Caroline Wake

Headphone Verbatim Theatre: Methods, Histories, Genres, Theories

Created in an American rehearsal room, exported to an English workshop, and developed in Australia, among other places, 'headphone verbatim theatre' – also called 'recorded delivery' – is a truly global genre. In this article Caroline Wake focuses on the work of two pioneering practitioners, Briton Alecky Blythe and Australian Roslyn Oades, in order to trace the form's history as well as its methods, genres, and theories. In doing so, she considers how audio technology has evolved over the past decade and how the display or disguise of headphones has affected both the production and reception of the form. She identifies three dominant genres of headphone verbatim theatre (the social crisis play, the social justice play, and the social portrait play, as well as three main performance modes – the epic, the naturalistic, and the mixed. The epic has been the most successful thus far, but the naturalistic and mixed modes are, in turn, begetting new ones. Finally, she suggests that in the same way that headphones have rejuvenated verbatim theatre, they might also reinvigorate the discourse on it by offering the opportunity to go beyond the politics of voice and visibility and to turn, instead, to listening. Caroline Wake is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Centre for Modernism Studies in Australia at the University of New South Wales. Her research examines cultural responses to and representations of refugees and asylum-seekers as well as the role of testimony in law, performance, and visual culture. Her work has previously appeared in journals such as *Text & Performance Quarterly*, *Modern Drama*, and *History & Memory*. She is the co-editor, with Bryoni Trezise, of *Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory, Trauma* (Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013).

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SINCE THE MID-1990s there has been a marked, and much remarked upon increase in the number of documentary plays appearing on both marginal and mainstream stages around the world. Not only has the volume increased, so too has the variety, leading to what Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson call a 'proliferation of documentary forms'.[1] One particularly interesting form that has emerged over the past decade is what British practitioner Alecky Blythe calls 'recorded delivery' and Australian practitioner Roslyn Oades calls 'headphone verbatim' – the term I am using here, since it is more generic and not associated with any particular company, as is Blythe's.[2]

Like Derek Paget's pioneering article on verbatim theatre, published in this journal twenty-six years ago, this article 'aims to trace the development of [a] distinctive form, to give an account of its characteristic working methods, to indicate the thinking of theatre workers concerning its methodology, and to examine the scope of its influence within, and at the edges of, the professional theatre'.[3] Well, sort of. Like the sub-genre it has recently spawned, my article is both similar to and different from the original: similar in the sense that I seek to trace the histories and methods of an emergent form; different in the sense that while I am interested in the production of headphone verbatim theatre, I am especially concerned with its reception. In particular, I am interested in how it models, enacts, and enables listening for its audiences. I argue that listening, both as a practice and a discourse, might reframe headphone verbatim, and verbatim theatre more broadly, as a form that does not so much 'give voice' as 'grant an audience'.

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Mohammed Ahmad and Katia Molino in *Stories of Love and Hate*. Photo: Heidrun Löhr.

Definitions

Like verbatim theatre, headphone verbatim is 'a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews done with "ordinary" people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things'.[4] Unlike verbatim theatre in its original form, however, these interviews are typically conducted by a single playwright rather than by several actors who later appear in the performance. Furthermore, these playwrights are increasingly moving away from recording formal interviews towards recording informal interactions, sometimes without being physically present. For example, in the case of Blythe's *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008), which is set in the living room of a brothel, 'the girls . . . agreed to record themselves' in her absence. 'This is the ultimate way of creating a non-pressurised, non-interview environment.'[5]

Like verbatim playwrights, headphone verbatim playwrights have to organize these recordings into the shape of a play. Unlike verbatim playwrights, however, this shaping does not begin with transcription; indeed, headphone verbatim playwrights often avoid transcription if possible. Instead, they edit the sound files with software such as Pro Tools, meaning that they do not always 'transform' the interviews 'into a text', or at least not in the narrow sense of the word.[6] Rather, they produce what Oades calls an 'audio script', which the actors do not see in print and do not attempt to learn, though they inevitably become very familiar with it.

Like verbatim plays, headphone verbatim plays are often '*fed back* into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance *in* those communities'.[7] Unlike verbatim, however, headphone verbatim plays are more likely to leave their communities of origin and be performed in mainstream settings, and they are more likely to be published. Furthermore, whereas in verbatim theatre 'the firmest of commitments is . . . made by the company to *the use of vernacular speech*', in headphone verbatim this commitment is extended beyond replicating argot, to include replicating coughs, pauses, hesitations, and repetitions.[8] In the words of Susannah Clapp, headphone verbatim includes 'sounds that you never normally hear onstage: the barrage of gulps, chewings, sniffs, half-words, and abandoned phrases with which people punctuate their sentences'.[9]

In summary, 'heritage' verbatim typically involves several collaborators taping interviews with subjects. These author-actors then transcribe, transform, and eventually perform these words to an audience of interviewees and their associates. In contrast, headphone verbatim typically involves a single author digitally recording interviews or interactions with subjects. He or she does not necessarily transcribe these words, but rather edits the recordings digitally, and then casts actors to perform both speech and non-speech to an audience of interviewees, associates, and others.

Yet perhaps the greatest difference between heritage verbatim and headphone verbatim is in the mode of performance. In verbatim theatre, as Paget notes, the performance is characterized by 'the systematic display . . . of the source material (which becomes the *true* protagonist in the drama)'.[10] In headphone verbatim, the performance displays not only its source material but also the mechanical device needed to record and

Alecky Blythe in *Come Out Eli*. Photo Ian Cole.

repeat that material. In both rehearsal and performance, the actors wear headphones, through which they hear the audio script. They then repeat that script as immediately and exactly as possible, including – as noted above – every stammer, pause, and repetition. The effect, according to audience members, 'is somewhere between acting, "being", and possession'.[11]

Technologies

Of course, the precise nature of this 'systematic display' has changed as the technology has developed. In early workshop experiments (2001–2), each actor had a minidisc player-recorder in hand. When a scene included more than one character (a relatively rare occurrence at that time) 'a headphone splitter was . . . inserted into the headphone jack to allow a second actor to plug into the same minidisc playback source. So the performances were essentially performed scene by scene with actors pressing PLAY and STOP on their personal units at the head and tail of each scene – rather than as one long synchronized audio track'.[12]

This is basically how Blythe's first play, *Come Out Eli*, was performed in 2003, though she states that the actors pressed PLAY at the top of the show rather than at the top of each scene, suggesting that she was working with one long track by this point.[13] Regardless of when they pressed PLAY, the actors still needed to plug into the same machine for duologues, meaning that there were 'long extension cables sprawled across the stage'.[14] In contrast, the headphones themselves were relatively small, black 'earbuds', such as the ones used by most iPod listeners (though these are usually white).

In Oades's first production, *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* (2005), all three actors were plugged into a single DVD player. Since the setting was a lounge room, the DVD player sat comfortably within the world of the show, but it did limit the actors' ability to move, despite their long extension cords. To the audience, the blocking looked relatively simple, consisting mainly of sitting. This recalls David Edgar's remark that contemporary documentary theatre is sometimes less about politics and more about aesthetics, specifically about whether to use stools,

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Vico Thai, Mohammed Ahmad, and Katia Molino in *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines*. Photo: Heidrun Löhr.

chairs, or sofas.[15] To the actors, however, there was an 'entire cord choreography' involved in the handling of small props and swapping seats.[16] This was made all the more difficult by the fact that they were wearing large, full-size, or 'circum-aural' headphones, which completely surround the ear and block any external noise, meaning that while the actors could hear the audio script, they could not really hear each other.

In 2008, both Blythe and Oades moved to an in-ear monitor system. In Blythe's *The Girlfriend Experience,* the actors

> used in-ear monitors that were linked to the sound desk via a radio signal, so no wires or plugging in and out of machines was necessary. This makes for a much slicker performance, and gives the actors more freedom to move around without having to 'plug into' the person they are having a conversation with.[17]

But even as the cords vanished, the headphones enlarged, meaning that as one means of production disappeared, another loomed into view. Similarly, in Oades's *Stories of Love and Hate*, the audio script was 'narrowcast' from her laptop via radio signal to the actors, who wore receiver packs attached to their belts. It was also during this production that Oades and her regular collaborators, actors Mohammed Ahmad and Katia Molino, discovered 'supra-aural' headphones, which are full-size but sit on the ear rather than around it. This means that the actors can hear each other as well as the recording, which is particularly important when performing scenes involving up to four people talking at a time.[18]

Mohammed Ahmad, Janie Gibson, and Katia Molino in *Stories of Love and Hate*. Photo: Heidrun Löhr.

Histories and Genres

Both Blythe and Oades trace their interest in headphone verbatim back to Mark Wing-

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Davey's *Drama without Paper* workshop, which he conducted at the London Actors Centre in 2001.[19] Two years later, Blythe founded her company Recorded Delivery in order to produce her first play *Come Out Eli*. She has since written several plays, including *Strawberry Fields* (2005), *All the Right People Come Here* (2005), *I Only Came Here for Six Months* (2005), *Cruising* (2006), *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008), *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* (2010), and *Where Have I Been All My Life?* (2012). She has also written a 'verbatim musical', *London Road* (2011), as well as two screenplays for television, *A Man in a Box* (2009) and *The Riots: In Their Own Words* (2012).

In his original article, Paget identifies two dominant genres of verbatim theatre, which he terms the 'celebratory' play and the 'controversy' play.[20] However, an examination of Blythe's oeuvre suggests that there are three dominant genres of headphone verbatim theatre, which I term the 'social crisis' play, the 'social justice' play, and the 'social portrait' play.

Of Blythe's eleven works listed above, three emerge from moments of social crisis. First, there is *Come Out Eli*, about a sixteen-day siege that ended with the escape of the hostage and the death of the hostage-taker. Second, there is *London Road*, about how a small rural community coped with the discovery of five dead women, all of whom were sex workers, and then with the arrest, charge, and conviction of a local resident for their murders. Third, there is *The Riots: In Their Own Words*, about the riots that took place in London, Birmingham, and elsewhere in England in the summer of 2011.

Three other plays concern chronic, ongoing social justice issues such as migration and prostitution: *Strawberry Fields* is about migrant labour on industrial-scale strawberry farms; *The Girlfriend Experience* is about four sex workers; and *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* tells the story of asylum seekers from Georgia. The rest of Blythe's works listed above could be described as social portrait plays, rather than as social crisis or justice plays. These include *All the Right People Come Here*, about Wimbledon; *I Only Came Here for Six Months*, which profiles residents of Brussels; *Cruising*, which deals with the sex and love lives of pensioners; *Where Have I Been All My Life?*, about Stoke-on-Trent's local talent contest; and *A Man In a Box*, about an autograph-hunter.

For her part, Oades worked with Wing-Davey's company Non-Fiction Theatre for another two years before heading home to Australia and producing *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* (2005), *Stories of Love and Hate* (2008), *I'm Your Man* (2012), as well as *Cutaway: a Portrait* (2012) and the forthcoming *Hello, Goodbye and Happy Birthday*. Only one of Oades's plays falls into the social crisis genre – *Stories of Love and Hate*, which was made in the wake of a riot. The rest of her work tends to fall into the social portrait genre; for instance, *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* tells the stories of a western Sydney suburb. However, this could also be considered a social justice play, since that suburb is often marginalized and maligned. Similarly, *I'm Your Man* follows a young boxer from that same suburb and his training companions. Together, Oades calls these three plays her 'Acts of Courage' trilogy, because they are about acts of bravery and the psychology of respect. More recently, Oades has moved away from the Sydney milieu and created *Cutaway: a Portrait*, which is a social portrait of the Port Adelaide area.

Beyond the immediate influence of Wing-Davey, both Blythe and Oades acknowledge the influence of the American performer and playwright Anna Deavere Smith, with whom Wing-Davey worked when he directed her *House Arrest* (1997). On her website, Blythe states that Smith 'was the first to combine the journalistic technique of interviewing her subjects with the art of interpreting their words through performance'.[21] Scholars have noted that this is incorrect and that, in fact, documentary theatre has a history that can be traced back about a century, and verbatim theatre has one which can be traced back about forty years.[22] Perhaps Blythe, having previously described herself as 'blissfully unaware of the verbatim "genre"', is now aware of this history through her recent collaboration with the New Victoria

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Theatre, home of Peter Cheeseman's original Stoke documentaries.[23] In any case, she is not the only theatre practitioner, or even scholar, to make this mistake.[24]

Understood more charitably, perhaps Blythe is not trying to say that Smith invented verbatim, but that she invented the method of intense listening that Blythe, Oades, and their actors now practise. In Blythe's account, which of course comes via Wing-Davey,

> Anna would record interviews with people and then learn them word-for-word, appropriating the speaker's cadences and patterns of speech in very fine detail. She learnt the interviews by listening to them, phrase by phrase, through earphones, and then repeating each phrase exactly as it had been said, immediately after she had heard it. . . . What Mark noticed was that in rehearsals, while the earphones were still on, the delivery was all the more extraordinary. He decided to keep them on during the performance. I have chosen to do this too, naming my company . . . to reflect the performance style. [25]

In other words, Smith's invention lies not in her style of interviewing but rather in her style of listening, which is exacting to the point of being exhausting. Wing-Davey's innovation is to make this listening visible by moving it from the rehearsal room on to the stage. Blythe's and Oades's invention has been to expand this form by including scenes with several speakers, staging entire plays in other languages, and setting interviewees' speech to music.

Alienation versus Authenticity

Beyond a couple of interviews with Blythe and Oades, there is surprisingly little literature on this sub-genre of what Carol Martin calls 'theatre of the real'.[26] For this reason, this section draws extensively on theatre reviews as well as on the small number of theoretical texts on the subject. This citational practice is also intended as a methodological gesture towards the genre itself. What writing there is on headphone verbatim theatre tends to interpret it either in terms of alienation or authenticity. On the one hand, critics claim that the headphones are 'distracting: black wires snake across the stage, and occasionally the headsets are audible to the audience'.[27] Similarly, both Dominic Maxwell and Deirdre Vine state that they can never forget the device as well as the fact that they're eavesdropping.[28] For these critics, then, the headphones function as an alienation device, 'serving as a constant reminder that the actors are presenting the material rather than identifying with it'.[29]

On the other hand, some critics claim that headphones produce 'an authenticity that [even] other forms of verbatim cannot' reach.[30] This is variously described as 'rich authenticity' or 'an absorbing authenticity'.[31] Picking up on the theme of absorption, critics comment that 'you soon stop seeing the headphones and are spellbound by the voices and their tales'.[32] Or, as the *Evening Herald* says of *The Girlfriend Experience*, while the headphones seem like an 'unnecessary contrivance . . . so naturalistic was the performance that it was quickly forgotten'.[33]

Terms such as 'naturalistic', 'realistic', and 'verisimilitude' recur often in this line of interpretation. For instance, Sarah Hemming says that *Cruising* achieves an 'extraordinary verisimilitude . . . reveal[ing] how composed even the most naturalistic drama is'.[34] In these accounts, then, headphone verbatim is more real than realism, more natural than naturalism.

In all likelihood, however, alienation and authenticity are working in tandem rather than opposition. Though they put it in critical terms, Peter Preston and John Gross make a valid point when they describe the headphones as an 'ostentatious . . . reassurance of reality' or 'a stunt, an excessive display of authenticity'.[35] For this reason, Christopher Innes argues that the headphones are better read as a 'symptom and signifier of . . . authenticity' rather than as a guarantee of it.[36] Like verbatim theatre more generally, but perhaps even more so, headphone verbatim is 'double-coded, not just sourced from interviews but about the interview process, questioning how retrospect recasts the past'.[37]

This double coding 'reminds us that what we are watching is based exactly on

actuality'. It 'simultaneously emphasizes the fact that it is counterfeit – that these are not real [people], but actors'.[38] Or, as scholar Mary Luckhurst puts it, headphone verbatim 'offers an aesthetics which appears to lend a greater authenticity to [its] shows, but that appearance is in itself a performance'.[39] To put it another way, headphone verbatim offers aural authenticity and visual alienation. Or does it? This is where it becomes impossible to discuss headphone verbatim without reference to the acting styles associated with it.

Acting

In Oades's work, actors always play several characters and they are always cast across race, ethnic, gender, and class lines. Indeed, in *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* she deliberately did not allow actor Anthony Brandon Wong to play any of the Asian characters.[40] Likewise, actor Mohammed Ahmad, who was also an interviewee in that same play, was not allowed to play himself. In Blythe's early work, actors would also play several characters across several identity categories. Indeed, she states that 'the most memorable characters tended to be the ones who were played by an actor of a different colour or gender from the interviewee'.[41]

In contrast, her more recent works have 'become more naturalistic, in that they tend to adhere more closely to the unities of time and place' and 'each actor . . . play[s] only one character'.[42] In these instances, she says, 'cross-gender and cross-race casting is less attractive because it can interfere with the naturalism of the production', and for this reason she has found herself 'mov[ing] towards casting to type'.[43] So the previous declaration has to be adjusted: when in the *epic* mode, headphone verbatim aims for verbal authenticity and visual alienation; when in the *naturalistic* mode, it aims for both verbal and visual authenticity.

Is there an advantage to one approach over another? Take the epic approach, where actors play multiple characters across multiple identity categories. This style can be seen in all of Oades's works as well as in Blythe's *Come Out Eli*, *Strawberry Fields, All the Right People Come Here, I Only Came Here for Six Months,* and *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* Both practitioners argue that the gap between the representation and the real can illuminate aspects of each. For instance, Blythe says that in *Come Out Eli*, 'the contrast between what [the actors] were saying and how they appeared subverted stereotypes and challenged the audience's preconceptions. People's words become all the more resonant when they are coming from the mouth of a person you would never expect to be saying them.'[44] Likewise, Oades states that on the one hand,

> the interviewees' words are . . . given to the audience with fidelity – with as much fidelity as the actors can achieve. . . . [On the other hand] we then cast against type. . . . 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 eighty-year-old woman, they are suddenly liberated to hear the truth of 'her'. What they see is really at odds with what they hear . . . 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.[45]

While I will take up the issue of hearing and listening in the following section, for the moment suffice to say that, according to practitioners, the gap between speech and appearance leaves room for spectators to do their own interpretive work, not only on the play but also on the reality it depicts.

Critics generally seem to agree with practitioners on this point. Of *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines*, for instance, Stephen Dunne says:

> Much of the piece's joy results from the obvious slippage of gender and cultural identity. . . . There's something delicious in [Lebanese Australian] Ahmad as a Skip [slang for Anglo-Australian] husband who agrees with his wife's idiot anxiety about shopping Muslims, or [Chinese-Vietnamese Australian] Thai's fabulously snappy mall rat girl or [Italian Australian] Molino's revhead bloke morphing into a self-assured, aged Polish-Jewish mum.[46]

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Esther Coles, Debbie Chazen, and Beatie Edney in *The Girlfriend Experience*. Photo: Alastair Muir.

Of *Come Out Eli*, Spencer states: 'We hear from Indians, Afro-Caribbeans and Cockneys, from a drawling Sloane and a drunken Irishman . . . The feeling is of a London that has become a heterogeneous community, a fact reflected in the production, in which five versatile actors play dozens of roles, ignoring conventional boundaries of race, age, and gender.'[47] In other words, not only does the epic approach enable the depiction of characters from minorities, it also encourages the casting of actors from such backgrounds. In fact, the form probably depends on it: I can't speak to the English context, but had the cast of *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* featured only Anglo-Celtic Australians, it would have been seen as deeply offensive. Despite this diversity, critics such as Fiona Mountford still worry that the form 'runs uncomfortably close to parody' or 'condescension and show-offery'.[48]

Perhaps Mountford would prefer the realistic approach, where actors play only one character, whom they closely resemble in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and identity. This happened in *The Girlfriend Experience*, where each of the four female actors played one of the female characters but one male actor played all the male customers. The advantages of the realistic approach, according to critics, are its truth, honesty, and subtlety. For example, Michael Billington describes *The Girlfriend Experience* as 'gritty [and] remorselessly honest', while Kate Bassett praises it for its 'rich and subtle real-life detailing'.[49] Nicholas de Jongh describes it as 'an invaluable piece of social realism', which 'persuasively reinforces Bernard Shaw's insistence that the real crime is not prostitution but the shameful poverty of women who are forced to sell themselves'.[50]

The point seems lost in Michael Coveney's judgemental review: 'There's no point in not saying that these huge and unappetising women come across as being incredibly sad and curiously stupid, with their whale-like lolloping around, matter-of-fact disposal of satiated condoms in the sitting room wastebasket, and quest for affection'.[51] It's almost as if he's reviewing the women themselves, which confirms, if nothing else, how realistic he found the performance.

Above left: Calum Callaghan in *The Riots: In Their Own Words*. Photo: Emilie Sandy/BBC.
Right: Alecky Blythe and Jason Barnett in *Cruising*. Photo: Tristram Kenton/Lebrecht Music & Arts.

The disadvantage of the realistic approach is that it causes critics to ask why headphones are used at all. For Bassett, they 'don't really enhance the authenticity'.[52] Likewise, Alice Jones is 'not convinced by this device – audiences have seen enough verbatim theatre to understand the concept, and the actors could just learn the lines, which they appear to have done'.[53] Karen Fricker agrees: 'Having the actors wear headsets feels like a gimmick, particularly since their delivery is so polished it's hard to believe they haven't memorized the lines.'[54] In other words, whereas in the epic mode headphones read as one in a series of alienation effects, in the realist mode they read as a singular disruption to the seamless naturalistic effect.

Where problems seem to arise is when productions fall between the two modes, meaning that actors are cross-cast but not multi-cast. This is what happened in *Cruising*, where most of the actors played one or two characters, whom they did not resemble. Indeed, there was often a thirty- or forty-year age gap between actors and their characters. This play provoked palpable anxiety in reviewers – more so than any other play by Blythe, as far as I can tell. These anxieties centred on ethics, empathy, comedy, and anthropology. For example, Spencer, who praised *Come Out Eli*, voices 'serious reservations about a show that often found me laughing uproariously, but which finally left me guilty about doing so. . . . I often felt the audience was invited to laugh at, rather than with, disconcertingly frank interviewees.'[55]

He also raises doubts about 'the device of having actors in their thirties playing characters more than twice their age. Their clever impersonation of the speech and movement of the elderly adds to the impression that people are being exploited merely as dramatic raw material.'[56] Luckhurst also sees a connection between the comedy and casting of the piece, arguing that while the casting 'certainly added to the alienation effect . . . it also treated the characters as comic, strongly implying that the subject itself might be difficult to take seriously, arguably reinforcing taboos about the elderly, and pre-judging the material for spectators'.[57] For Paul Taylor, this 'exposes the difference between mimicry and empathy', meaning that *Cruising* ends up feeling too much like anthropology.[58] Like participants in any ethnography, the interviewees 'might feel a touch patronized'.[59] In the end, only one critic appeared to like this approach.[60]

Futures

For the reasons outlined above, I tend to prefer the epic mode to the realistic and mixed modes. Nevertheless, the naturalistic style has transferred successfully to screen,

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Anne Gridley in *No Dice*. Photo: Peter Nigrini.

for example in the short promotional videos for *The Girlfriend Experience* and the two-part television series *The Riots: In Their Own Words* (2012).[61] Writing about the latter, assistant producer Nicola Cutcher states:

> On stage the headphones can be visible and accepted as a stylistic device. On screen we wanted naturalism, so camera, sound, and make-up all worked together to ensure the earpieces were invisible at all times. Each actor was given one tiny earpiece that could be disguised by hair and make-up and one larger earpiece that would be hidden by the camera angle.[62]

In the *Girlfriend Experience* videos, the actors are wearing two earpieces, according to Blythe, but they are both artfully obscured.[63]

If the presence of headphones in realist stage productions prompts the question 'Why headphones?', then their apparent absence from realist screen productions prompts the question 'Why actors?' That is, why not simply put the interviewees themselves on screen, as television documentaries almost always do and theatrical documentaries sometimes do? The answer, perhaps, has to do with privacy. Speaking about *Cruising*, Blythe notes:

> The 'recorded delivery' technique has a further advantage [over television]. It allows interviewees to share highly personal information while offering a degree of protection for their identities. . . . By only using [Maureen's] words in the play, I had protected her identity, allowing her to speak freely, safe in the knowledge that she could walk down the street without being recognized. Cameras may present something closer to actual reality, but audio allows for greater access to underground worlds.[64]

In other words, by allowing its interviewees anonymity, headphone verbatim theatre preserves its subjects' dignity. Of course this does not always happen, but when it does it creates the conditions whereby subjects can 'appear' without being framed as 'object[s] of spectacle', thus avoiding what Julie Salverson terms an 'aesthetic of injury' or curiosity.[65]

Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum of headphone verbatim, the New York-based company Nature Theater of Oklahoma, directed by Pavol Liška and Kelly Copper, has pushed the epic form even further. I hesitate to include Nature Theater here, in part because they, and especially their interpreters, seem to disavow the documentary genre. For instance, Karinne Keithley states that Copper does not 'simply "document" a nonfictional reality as documentary theatre might; rather, in collaboration with the company, she collects, transcribes, and orders linguistic data so that they may collectively energize it on stage'.[66]

To me, this could describe a documentary method – although not 'the' documentary method, as there is no single one. Keithley, however, defines the genre more narrowly, partly, it seems, to keep Nature Theater safely on the other side. Perhaps this has to do with Nature Theater's desire to identify, and be identified as, part of the American avant-garde, rather than as part of a social realism movement.[67] Certainly, their work shares many affinities with the Wooster Group and Elevator Repair Service as well as artists from an earlier era such as John Cage. Nevertheless, there are some similarities between their work and that of other headphone verbatim practitioners.

First, their source material often derives from recorded conversations. *No Dice* (2007) was generated from 'over one hundred hours

of . . . [phone] conversations with . . . co-conspirators, friends, and relations'.[68] *Rambo Solo* (2008) 'derived from a phone call . . . during which . . . Liska asked [actor] Zachary Oberzan to retell the story of *First Blood*. Oberzan obliged, in prolific detail, by recounting the story from the novel that preceded the movie starring Sylvester Stallone.'[69] And *Romeo and Juliet* (2008) is 'a transcription of an edited sequence of phone conversations in which Liska asks his interlocutors to retell Shakespeare's plays in as much detail as they can remember'.[70] So far, so familiar.

Second, the working methods of Nature Theater are similar to those of other headphone verbatim practitioners in that they record conversations, do an audio edit, and avoid transcription if possible.[71] In performance they replay these conversations through earphones, which the actors wear and which are visible to the audience. The actors are asked to 'stick as closely as possible to the original timings and language of the recording', including all the 'Um's, 'Well's, 'I Think's, 'I Don't Remember's, and 'Is That Right's.[72] There are additional similarities, such as their 'reveal' of the original conversation at the end of *No Dice*, which Oades uses at the end of *Stories of Love and Hate* to great effect.

Where Nature Theater of Oklahoma's work differs is in its length and in its performers' verbal and physical language. In terms of length, Blythe and Oades's productions typically last between one and two hours whereas Nature Theater's performances can go for four or more. In terms of vocality and physicality, Blythe and Oades's actors typically embody behaviour that is only slightly elevated above the everyday, whereas Nature Theater's actors speak with heightened intonations and seem to enact a secret sign language, which Jana Perkovic describes as 'a legible, but closed system of references'.[73]

Watching *No Dice*, she manages to decipher 'the sign of the cross, thumbs up, mimed wall, and some nameless but recognizable gestures, such as intravenous drug use'; another critic recognizes 'strange gestures . . . from a magician, disco dancing, and blocking clichés from the stage and soap opera'.[74] When these gestures are paired with preposterous pirate, cowboy, and showgirl costumes, the results resemble what one critic calls the 'serious amateurism of the *Waiting for Guffman* variety'.[75]

This interest in movement means that the Nature Theater of Oklahoma's work starts to cross over into a genre I call documentary dance or, for want of a better term, physical verbatim theatre. Here I am thinking of works by companies such as London-based DV8 and Sydney-based Force Majeure. DV8 has produced at least two pieces that could fit into this category: *To Be Straight With You* (2007), for which they interviewed over eighty people about tolerance, religion, and sexuality; and *Can We Talk About This?* (2011), for which they interviewed some fifty people about freedom of speech, multiculturalism, and Islam.

Force Majeure has also produced two works of this nature: *The Age I'm In* (2008), in which a diverse selection of interviewees, aged between fourteen and eighty, speak about age and ageing; and *Never Did Me Any Harm* (2012), which deals with child-rearing practices. There is obviously much more work to be done on this genre – but that is for another article and another time.

In summary, headphone verbatim theatre has been discussed, by critics and academics alike, in terms of three main aspects: authenticity, alienation, and acting. While these approaches may appear opposed, they are in fact aligned in the sense that they all emphasize the *visual* effects of headphones. This means that *aural* aspects of headphone verbatim remain un-, or at least under-, theorized. In the final section of this paper, I outline the case for a 'listening turn'.

Audiences

The mainstream discourse on headphone verbatim indicates that authors, actors, and audiences have already noted how central is listening to both production and performance. For example, Blythe states: 'Because we do not listen to each other enough in daily

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life, when someone offers an attentive ear, people grab the opportunity to talk – even about highly personal information. . . . People are flattered that someone wants to listen.'[76]

For Oades, this is particularly true during crises, especially those reported, represented, and in some ways manufactured, by the media. Speaking about *Stories of Love and Hate*, which was made in the wake of a riot, she says: 'There is something incredibly important in being able to say to the interviewees: "What you're saying is going to be heard." . . . People felt so misrepresented by the media . . . that the offer to tell their story in their words, and then have it reheard, was potent in those circumstances.'[77]

Of course, this could be said of verbatim theatre more broadly. Robin Soans has done so. He states: 'I wouldn't say that verbatim theatre gives Paul a voice – he has a voice already – but it does provide his voice with listening ears: mine when he tells me his story, and those of the audience when the actor tells it to them.' Hence, it provides 'an amplification of an otherwise lost voice'.[78] While this may be true of all verbatim theatre, the presence of headphones makes this amplification particularly visible in headphone verbatim.

In addition, the presence of headphones makes the performers' acts of translation more apparent. The absence of a script means that actors are less likely to learn their lines and thus, according to Blythe, more likely to 'actively . . . listen to their lines'.[79] Similarly, Oades states that acting in headphone verbatim is 'a very particular skill, and you have to have a very good ear'.[80] She hopes that watching actors with 'good ears' in turn brings the audience into a 'heightened state of listening'.[81] For the most part, critics agree that it does. For example, Williams says of *Fast Cars and Tractor Engines* that it makes for 'compulsive listening', and Clapp says of *Come Out Eli*, that it 'keep[s] your ears keen'.[82]

More recently Clapp has said, 'Each show created by Alecky Blythe makes its audience listen differently. . . . You can never again listen to the uniformly heightened prose of composed drama in the same way.'[83] Despite the abundance of mainstream observations about listening and headphone verbatim, there is relatively little theoretical work on the subject. The work that does exist considers verbatim theatre more broadly and tends to utilize psychoanalytic models, meaning that listening to verbatim theatre is often likened to 'therapeutic listening', as John Tebbutt calls it in a slightly different context.[84] In contrast, headphone verbatim's own insistence on the mediated nature of listening offers the opportunity to move away from therapeutic models towards media and cultural studies, where a 'listening turn' is already under way.

In 2009, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* published a special issue, 'Listening: New Ways of Engaging with Media and Culture', in which authors canvassed a wide variety of theories and practices, including eavesdropping, political listening, collective listening, courageous listening, and many others. Together, these theories might shift the discourse on verbatim theatre away from notions of 'giving voice' towards 'granting an audience'. To put it otherwise, it reminds us that as well as asking 'Who speaks and for whom?' we also need to ask 'Who listens and to whom?'

Of course, there are limits to the effectiveness of listening both as practice and discourse. As a practice, listening rarely operates alone: we are usually looking and listening simultaneously, so that even if a particular performance is modelling a new form of listening, it may also perpetuate old spectatorial habits. And listening is not infallible and it is easily co-opted, as Justine Lloyd has argued. Think, for instance, of politicians' 'listening tours' and new managerial strategies of 'listening' to your employees before doing what you were going to do anyway.[85]

Conclusion

As a discourse, listening is at risk of reproducing that active–passive binary that has, until recently, dominated discussions of spectatorship.[86] Nevertheless, listening lies at the heart of headphone verbatim theatre and as such will be central to efforts to conceive and theorize it as a form.

Justin Rosniak, John Shrimpton, Mohammed Ahmad, Billy MacPherson, and Katia Molino in *I'm Your Man*. Photo: Heidrun Löhr.

Created in an American rehearsal room, exported to an English workshop, and developed in England, Belgium, Australia, Georgia, and the United States, headphone verbatim is a truly global genre. So too are its stories and its casts. So far, the form has three identifiable genres: the social crisis play; the social justice play; and the social portrait play. The first of these emerges at or from a moment of acute social crisis, such as during or after a riot, siege, or murder. The second emerges out of a more general concern about social justice and the rights of marginalized subjects – migrants, the elderly, and sex workers, among others. The third emerges from a playwright's general interest in a person, place, or community.

In addition, headphone verbatim has three identifiable performance modes: the epic mode; the naturalistic mode; and the mixed mode. The first seems the most successful thus far, but the second two are, in turn, begetting new genres such as 'verbatim television' and 'verbatim dance'. The precise nature of these genres will of course continue to change as the technology does. In early performances of headphone verbatim, actors held minidisc player-recorders and wore small earbuds, which were connected by long wires. More recently, they have worn in-ear monitors that receive radio signals from a laptop or sound desk. These changes in the practice of headphone verbatim will, in turn, necessitate changes in the discourse associated with it. For the moment, however, headphone verbatim offers the opportunity to go beyond psychoanalytic theories of listening and to investigate theories of listening in media, cultural studies, and other disciplines.

I want to finish with the fourth scene of *No Dice*, where Robert Johanson's character Bobby says: 'If – you could then hear / the cosmic murmur . . . / Be able to HEAR . . . ! / (*Pause.*) / Because you don't hear / yourself right now, right? / And I don't hear myself. / We don't hear ourselves. / We just talk, and – and / things . . . / things go unrecorded.'[87] Of course, the wonder of headphone verbatim is that some things *are* recorded and, what's

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more, some of these recordings are performed. To perform listening, to make visible the invisible labour of hearing and heeding – that is the achievement of headphone verbatim.

Notes and References

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