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The function of verbatim theatre conventions in three Australian plays

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ABSTRACT

Direct address is considered to be the hallmark convention of verbatim theatre. Coined by Derek Paget in 1987, verbatim theatre is a form that involves engagement with a community about a topic or event. Conversations and interviews are recorded, and this material becomes the stimulus for the creative development of performance. This article researches and analyses the broad diversity of conventions evident in three Australian verbatim plays; Alana Valentine's *Parramatta Girls* (2007), Campion Decent's *Embers* (2008) and David Burton's *April's Fool* (2010). Developing a greater understanding of the function of verbatim theatre's conventions therefore deepens our knowledge of dramatic composition and the choices these playwrights have made in translating their verbatim stories into dramatic material. It also enables educators to respond more comprehensively in their analysis of plays, and encourage their students to create their own verbatim theatre in more nuanced and dynamic ways.

KEYWORDS

Verbatim theatre; conventions; dramaturgy; Australian plays

The dramaturgy of a play can be analysed through its dramatic composition; its style, conventions, themes, characters and language. Analysing and deconstructing the composition of plays within a specific form enables a more complex and nuanced understanding of the way stories are told and dramatic meaning is made. It provides educators with the knowledge and skill to engage critically with a text and facilitate students understanding of the way each of the individual components of a play contribute to the overall emotion and narrative of a work. In the field of verbatim theatre, Derek Paget suggests that '[u]sually, controversy rages around content issues, with the form itself dragged into public attention as a by-product' (Paget 2006, 307). In this article I seek to contribute to the gap highlighted by Paget, focusing explicitly on verbatim Theatre's conventions and analysing their function in shaping the dramatic action of three Australian verbatim plays; Alana Valentine's *Parramatta Girls* (2007), Campion Decent's *Embers* (2008) and David Burton's *April's Fool* (2010). These plays are indicative of the complexity of conventions used in Australian verbatim theatre, contradicting the traditional statements made in the broader field about verbatim's tendency towards un-theatricality. Understanding how conventions function in verbatim theatre will

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enable educators and students to respond more comprehensively in their analysis of plays, and create their own verbatim theatre in more nuanced and dynamic ways.

Verbatim theatre involves interviewing a community about a topic or event, recording these conversations, and using the resulting stories as the stimulus for the creative development of performance. Within the field there are a myriad of terms used to describe how verbatim material is written into performance. These include 'compression' and 'shaping' (Luckhurst 2008, 207), 'editing' and 'juxtaposing' (Bottoms 2006, 59), 'framing' (Jeffers 2006, 14) and describing the verbatim as being 'distilled' (Anderson and Wilkinson 2007, 154). Each of these terms conveys a sense of how a writer may use verbatim material. They predominantly focus on the theme of reduction and the process of minimalizing verbatim material into a cohesive narrative. Juxtaposing and framing convey greater insight into the strategies used by writers and infer a process of active decision-making about the intentions of these dramaturgical approaches. The most commonly cited convention and one often referred to as the form's hallmark is 'direct address' (Duggan 2013, 152; Jeffers 2006, 3; Paget 2008, 137; Stuart Fisher 2011, 116). Further conventions include the incorporation of monologues (Watt 2009, 194), restaging the interview (193), narration, flashbacks (Chou and Bleiker 2010, 565), 'scarce movement and functional design' (Botham 2008, 315), and a distinctly presentational rhetoric (Young 2009, 82). Young extends the discussion to a reflection on the language conventions of verbatim theatre and summarises that it is 'often fragmentary, stumbling and repetitious' (81). Botham states that verbatim theatre often tells rather than shows and suggests that this is one of the form's limitations, leading it to be regarded as negatively 'un-theatrical' (2008, 311). These conventions are generally referenced as strict requirements rather than flexible possibilities. For example, Soans describes the 'quintessence of verbatim theatre' as 'a group of actors sitting on chairs, or cardboard boxes or a sofa, talking to the audience, simply telling stories' (qtd. in Hammond and Steward 2008, 21). Similarly, Luckhurst states that in its 'purest' sense verbatim theatre 'is understood as a theatre whose practitioners, if called to account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue' (2008, 201) and that 'verbatim theatre is performed with actors in a line before the audience' (214). This is a narrow view of verbatim's conventions as I will demonstrate through the forthcoming analysis of plays.

There is a connection between the conventions of a text and the embodiment and performance of those conventions in performance. Jeffers describes this as 'acting conventions' (2006, 3), discussing how actors need to learn the art of performing verbatim specific conventions such as direct address and 'acknowledg[ing] audience reactions' (3). The conventions of verbatim theatre require 'more flexible expectations of actors. Actors need to master direct address techniques and also effect rapid transformation of time, place and character of the kind unknown and unnecessary to naturalistic theatre' (Paget 2008, 137). Paget highlights the link between the conventions of a text and the embodiment and performance of those conventions on stage. I suggest that developing a deeper understanding of the conventions of a form will also influence and broaden the practice of rehearsing, performing and teaching verbatim theatre, as highlighted here by both Paget and Jeffers.

Ackroyd and O'Toole explore a variety of conventions and aesthetics in their work *Performing Research: Tensions, Triumphs and Trade-offs of ethnodrama* (2010). They frame their investigation within the field of ethnodrama and performance as research, although many of the contributors whose work they summarise are working explicitly within verbatim theatre. They articulate the following conventions of verbatim theatre: the amalgamation of

stories and people to create 'composite characters'; using fictitious dialogue to stitch together verbatim material (62); the use of mise-en-scene (64), 'parallel storytelling, moments of stillness and comic timing' (70). Significantly, Ackroyd and O'Toole acknowledge that it is more than the dialogue and language that goes through a 'dramatic transformation'; the way the writer chooses to represent locations (63) and intercut dialogue and action in order to convey their narrative (65), are also dramaturgical conventions that can be analysed in a verbatim work. Rather than creating characters who develop throughout the play, a convention of verbatim theatre is to have moment specific characterisations (72) with the incorporation of composite characters to make thematic links to 'broader truths' (72).

These broader truths, or what Soans describes as a 'unifying premise' (qtd. in Hammond and Steward 2008, 34), contribute to the emotional arc of the text and Jeffers suggests that verbatim playwrights look for this overarching emotional structure 'rather than the linear narrative of cause and effects which creates the classic dramatic arc' (2006, 4). Soans argues that verbatim plays 'should still be built around a narrative', and there still needs to be 'dramatic conflict' and characters who 'undertake journeys of discovery of some kind' (qtd. in Hammond and Steward 2008, 26). Although he qualifies that these journeys may take place 'while the character is sat in a chair, talking' (26). Significantly the discussion on structure and narrative aligns with an episodic approach to plot and character development, with the more traditional linear arc in a verbatim work associated with emotion and mood. The narrative structure of each of the Australian plays discussed further in this section demonstrate a balance between both linear narrative and emotional arc. All three plays are event based (rather than topic based), and this enables a mirroring or organic reproduction of the timeline of the event within the dramatic structure.

Duggan, Wake and Bottoms move beyond merely naming conventions of verbatim theatre to explore the way they function within a performance. Duggan designates certain conventions the title 'authenticity effects' (2013, 147) which are strategies that convey information about the creation of the play and its connection to the lives of people beyond the performance. Authenticity effects include stating within the dialogue a process of interviewing a community of storytellers, introducing characters by recognisable names and maintaining the fragmentary qualities of speech. How a writer uses these authenticity effects can convey the degree to which the play mimetically represents a story or explores an experience as something that happened, without positioning that story and experience within the framework of a universal truth. Contributing to this discussion on representation in verbatim performance, Wake proposes that performance which depicts actuality falls within the realist category, whether that be 'diegetic realism' through a staging of the interview context, 'mimetic realism', moments of re-enactment designed to mimetically represent the actual experience, or a combination of the two (2013, 106). She suggests the convention of theatricalising stories renders them as more real, and references a segment of Ros Horin's *Through the Wire* (2004) where characters are speaking over one another in short unfinished sentences. Wake argues that this 'less structured, more scattered, and by implication less rehearsed' dramaturgy renders the stories and emotions 'more authentic' (2013, 110), thus heightening the perceived reality of the narrative and the characters emotions.

Bottoms describes two conventions used by David Hare that he associates with highlighting the authenticity of Hare's work; addressing the audience as David and introducing characters with vocal captioning. Bottoms suggests these conventions are employed to act as 'a reminder of the original interview context' (2006, 59) and to convey the real status of

the character outside the world of the play. Hare's second convention, vocal captioning, is a strategy that Bottoms praises, describing it as a 'model of reflexivity' (61). Bottoms references Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997) as an excellent exemplar of this convention, as actors in this work enter the stage, pick up a book or newspaper and introduce the source of the story to the audience (which is a convention reminiscent of verbatim theatre's ancestor the Living Newspaper). Bottoms suggests that this reflexive convention demonstrates that the play is 'scrupulously researched' (61). As Duggan, Wake and Bottoms here highlight, the conventions and dramaturgical approach of the writer directly influences the degree to which the performance is considered authentic, real or making claims to truth.

There is minimal academic engagement with the conventions of Australian verbatim works (which disrupt the restricted view of the verbatim form) and how these conventions operate within the play text to shape dramatic action. This may be in part due to the accepted diversity of the form in an Australian context, reflected in the observations of Australian academics such as Anderson and Wilkinson, Wake and Watt, whose discussion of verbatim theatre conventions is broad, diverse and inclusive. I will now move into an analysis of the conventions used in three Australian verbatim plays and specifically investigate how these conventions shape the dramatic action of each work.

Alana Valentine: *Parramatta Girls* (2007)

Valentine describes her approach to *Parramatta Girls* (2007) as 'massaged verbatim' because she 'didn't want to capture their exact voice, I had to capture the spirit, the soul, the way of being in the world that those women were' (qtd. in Oades 2010, 59). The play follows the story of eight women who were institutionalised at the Girls Training School in Parramatta; a home where cruel punishments, sexual, mental and emotional abuse were the norm. Valentine interviewed and met with over 35 women, however has used the convention of composite characters in order to amalgamate the stories. Oades explains in 'Parramatta Girls: Verbatim Theatre about the forgotten Australians' (2010) there is also one 'invented' character based on a story told to Valentine about a young girl who died in the home. This character serves to interconnect with the verbatim composite characters created through the interview process. This reflects Ackroyd and O'Toole's description of fact and fiction being woven together in verbatim works. Structurally the play shifts between past and present, and is 'a simple journey: a group of old girls attend a reunion, look around and then go home' (Oades 2010, 64). The transitions to these flashbacks and other assorted locations such as the Children's Court in Darlinghurst (Valentine 2007, 14), the showers (21) and the dormitory (27) are written as occurring on stage so that the audience can witness the actors becoming each new character or younger/older versions of themselves. While the structure is anchored around the event of the reunion, the majority of the narrative is formed through theatrical scenes that depict the women's remembered life at the home and are performed in present tense, or what Wake would describe as 'mimetic realism' (2013, 106);

LYNETTE: What? Would you do it with him?

JUDI: No way. But if it's just my hand.

MAREE: He'll want you to put it in your mouth.

JUDI: Yeah, well if he does he can get me outta here on a Sunday afternoon. Like when he takes those other girls on excursions.

MAREE: You don't know what you're doing. (Valentine 2007, 51)

The play then circles back to the linear plot of attending the reunion, exemplified in the following excerpt where two of the 'old girls' are discussing the contents of their files;

CORAL: Gayle. I'm asking you straight. Read it to me please.

GAYLE sits and reads.

GAYLE: 'Committal to an Institution. Coral Dawn McGillivray. Born 25.9.1947. Charge: Neglect and E.M.D'

CORAL: Exposed to Moral Danger.

GAYLE: 'Home visit – mother seen. She stated that the girl had not been home for five weeks and that… she did not know where she was'.

CORAL: Read that again

GAYLE: 'She stated that the girl had not been home for five weeks and that she could not care less what happened to her'. (66)

While there are occasional monologues of direct address this convention is used sparsely and the text is predominantly dialogue, where Valentine's immersion in the community becomes more evident. Through the language, verbal imagery and phrases of speech of the characters, the reader is given an insight into the mannerisms and verbatim of the women Valentine interviewed. From something as simple as capturing the dropped-ends of words; 'the wind makin' my eyes water, laughin' and screamin' with everyone watchin' ya' (1) to phrases such as '[f]at lot of thanks that is' (36) and '[s]he's been given a good going-over' (56), the language provides an authentic connection to the community of women Valentine interviewed. It is nuanced and specific, but doesn't have the stumbling and repetitious quality that Young identifies as common in verbatim theatre, which is perhaps due to Valentine's massaged approach. The authenticity effects are subtle, they exist in the place names, song choices and stage directions created by Valentine, yet clearly informed by people who experienced the context of the Girls Home, and therefore convey authenticity to the story.

Stylised physical movement is a prominent convention in *Parramatta Girls*, with stories and events being conveyed solely through stage directions. For example, the opening of Act One Scene 5 reads '[a]ll the cast March in, in formation' (30), conveying a sense of the strict order and discipline experienced by the women. Creating a heightened and stylised physicality can convey a greater sense of the emotion and feeling of an event rather than solely relying on the verbatim words. A detailed example of this is found in the following stage direction; 'Marlene screams uncontrollably, all the loss and pain and grief and anger coming out in one massive raging scream of fury and humiliation and frustration' (57). While often verbatim theatre relies on reflective stories and is therefore stereotypically deemed un-theatrical (as evidenced in the earlier observations made by Young and Botham), these moments of physicalisation and mimetic realism heighten the emotional engagement. This is a convention used in all three of the Australian plays discussed in this article.

Campion Decent: *Embers* (2008)

Embers (2008) by Campion Decent was commissioned by Hot House Theatre in partnership with the Upper Hume Community Health Service. Decent explains that it was developed using the 'principles' of verbatim theatre and that he found *The Laramie Project*, *The Permanent Way* and *Aftershocks* useful models of the form (Decent 2008, 6). The project involved an intense period of community immersion that was enabled by the support of local rural recovery support worker and ex-fire officer Les Hume. Together they conducted over 75 interviews within 26 townships in relation to the bushfire event in North East Victoria in January 2003. Decent used both the interview material and parliamentary transcripts in developing the play which he describes as 'a community of ordinary people facing an extraordinary event' (Decent 2008, 6). The play uses projected text to provide context and factual information (what Bottoms would refer to as subtitles, Paget as captioning and Duggan an authenticity effect), and these also serve as a transitional convention between scenes. The world of the play oscillates between three contexts; the official public hearing in relation to the fires, unidentified characters sharing their experiences in the form of a spoken chorus, and named townspeople attending a community barbecue. This last contextual setting helps to facilitate the action with each new character arriving at the barbecue being introduced through vocal captioning and then telling their story. For example;

Kristina: A cattleman

Miranda: Aged 87

Kristina: From Mudgegonga

Cattleman: All we had in '39 was the bloody bush, a blunt axe and a rake. (29)

The action of the scene is realistic for a barbecue setting (which is also highly relatable in an Australian context) however the longer stories are positioned as direct address. The personal experiences are juxtaposed with excerpts from parliamentary transcripts and this is used to drive the tension of the play, as the official documents often trivialise or contradict the first-hand experience of the community. For example;

Text: [It is the finding of the State Inquiry that CFA and DSE were appropriately prepared for the 2003–2004 fire season. The partnership between DSE and CFA has proved effective.]

D/farmer: [To audience] About as effective as a Mad Hatter's Tea Party, that's how effective it was. (69)

Also contributing to the dramatic action is the use of parallel storytelling, with multiple characters sharing their personal perspective of the event, providing insight to their relationships, personality and priorities. This convention serves to both demonstrate the diversity of experience and also highlights moments of connection, with multiple characters speaking selected lines in unison:

Susan: We were very well informed by ABC radio

All: Here! Here! (43)

The pace and rhythm of the play is timed through three textual conventions. Firstly, overlapping staccato lines that create mood and tension:

Male 2: Like a dragon.

Female 2: Like a train.

Male 3: Like a jet coming up the valley.

Male 1: F1 – 11s flying over.

Female 3: That sickening roar.

Male 4: You never forget it. (20–21)

Secondly, the use of lengthy monologues that enable story specific character development and sub narratives to emerge (40–42), and finally conversational dialogue that allows for relationships and interaction between characters:

DF/Wife: We all had our moment, didn't we?

D/farmer: Never feared for our lives I don't think, did we? I didn't.

DF/Wife: No, I don't think I ever thought this is it, I'm gonna die.

D/farmer: But the feeling afterwards? Just shattered.

DF/Wife: You went into a fairly depressed state for about three weeks.

D/farmer: I think I was alright.

DF/Wife: You couldn't get out of bed in the morning. (85)

A unique convention in this work is the approach to the composite characters. In *Embers* the composite characters are generally caricatures of recognisable community stereotypes, for example the Red Cross ladies, Politicians and Children. While Decent states at the end of the character list that when a name isn't given 'it is at the request of the interviewee' (17), these characters appear to be employed as comic devices or points of tension and do not have the same complexity and depth as other named characters. The convention of using named and unnamed characters for specific dramatic purposes is also evident in David Burton's *April's Fool* (2010).

David Burton: *April's Fool* (2010)

April's Fool (2010) was commissioned by the Empire Theatre Project Company in Toowoomba Queensland and centres on the Terauds family after their 18 year old son Kristjan dies from complications relating to illicit drug use. David Terauds, Kristjan's father, kept a journal during the time his son was in hospital. This document along with numerous interviews with family and friends, became the stimulus material for Burton's work. Burton explains in the author's note that '[w]hile all material is verbatim, editing has obviously condensed the material. These edits were done always to keep the intention of the speaker clear' (2010, 15). Here the reader is provided insight to the playwright's intention and premise for the work; to convey as closely as possible the intended meaning of the storytellers that were interviewed. It becomes apparent throughout the play that Burton's use of the verbatim material is in service of painting one complex picture of the central event, in contrast to Decent's approach of using juxtaposition to paint multiple versions of an event.

Similarly to *Embers* there are some named and many unnamed characters. Burton has incorporated actor characters in order to introduce, narrate and frame the world of the play, guiding the audience through the narrative and acting as signposts to the verbatim material. As the actor states in the opening moments of the play '[w]e will be using their words, collected from interviews, to tell Kristjan's story. We will be giving voice to them' (Burton 2010,

18). This is the reflexivity that Bottoms praises as a necessary convention of verbatim theatre (2006, 61), although *April's Fool* is the only work discussed in this essay that applies this convention within the text of the play. Doctors, Paramedics and Nurses are given unnamed titles, while the Teraud's family and their friends have been named. Included in the dialogue is the following disclaimer: 'Many names have been changed for their own protection' (Burton 2010, 18). The use of profession titles as character names then implies that these characters are used as devices within the work, and may present as more two dimensional than the named characters, as was evident in *Embers*.

The journal document (which is also listed as a character) is used to introduce each new theme of the narrative, and the reader learns why this document was written by David Terauds; 'I am writing this to organise my thoughts. I need an outlet for my turmoil and the police may need a statement at some point in time' (19). The journal then explains that Kristjan had spent a lot of time planning to attend a three day music festival with friends, which leads to the introduction of a named character through verbal captioning;

HELENA: You know, when I was young we used to go to all day music things. I had been to that sort of thing

ACTOR: [to audience] Helena Terauds, Kristjan's mother. (19)

We learn about the Terauds family through the observations and reflections of those closest to them. Our understanding of them is slowly built up as we learn specific nuances and critical insights to their character;

BILL: Helena's smart. I think she probably suffers from a bit of low self esteem. (25)

BOB: He annoys the living shit out of me, but whatever he's doing it's because he believes it's right. You gotta respect that. (25)

The three days surrounding Kristjan's death is used as a narrative structure to the work, signposted through the use of dates and times which Burton suggests 'may be spoken or projected. It is suggested they are not ignored altogether' (15). His caution here provides insight to the importance of these signposts to the dramatic action. The dates and times let the reader know that time is passing and that we are slowly getting closer and closer to the key event; ultimately, to Kristjan's death. Even when the scene itself is providing more character development and contextual colour rather than specifically building tension through plot development, the dates and times heighten the mood and expectation. Burton has spent time developing the complexity of the characters, so that when we hear from their point of view it is an opinion of a character that we are engaged with and invested in. While *Embers* is also event driven, *April's Fool* differs in that there are a central cast of characters who we repeatedly return to throughout the work. The multiple perspectives in *Embers* is often used to provide contrasting views to the events as they unfold, whereas Burton has used the multiple voices to complement the audience's picture of the event. For example, when the family is let in to see Kristjan at the hospital, his brother Ari explains that his mother was 'inconsolable' and 'I was a bit withdrawn. I was needing to hit something. Just not knowing why…' (39). His sister Danika validates this picture for the reader stating 'Mum was absolutely… she couldn't stand up. Ari always stood fairly back from it' (39). In this way Burton creates layers of complexity to the one version of events, rather than causing the reader to question the series of events, as Decent does in *Embers*.

The longer monologues act not only to provide further insight into the events and characters, but also to act as a breathing space for the reader. After building up the action and

tension of the scene, Burton allows time for the reader to take it all in by incorporating expert monologues that provide a little distance to the emotion of the events. The Doctor explains medically what is happening to Kristjan's body and a moment later a 'psychologist specialising in drug abuse and trauma' (43) talks generically about drug use and the implications it can have for individuals and communities. These educative moments allow the reader to connect the very specific characteristics of the Terauds experience to the broader themes of the play, what Ackroyd and O'Toole might describe as the 'broader truths' (2010, 72), while simultaneously enabling a break from the high stakes emotion of the central plot.

There are seamless transitions between direct address and onstage interaction that help the rhythm of the work and move the action from past tense reflection into present tense mimetic realism:

> ARI: They were really worried about me. I went to the hospital, but I couldn't go into the room. I just couldn't see him like that. It's not normal, seeing someone like that.
>
> [NICOLE has faded. DAVID appears at ARI'S side]
>
> DAVID: You don't have to be strong for me you know.
>
> ARI: Don't Dad.
>
> DAVID: I'm surrounded by people who have been strong for me. Because of them I can be strong for you.
>
> [It's slow, but ARI suddenly lets loose and howls]. (64)

In this moment Ari transitions from the position of reflecting on his experience of grief to the intensity of a present tense moment of mimetic realism. The immediacy and intensity of his emotion engages the audience in a unique and heartrending way. This convention of transitioning from past to present tense is a common feature across all three plays, indicative of the diversity and theatricality of the conventions used in this form.

In response to Paget this article has focused explicitly on the form of verbatim theatre, analysing the function of various conventions in three Australian works. This analysis deepens our understanding of dramatic composition, the dramaturgy of verbatim theatre and the diverse theatrical possibilities of the form. Educators could encourage their students to experiment beyond the stereotype of verbatim theatre and engage with stylised movement, physical and present tense performance, and theatrical restaging of described experiences (mimetic realism) when performing, responding or creating their own work. The combination of informed dramaturgical understanding and experimentation will enable the field of verbatim theatre to continue to grow in creative and innovative ways.

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Notes on contributor

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