzsche’s ‘fundamental false observation’” of the single self (Eakin, 1999:3). If the single self is a fictional construct (in Lacanian terms, an ‘imaginary subject’), most also recognize that it is a fiction necessary to our participation in society: an ‘enabling myth’ (Henke, 2000:xvi in Heddon, 2008: 55). Some people to whom verbatim theatre-makers come for a story, feel very strongly that their life stories are very much their own to tell, and that their identities are enmeshed with their stories. This claim to a vital correlation between identity and autobiographical recounts needs to be taken seriously, as it infuses the verbatim interview, as well as the ensuing construction and performance of verbatim theatre, with heightened ethical implications. Verbatim theatre uses the narratives of
people who may perceive that their life stories and their identities are co-extensive. Harm can be minimised if this understanding, no matter whether theoretically exact or not, is treated with some ethical deference in the verbatim process.

Trauma is another important factor underscoring the necessity for negotiation in the use of source material in verbatim theatre projects. Some interviewees are no doubt keen to talk about their experiences of suffering and oppression. Talking, especially about what are perceived to be traumatic events, which have usually caused doubt and confusion, may help to heal the sufferer:

In all human societies, recounting one’s experiences in the presence of others is a way of reimagining one’s situation and regaining mastery over it. Stories enable people to renegotiate retrospectively their relation with others, recovering a sense of self and of voice that was momentarily taken from them (Jackson, 1997: 23).

However, if this recovered voice and sense of self is then betrayed by theatre practitioners, whose aims in the making of the verbatim theatre piece and in the interview on which it is based, lack transparency and honesty, then another act of oppression may be reenacted on the original victims.

I have not been able to find any evidence that Anna Deavere Smith negotiates with her subjects as to what stays in and what is left out of her work. The inclusion of one person’s comments or even their whole character, and the contrasting excision of another without negotiation taking place, unavoidably involves a judgmental, discriminating practice of power. Within the process of rehearsing and showing her work at various theatres, dramaturgical editing continues to take place. The Let Me Down Easy that I saw at the Second Stage Theater in New York, December 2009, was different to that shown some months earlier at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts and at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven Connecticut, from what I have gathered from internet postings (www.2st.com and www.latimes.com). Some characters in these productions were deleted from the New York show (e.g. Carrington Marzett). Although Lyons and Lyons (1994: 61) have called this type of editing “fluid” and noted it as part of a preparation process that enlarges, contracts and reconfigures over time, I argue that it underscores the hand of an authorial presence making choices about and for the subjects of her work, without apparent negotiation. Deavere Smith appears to sit very much in the driver’s seat controlling who and what eventually ends up in the work. Her interviews with people are always in excess of the numbers of characters in her shows (Heddon, 2008: 130). In a 1993 interview with Carol Martin, Deavere Smith said that, when she was working on Fires in the Mirror and she realised that there were not enough women in the piece, “…one of (her) goals when she came back to New York in the Spring was
to do a few more interviews with women” (1993: 48). As the only performer on stage, hers is the overriding image left to the audience: a United Nations melting pot in the one African- American body, but also an image which confers on Smith some kind of final authority. Let Me Down Easy is, at its core, an artistic invention which obfuscates the mechanics of the interview process operating behind it. Even though Deavere Smith has one character talk through a video camera and a few others mention her name, these few meta-theatrical gestures do not go far enough towards transparently exposing the interviewing process behind the construction of the play. We are not shown how or with what agenda the play has been made, further concealing Deavere Smith’s control and the mediation behind the ‘reality’ of the work (Heddon, 2008:132).

Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project’s The Laramie Project

If Deavere Smith’s work is most often written about within a feminist framework, the work of Tectonic Theater Project (TTP) is, as a rule, most closely aligned to queer theatre, probably because several of Tectonic’s plays have, as their subject matter, gay histories, and also because there are openly gay company members. Theatre studies scholar Stephen Bottoms has noted Kaufman’s “… ‘outsider’ awareness that his multiply othered subject position as a gay, Jewish, Venezuelan living in New York has given him on the language and identity assumptions that some ‘documentarians’ simply take for granted”(2006: 67). The Laramie Project (1998), assembled mostly from interviews with an added mixture of court transcripts, media reports and personal diaries, does go some way towards foregrounding its assumptions, by firstly foregrounding its construction process. In doing this, it makes some attempts to be transparent, and to expose the constructed and mediated nature of the ‘truth’ in verbatim theatre.

One way it does this is by calling its acts ‘moments’. These are short chains of one-off actions or individual units of theatrical time based on the interview materials. The moments in The Laramie Project were created, in rehearsal, by the actors telling a story using all the tools of the stage (for example, lighting, design, costumes, and blocking). These moments were contrasted with other such moments created by other artists, and from a collaborative method of choice involving the artistic director and the whole company. Some moments made it to the script; others didn’t. The company’s method of moment work then became a transparent part of the play’s narrative:

…with the various tensions and misapprehensions engendered by their presence in Laramie being explored, self-critically, alongside the Shepard story itself: “When you first called me (about an interview),” Laramie theatre scholar Rebecca Hilliker tells them, “I wanted to say, You just kicked me in the stomach. Why are you doing this to me?” (Kaufman, 2001: 11). The inclusion of such material invites audiences 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 (Bottoms, 2006: 65).

There are quite a few other moments of self-reflexivity in the script; for example, when Marge Murray says, “Oh Lordy, you’ve got that on your tape” (Kaufman, 2001: 17); or when Alison Mears says, “Now, how’s he gonna use that in his play?” (Kaufman, 2001: 15).

However, only some of the mechanics of *The Laramie Project* are made transparent in the script. It seems that, when constructing the play, the company wanted to get the grand narrative ‘right’. This meant that some material had to be sacrificed in order to “…facilitate the hero’s tale” (Tigner, 2002: 152). Certain homophobic comments made by Aaron Kriefels, the person who first found Matthew Shephard tied to the fence and dying, were left out of the play because he would have sounded out of character if they had been included (Tigner, 2002: 152). In addition, hundreds of hours of tapes were gathered, but only the most relevant or important were used (Shewey, 2000: 18) without apparent negotiation with the subjects. Some characters feature in the play (Marge Murray); others are relegated to virtual invisibility (Trish Steger). As James Thompson notes, theatre practitioners who seek stories are in effect witnesses to those stories “which begs the question of whether, by asking to hear, must we retell’ (2005:25 in Heddon, 2008:136). Despite the grand meta-theatrical gesture in the opening lines spoken by the narrator about the making of the project, *The Laramie Project* is at its nucleus still an aesthetic invention which, especially given that it does make some attempts to make its construction processes explicit, runs a very high risk that its documentary subject matter will be perceived as ‘the truth’.

Another ethical problem to be noted is the way in which, in many verbatim plays, real people become fossilized at the age, time and stage of publication as ‘characters’ in a play, which may mean that when meeting new people, they are understood to be these ‘characters’, rather than the people they have become over the years since the play was first published. This has certainly been one of the problems reported by some of those people interviewed for *The Laramie Project*. Amy Tigner has noted that Harry Woods “…found watching himself as a character troublesome, precisely because this short narrative, which he related in autumn 1998, begins to stand in for who and what he is as a person” (2002: 152). Tectonic Theater Project has just produced *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later*, which may partly be an attempt to address this issue.

*Off the Backs of Others*

*Both The Laramie Project and Let me Down Easy* stage debate and dialogue from across a wide spectrum of political ideologies (Claycomb, 2003: 97) and in both, narrative
authority is textually inscribed through these multiple mutually authorising voices (Lanser in Claycomb 2003:97) interrupting the hierarchy of a coherent, explanatory narrative. There is an argument that the choice to locate contending discourses side by side in the pieces interrupts the monologic control inherent in the form of the interviews on which the pieces are based, thereby democratising power, because no one of the interviewees is then the definitive expert. It has also been argued that the political power of this type of theatre is the way in which it “…seeks to reveal a hidden truth, to give voice to silenced voices, or to explore what has been kept hidden” (Claycomb, 2003:99).

There may be credence to some of the above-mentioned arguments; however, I question whether this coalescence of voices in fact risks fortifying their authority on stage, rather than destabilising it. It may also invest the playwright with that very authority (Claycomb, 2003:103). Furthermore, when the silenced and traumatised are silenced and traumatised again, by the excision of their characters after interviews and/or by other lack of consultation and/or discussion on the script, the rhetoric of the social and political efficacy of verbatim theatre becomes empty. Heddon’s labeling of verbatim as the “…theatre of solicitation or appropriation” (2008: 128) seems apt.

At their core, Let Me Down Easy and The Laramie Project are obviously aesthetic inventions, but they are inventions created ‘off the backs’ of others, as is the case with all verbatim theatre. For this reason, I am critical of the way in which certain important ethical concerns appear to be sidestepped in the construction of many verbatim pieces. The choice is always there for playwrights and theatre ensembles to work imaginatively: I argue this point in full cognisance of the fact that ‘fictional’ plays are often based on parts of stories from ‘real’ life events or that characters in plays may of course be based on real people. But, instead of a fictional enterprise, this manner of theatre is chosen. Verbatim theatre pieces are deliberately framed and marketed as verbatim (e.g. ‘this play is based on the testimonies of real people’). This then functions as a signifier that the product is closer to ‘the truth’. Even though many audiences may be aware that their experience is a highly mediated one, this way of producing theatre is often a drawing card to them.

Working verbatim is not an easy task. It is challenging not least because there are palpable tensions between the ethical challenges of dealing with people’s stories and the aesthetic challenges of creating interesting theatre from them. As Julie Salverson asks “How do theatre workers negotiate the multiple responsibilities of integrity, imagination, inspiration and craft?” (2008). Moreover, there could be many reasons why the theatre practitioners whose work I have critiqued in this paper have decided to construct their plays; that is, without always enough regard for negotiating with their subjects. For various reasons, in the writing of this paper, I have not contacted TTP or Anna Deavere
Smith in order to give them the chance to counteract the claims that I have made about some of their practices. In the construction of theatre pieces as much as in the production of scholarship, there are often decisions which have to be made, within constrictive frames of reference like time. These choices will not always be easy to make.

Yet the ethical gauntlet needs to be taken up. Ethical ways of creating verbatim theatre do need to be canvassed. Bannerman and Maclaughlin (2009) argue that virtually all creative work in the theatre is collaborative: the implication is that the subjects of verbatim pieces are its co-collaborators. Any claim to single authorship would then be inherently unethical, and all conditions of participation and collaboration, as well as all ownership of the materials, would have to be negotiated, with the subjects having the option to edit out sections if not comfortable with them, and to approve final edit along with the performer or the troupe.

Yet what happens when the people whose stories are used to make a piece of theatre have done harm themselves? In this instance, is it necessary to dispense with ethical concerns to make a political point? In The Power of Yes, (2009), David Hare interviewed bankers and other members of the finance sector, as well as politicians, to find out what caused the recent financial crisis in Great Britain. What ethical responsibilities did he have to these bankers, many of whom sat in the audience on opening night at the National Theatre in London, in creating that piece of theatre? When he says, in the play, “At least playwrights don’t make a living out of fucking up people’s lives” (2009:62), was he thinking about the bankers whose unrestrained greed in this crisis is so readily exposed in this play? Or do ethical concerns in verbatim theatre creation only apply to the oppressed?

Conclusion

The creation of verbatim theatre activates ethical dilemmas often ignored by theatre practitioners and scholars. Questions need to be asked about these quandaries and discussions need to take place, even if solutions are not readily found. Some of these questions, not fully examined in this paper, include: If verbatim theatre artists do have ethical responsibilities towards the people whose stories they listen to, gather, discard and/or include when they construct a piece of verbatim theatre, what exactly are they? Can a responsibility to others coexist with the demands of the creation of a piece of theatre? Is it possible to identify and monitor ethical verbatim theatre creation and performance practices? If so, what kinds of ethical models should be utilised? If, in the act of writing about others, whether family or not, or in using their stories in verbatim theatre, practitioners do damage, are there ethical values which can counteract or minimise this harm?
Schmidt’s challenge is a useful one as it highlights the importance of turning towards, rather than away from, a consideration of ethics in the creation of verbatim theatre. In the re-telling of people’s lives, in the use of their experiences, understandings and words can lay tremendous political potential for change. But along with this comes ethical responsibilities, some way of “saying it right” based on an ethics of responsibility and interdependence that is transacted in each particular situation but which also rests on the foundational acceptance of theatre as a collaborative practice.

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