

Patrick Duggan

## *Others*, Spectatorship, and the Ethics of Verbatim Performance

In this article Patrick Duggan interrogates The Paper Birds' 2010 production *Others* to explore the political and ethical implications of embodying the (verbatim) texts of others. Built from a six-month exchange of letters between the company and a prisoner, a celebrity (a very non-committal Heather Mills, apparently), and an Iranian artist, *Others* fuses live music with verbatim and physical theatre texts to investigate the 'otherness' of women from vastly divergent cultural contexts. With equal measures of humour and honesty the performance deconstructs these voices both to highlight their particular concerns and problems and to interrogate larger issues relating to 'others' with whom we have conscious or unconscious contact. The ethical implications of continuing or discontinuing the correspondences with the three women are explored, and trauma and embodiment theories are used alongside Lévinasian and Russellian theories of ethics to ask what an encounter with such others might teach us about ourselves, about the traumatized other and about the ethics of encounter within performance texts. Patrick Duggan is Lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Exeter. A practising director, he has also taught extensively in the UK and Ireland as well as in Germany and the United States. He is author of *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester University Press, 2012) and co-edited *Reverberations: Britishness, Aesthetics and Small-Scale Theatres* (Intellect, 2013) and a special issue of the journal *Performance Research 'On Trauma'* (Taylor and Francis, 2011).

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In *Others*, we very explicitly share and reference the theatrical techniques we are using. We open up our working process and in turn, part of ourselves.

Jemma McDonnell, 2011<sup>1</sup>

*Others* (2010), by The Paper Birds, was one of the most enjoyable, interesting, and moving productions I saw in 2010, but at the same time one of the most ethically complex and problematic.<sup>2</sup> There are only three performers in the piece (four, if you count an off-stage but visible piano player who makes some occasional interventions); it is built from a six-month exchange of letters between the company and a prisoner (Sally), a celebrity (a very non-committal Heather Mills), and an Iranian artist (Nasim). *Others* mixes live music with verbatim and physical theatre to investigate movingly and intelligently the 'otherness' of women from vastly divergent cultural contexts. The piece makes

use of humour and unflinching honesty to deconstruct these voices not only to highlight their particular concerns and problems but also to interrogate wider socio-political and cultural concerns about 'others' with whom we – the wider society – have conscious and unconscious contact.

Culture, Raymond Williams tells us, is ordinary (Williams, 1996). That is the first fact in considering and analyzing cultural objects to find out what they tell us about ourselves and our society:

Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. (Williams, 1996, p. 54)

Thus we have understandings of our culture and cultural products at societal and individual levels; we come to understand our society through culture and vice versa. In this way, at a very 'ordinary' level, we are all involved in making and understanding 'our' culture; and cultural meaning(s) are constructed and understood at subjective (individual) and more objective (collective) levels.

If cultural products might be ordinary they are also fundamentally modes of a society thinking itself through in various different ways. As an art form of bodies in relation to each other, theatre and performance create a space in which we can begin to consider the world, our position within it, and thus our position in relationship to others. In doing so, theatre and performance enters us (makers, thinkers, audience) into an ethical relationship with the people in the theatre (audience and performers), the images presented and those represented in those images and the concerns raised by those representations.

### Representing Trauma in Performance

This is not, of course, to deny, banalize or neglect the materiality of original trauma events and their witnessing; nor is it my intention to privilege theatre/performance as a site of ethical encounter above other events of encounter, something Geraldine Harris cautions against as she suggests that

in such approaches there can be a degree of abstraction and decontextualization that allows for slippage between figural and literal resistance and subversion and/or between the ethics of 'witnessing' a performance and 'witnessing' an actual significant event. Sometimes self-reflexivity can signify narcissism. (Harris, 2009, p. 1)

Rather, I am suggesting that because of the conditions of its operation – the encounter of live bodies that gaze upon each other – the theatre might be considered an ethically dense and complex space, especially when attending to questions and representations of trauma and incarceration as *Others* certainly did.

Addressing and representing the voices of the three 'others', the piece not only raised a number of ethical questions from within the

The Paper Birds are an all-female theatre collective, who have been making performance work professionally since 2003. In this time they have developed a collaborative, physical theatre style that is aesthetically and technically accomplished, rigorously researched, and politically nuanced.

Formed by Jemma McDonnell (Artistic Director), Kylie Walsh (Co-founder and Outreach Director) and Elle Moreton, the company's aesthetic practice is identifiably built on the shoulders of companies they were exposed to as students at Bretton Hall on the BA Acting programme (2000–2003) and during their time on the MA Theatre Collectives at Chichester University (2008–9). This praxis-based university training called on a history of experimental performance practice, physical and dance theatres, 'post-modern' performance, overt theatricality, and a rich visual depth – all of which are evidenced in their own form of politically focused, physical theatre. They are concerned to make work that 'is important; work that is culturally, socially and politically observational and conversationally urgent' (Paper Birds, 2011: online).

While not the central focus of this essay, it is important to note that more often than not their work 'emerge[s] from a female perspective and often this female voice will prioritize stories of women' (for a more detailed discussion of their work in relation to feminism and feminist politics see Duggan, 2013). Their work is undeniably 'issue based' with productions thus far tackling topics that include sex trafficking, the disenfranchisement of the other, and Britain's binge-drinking culture. As McDonnell put it to me: 'We don't make the work for ourselves, we make it to share and to start discussions and debates and to engage other people' (McDonnell, 2011: interview with author).

diegesis but also in the manner of its production, especially in relation to the prisoner Sally who (despite the company sending her a script and openly stating their aims) had very limited access to the representations made of her and no possibility of engaging with the final performance.

*Others* engaged its audience in complex negotiations of otherness and encoded a set of what I term 'authenticity effects' through an arbitration of the fragmented experiences and voices of three female 'others'. The ethical

complexity of the work comes through its dramaturgy and the modalities of representation in the performance – both of which signalled a reflexive appreciation of the difficulties that shape encounters with otherness – and the actual processes of performance-making that, paradoxically, gave one of the women only limited access to the final performance and thus no opportunity to feed back to the representations created of her from her testimony.

Thus the piece sets up a performance that openly and explicitly raises and engages with questions and problems of otherness, while in the same moment unintentionally distances – or ‘others’ – an interviewee from the performance itself and hence the ways in which it reframes and re-presents her and her testimony.

This raises a number of ethical problems/questions/complexities; however, these are precisely the catalyst to what we might term ‘proper’ contemplation of the trauma(s) and personal contexts of the ‘others’ represented in this production. This in turn positions the audience in an ethically complex relationship with the piece, those who made it, and those who are represented in it.

With a particular emphasis on the character of Sally, and principally through Lévinasian and Russellian theories of ethics, alongside Rancière’s thinking on the ethics and politics of spectatorship, in what follows I attempt to answer two questions centred on the ethics of representation in operation within this performance and at a more general level in work that ‘represents’ the (traumatized) other.

In the first instance I am seeking to explore what it means to appropriate the other for artistic means. Second, I am asking what is at stake in embodying a ‘real’ other (as opposed to a fictional character), especially in a verbatim context, and when that other is to some degree ‘powerless’ to resist or challenge that embodiment.<sup>3</sup> Through these questions, the article further points to ideas about what an encounter with such others might teach us about ourselves, about the traumatized other, and about the ethics of encounter within performance contexts.

As we enter the tiny studio space (Camden People’s Theatre) we are greeted by a young woman calling herself Jemma. Two others nod and say ‘Hi’. We spot some seats we’d like – they’re not numbered – and squeeze into the narrow row past those already seated: ‘Sorry, sorry. Excuse me. Thanks. Sorry.’ We sit down just as Jemma asks, ‘Is everyone in? Elle? Yep.’ The house lights come down and Jemma explains that she would like to write to us and ask us some questions, sixty to a hundred; our answers will be used in the making of a show about ‘others’.

The opening of the Paper Birds’ *Others* is disarmingly simple and effective, very quickly positioning the audience as both spectators of a theatrical performance and co-creators of that performance as we come to stand in for the three women with whom the company has been in correspondence. Thus we become implicated in the work from the very first moments.

This audience–performer relationship is complicated further as the three central performers embody and swap the roles of each of the three women throughout the performance, using their words as well as ones written by the company and all the while acknowledging our presence and with that the theatricality of the event of which we are all a part. There is thus a complex performance text in operation in *Others*: an embellished, theatricalized verbatim text that represents three absent, othered bodies is passed between three performers’ bodies while it is witnessed by rather fewer than fifty spectators who have been written into the text and very clearly set up to hold at least some responsibility for that which is being presented. In acknowledging the audience and the fact that ‘this is theatre’, we become explicitly bound to an ethics of spectating as much as the performers are tied to an ethics of making the work.

### Frames

In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Jacques Rancière argues that in the contemporary moment horror (and trauma) have become

banal not because we are exposed to too many images of them, but because we see

too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak.  
(Rancière, 2009, p. 96)

While reciprocity of gaze is at the centre of all theatrical encounters it is explicitly foregrounded in *Others*; the fact of the audience's mutual co-presence with the performers and the implication effect thus set up are fundamental to the ethical dilemma(s) that the performance stimulates.

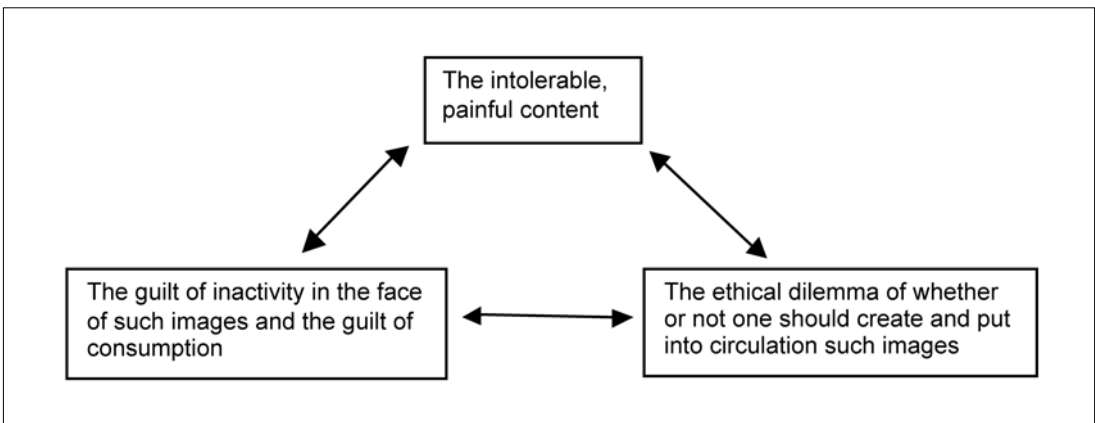
Rancière rhetorically asks, 'What makes an image intolerable?' and he muses that the question seems to be asking us to consider 'What features [of an image] make us unable to view [it] without experiencing pain or indignation'. But this, he suggests, gives rise to a second question of equal importance: 'Is it acceptable to make such images and exhibit them to others?' (2009, p. 83). In asking these questions, Rancière is not only asking us to attend to the content of the image but more fundamentally to consider the ethics involved in creating, disseminating, and viewing such images.

The dilemma here is at the level of cultural production *and* at the level of consumption. Rancière seems, then, implicitly to suggest that the making of artworks might be riddled with intolerable images and unethical production and consumption practices. From here, he argues that the political efficacy of 'intolerable images' is based in the specta-

tor's 'guilt' about the content of the images; that is to say, he contends that political effect is partly figured as a result of the spectator's feeling 'guilty about being there and doing nothing; about viewing these images of pain and death, rather than struggling against the powers responsible for it' (p. 85; cf. p. 83–6). Thus, for Rancière, a triangulation of tensions comes into operation in the viewing of 'intolerable images', as in the diagram below.

This triangulation serves two purposes. First it functions as a theoretical frame through which to consider the central cultural object of my investigations – The Paper Birds' *Others* – insofar as it precisely concerns itself with the ethics of encounter and the ethics of production that are under consideration in this article. Second, at a more general level, the operation of the tensions suggests a model similar to the operation of trauma in the social 'real' of the survivor-sufferer's daily existence (cf. Duggan and Wallis, 2011, p. 5). Rancière's triangulation implies an unsettling of the spectators as they are 'pulled' from one pole to another, unable to settle into viewing the images 'in' one mode of encounter or the other.

Through this lens, I now turn to frame *Others* in the verbatim theatre and trauma contexts in which the company position their work. *Others* is what we might term a piece of proto-verbatim theatre – 'proto' because, although making use of 'real words' gathered from those being represented, there is no claim of exact truthfulness here. The company does not suggest, in promotional literature or on stage, that the production is



anything other than a piece of theatre. The play is not what David Hare might call 'factual theatre' which, as Amanda Stuart-Fisher has argued, gains a sense of authenticity from a 'faithful adherence to actuality and reality' (Stuart-Fisher, 2011, p. 112).

However, in the opening moments of the work the verbatim nature of (some of) the spoken text and the importance of the use of actual words of the 'others' on the construction of the work is made explicit. In so doing, the company, unwittingly or not, are making a claim for the work's authenticity at the level of the witnessing the 'real stories' of the women they are representing.

The authenticity at work here is not one of verisimilitude or some sense of 'truth', rather it is precisely concerned with the relationship between the theatricality of the event and the supposed reality of the spoken text. The interaction of the 'reality' of the spoken texts and the overt (almost meta-) theatricality of the event converge to create what we might think of as authenticity effects. By this I mean that the representations made by the company might be seen to correspond to a more Heideggerian interpretation of authenticity insofar as the work is not attending to any sense of factual veracity but might be presenting something which speaks to the conditions of human existence and especially the experience of trauma.

This is to say, trauma is not experienced in the here and now of the trauma-event but in the warping of time and confusion of the re-presentations of trauma-symptoms. The authenticity of trauma is thus an always already theatricalized moment of unclear remembering and representations, of 'truth' and fiction played out in the mind of the survivor-sufferer (cf. Duggan, 2012). With *Others*, *The Paper Birds* are speaking a theatrical language that might be seen precisely to mirror this fragmented fact-fiction experience.

In *Trauma and Human Existence*, Robert Stolorow argues that 'trauma shatters the absolutisms of everyday life' and as such fractures and fragments the survivor-sufferer's experience of the world (Stolorow, 2007, p. 41). The experience of trauma is not one of linearity or clarity and thus any attempt to

represent it (as 'impossible' as that has been claimed to be<sup>4</sup>) needs to attend to that structural fracturing and disruption of linear time. In other words, representing trauma is perhaps less to do with verisimilitude of image and is more concerned with structure and experience. *The Paper Birds* attend to trauma in an oblique way: the characters' traumata are generally latent rather than explicit, but this piece calls for an implicit witness to and remembrance of trauma both on the part of the performers and, especially, on the part of the audience.

This is achieved in part through the production's dramaturgical strategies in which characters are passed between the different performers and an abstracted physical language is used to communicate the effect and affect of trauma on those characters and those around them. Meanwhile, direct address and referencing of the fact that we are at the theatre ensure this 'message' is related out beyond the stage and diegesis to the audience and the social real. This, alongside the carefully composed testimonial text, ensures a deliberately fractured, fallible, and ambiguous structure which confuses the reading of traumatic narrative and adds a discombobulating voice into the 'verbatim' narrative being told. Similarly, the physical language is beautiful and violent in turn, speaking both to the structure of traumatic memory and symptom.

### 'You Will Still Write, Won't You?'

JEMMA Sally, thank you for your letter. We are really pleased that you are keen to get involved and thank you for the card you made me, that was really nice of you . . .

We have some more questions actually. . . . I wondered if you might be able to write us a story, any story, it does not have to be about what happened. . . . Well, I am obviously writing to you because you are in prison but I don't want that to define you. I know there is more to you than where you are, but also we wondered, it may be for legal reasons that you can't, we were just wondering, if you're not comfortable . . .

What did you do? What have you done?

We just need to know . . . for the play.

Our first guess was fraud. I mean, if you're serving a life sentence it means it's not petty theft or assault. . . . We thought it could have been robbery, or worse? (Paper Birds, 2010, p. 16)<sup>5</sup>





Performance still of The Paper Birds' *Others* (2010). Left to right: Shani Erez, Jemma McDonnell and Kylie Walsh. Photo: Helen Lindley.

A performer 'picks up' the role of the convict to tell us how she was physically abused by a partner. The small, packed auditorium audibly and visually flinches as an invisible man lifts her by the throat and throws her on to a table. Although physically absent the abuser is made palpably present through McDonnell's virtuosic physical skill: her body is 'lifted' at the throat, her chin is pushed upwards to elongate and stretch her body on to tiptoes before it is violently 'thrown' backwards on to a table behind her. The phantom attacker begins to strangle her as, all the while, she tries desperately to reassure and protect the invisible child her monologue made discernibly present also.

As set up above, there is authenticity here; not at the level of 'fact' (Sally may have made

up the story or the company may have embellished it, for example) or accurate representation of trauma (which could banalize the facts of the original events). Rather, the impact of the moment (seemingly materially felt in the audience, judging by the embodied reactions) is in the relationship between its overt theatricality<sup>6</sup> and a dramaturgical structure that might be seen to mirror or map on to the structure of traumatic encounter.

The physical language the performers use is simple and uncluttered: it is not trying to be like the original trauma nor is it making a comment on it; in fact, the poetic physicality is precisely *inauthentic* in relation to the original moment, but it produces the effect of authenticity. As Stuart-Fisher has argued, while 'the "truth" of the traumatic event is

arguably not transparent, knowable, or even communicable' through verbatim transcripts, we might be able to figure a dramaturgy that 'set[s] aside standard conceptions of truth (such as correspondence theories or adequacy to the facts) and instead consider a more existentially nuanced articulation of truth grasped as "authenticity"' (Stuart-Fisher, 2011, p. 112).

Meanwhile, Geraldine Harris, glossing Rancière, sets out that one result of recent discourses that have privileged live performances as ideal sites for political and ethical witnessing is paradoxically to reinforce 'something very like Plato's anti-theatrical prejudice' (Harris, 2009, p. 10). For Rancière, and other critics of theatrical spectatorship, this anti-theatricality is a result of the dubious nature of spectatorship, identifiable within two key presuppositions.

First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.

(Rancière, 2009, p. 2)

These central presuppositions are quite reductive because they remove the ethical and political imperatives inherent in the gaze by suggesting it occupies a neutral, immobile and uncritical space (cf. Harpin, 2011). Nevertheless, for Harris these presuppositions can be seen to motivate a search for a theatre which 'activates' the spectator and urges them to 'overcome' mimesis (a defining quality of theatre) because it is the mimetic spectacle 'which "produces" the spectator as passive and unknowing' (Harris, 2009, p. 11, emphasis in original). For Rancière the work of Brecht and Artaud achieves such activation and overcomes the 'problem' of passivity within spectatorship; thus, the 'emancipation' of the spectator comes through their activation either in being made explicitly aware of the condition of theatre as spectacle and shown the fabric of its own production (*vide* Brecht) or the opposite, in which 'participation' in the event erodes it as represen-

tation to the point that it becomes 'life' (*vide* Artaud) (cf. Rancière, 2009, p. 3–6).

This is precisely what might be seen to be in operation in the moment described above and throughout *Others*: the audience are positioned as active, implicated witnesses to the individual stories of the women represented and to the ideas collectively represented through their stories. In fusing verbatim texts with overt theatricality and direct address *The Paper Birds* establish a dramaturgy that at once operates within a Brechtian frame in which the company rhetorically say, 'Look, here is a piece of theatre; you need to know that it's "pretend";' but at the same time we are told not only that it is being made *for* us but also *because of / by* us, as made apparent in the opening of the production (glossed above).

### Ethical Witnessing

Thus, because the audience has been set up as co-creators of meaning, they might be seen to become what Peggy Phelan has called 'ethical witnesses'. Ethical witnessing comes into being when the conditions of the performance engage the spectator in the production of multifarious or fluid meanings which might promote consciousness of the ethical-political implications of those meanings in the social realm (cf. Phelan, 1999 and 2004). In addressing the audience in the way they do, *The Paper Birds* implicate them explicitly through the dramaturgical strategy of the production and later by highlighting some of the ethical dilemmas the play raises.

'You will still write, won't you?' asks Sally, explicitly drawing attention to the ethical dilemma of whether or not the company will continue their correspondence with Sally which provides a seemingly much desired contact with the outside world for her. Thus, *Others* invites its audience to bear witness to the specific contexts and content of this particular production but also to significant socio-cultural 'events' and contexts in process beyond the theatre (*vide* Hayden White<sup>7</sup>). As McDonnell put it to me in 2011:

[Artists] represent others and upon seeing [those representations] audiences may agree, disagree



Performance still of The Paper Birds' *Others* (2010). Performer: Jemma McDonnell. Photo: Helen Lindley.

and/or be influenced by the way you have presented a character. We take that responsibility very seriously. With *Others* . . . we allow the audience to explore their prejudices [and they are encouraged to do so because] we admit to having them too. It makes it okay for the audience member sitting in the dark to laugh at a misrepresentation of a whole nation of people, if throughout the play we encourage them to re-evaluate their attitudes and experiences. If they leave having been on their own ethical journey then our job is done.

Above I suggested that this production might be seen as authentically attending to traumata under Heidegger's proposition that authenticity is not about factual accuracy but about correspondence to the conditions of human existence. The problem arising at this point is

that while the production's dramaturgy attends to such a correspondence, at the level of *representation* the company might be seen inadvertently to perpetuate or at least figurally and artistically compound the 'conditions' of Sally's daily existence.

While the company are certainly alert to the problematics of expropriating the experiences and voices of these 'other/ed' women, within the theatrical system of representation the appropriating and re-embodying of Sally's story without her having access to it (beyond being sent an early copy of the text) might be seen to mirror the conditions of her confinement: Sally is bound by particular structures of representation and domi-



nation within the site of her daily reality *and* within the site of the performance. She becomes subject(ed) to the representations as well as the subject of them.

In her insightful critique of Robin Soans's *Talking to Terrorists* Amanda Stuart-Fisher contends that while the play tells stories of terrorism that are 'often horrific, brutal, and "true"', it nevertheless offers little beyond a 'word-for-word re-telling of personal stories of terrorism' which reinforce a 'simplistic message that "all terrorism is bad and therefore we shouldn't do it"'. And she continues by arguing that the play 'neither penetrates the trauma or the act of terrorism, nor discloses any insight into the politics of these situations' (Stuart-Fisher, 2011, p. 113).

While some of the problems of a 'word-for-word re-telling' do still linger in *Others*, in the main the play is able to deconstruct any 'simplistic message' of good and bad by openly admitting its theatricality, thus alleviating any 'truth' claims but allowing the audience to discover their own experiences of the truth and authenticity of the women's stories. In allowing the audience (some) 'control' of the meaning, the performance implicitly gives insight into the politics of Sally's and the other women's situations. In the case of Sally, prison life, the politics of incarceration, and its effects are made visible to the audience. The question 'What have you done?' highlights a social fascination with the discourse of crime and punishment. In asking a question that notionally one is not 'supposed' to ask of a prisoner, it might be seen to be explicitly levelling Rancière's ethical question, 'Is it acceptable to make such images and exhibit them to others?' (2009, p. 83), at itself and at (verbatim) performances more generally.

### On the Ethics of *Others*

Bertrand Russell has argued that while ethics are certainly understood and developed at an individual level we might also be able to figure the ethical outside the merely subjective (cf. Russell, 1999, p. 1–24 and 151–63). He 'proves' this by talking about oysters and Nazis:

If I say that oysters are good, and you say that they are nasty, we both understand that we are merely expressing our personal tastes, and that there is nothing to argue about. But when Nazis say that it is good to torture Jews, and we say that it is bad, we do not feel as if we were merely expressing a difference of taste; we are even willing to fight and die for our opinion, which we should not do to enforce our view about oysters.

(Russell, 1999, p. 156)

This is all well and good but there is a more complex problem at the heart of any consideration of ethics: what do we mean by ethics and ethical decisions?

Russell, a Utilitarian, proposes that ethics is the 'general inquiry into what is good, and into what good is' (p. 99). So far, so opaque; but he goes on to argue that to be 'good' we should do what *we think* will produce the best consequences based on consideration of the available evidence. He later boils down his arguments to three rules. First, he contends that looking across acts which arouse emotions of approval or disapproval we can say that those which are approved of have effects of a certain kind but those that are disapproved of have the opposite effects. Second, he proposes that effects that lead to approval are good, those that lead to disapproval are bad. Finally, he argues that an act which, on the available evidence, is likely to produce better effects than other acts available in the circumstances is the one that is right and what we ought to do. Thus, what we ought to do is 'right' (cf. Russell, 1999, p. 152). We might, in light of this, ask if *The Paper Birds* should have made the work. And whether they should have used Sally's words.

Charles Pigden pushes the third 'rule' a little further to argue that (a) 'The right thing to do is defined as the action which an impartial, informed, and non-superstitious spectator would approve of doing'. Thus (b), the right thing to do is that action which seems likely to produce the best effects (in Russell, 1999, p. 153). Of course, this still leaves asking, 'But for whom?'

So, according to Russell (according to my brief account) an ethical act comes down to doing that thing which will produce the best results and, given that he was a Utilitarian,

I guess we can add, 'for the largest possible number of people'. If this is the case, then we might ask if the representation of Sally is ethically 'good' because, in giving voice to and representing her story, it comes to referentially signify and give voice to a great many other similarly disenfranchised others. At the level of the ethics of making, then, the company might be seen to have 'done the right thing' – leaving us in need of interrogating the ethics of watching rather than, or at least as well as, the ethics of making. Or, to put it slightly differently, we might need to consider the ethics of the encounter with the other.

In 'Ethics as First Philosophy', Emmanuel Lévinas proposes an ethics that is oriented around encounters with and responsibility to/for the other (Lévinas, 1989, p. 75–87). He argues that 'one has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other' (p. 82).

Thus, performance made in relation to or read through Lévinasian ethics encourages the spectator to take ethical responsibility for the (represented) other, rather than simply viewing the performance as a reflection or exploration of personal subjectivity. In representing the three female 'others', *The Paper Birds* are precisely and explicitly asking us to engage with an ethical responsibility that extends beyond our own bodies and the bodies that immediately surround us in our personal lives.

If we are brought into being as a result of our responsibility to the other, we must take up this ethical responsibility when appropriating that other, or the memories of that other, in the production of cultural objects. This is not to suggest that such events as those described by Sally, or indeed representations of the 'real' other such as those found in *Others*, cannot be addressed in theatre and performance, but that we have a responsibility to handle that material with care – not because of some sense of political correctness or fear of offending, but because to misappropriate such material is to run the risk of belittling it by denying the particulars of its original context. The seriousness of this

responsibility is ratcheted up considerably when representing in a proto-verbatim context a real other who has no recourse to interrogate that representation (either because they have no access to appropriate discourses and vocabularies or, as here, they simply cannot see the representation and so respond to it).

### 'How Shall I Act?'

At the beginning of *Theatre and Ethics* (2009), Nicholas Ridout suggests that asking of oneself 'How shall I act?' is a basic, yet succinct, way of interrogating the question of ethics in any situation (cf. Ridout, 2009, p. 5 and *passim*). Asking how to act as a maker or spectator of performance might thus be considered a key question when addressing and representing the other, especially the disenfranchised other, in performance. McDonnell made it clear in the 2011 interview that she knows how she wishes to act, what she hopes the bodies in her production will represent, and what she wishes those representations to question and problematize:

Some of what we're saying about these women is very honest and at times uncomfortable. But the piece deconstructs itself and problematizes the narratives it tells. It was important that the women didn't feel like we had in any way misrepresented them, but in a way that was impossible because we do misrepresent them but that's part of the story. . . . The whole premise of the piece was that we don't understand them and that the work is about us trying to understand them and maybe getting that wrong. We were coming in with the intention of discussing and interrogating the misrepresentations that all the women have experienced.

The piece itself explicitly foregrounds this notion of misrepresentation and humorously and playfully highlights the naivety of the company's assumptions about all the women and their circumstances. Furthermore, according to McDonnell, at no point has the company misrepresented themselves to the women they are communicating with, since they were

very, very honest and upfront with the women from day one; saying that we were contacting them because we wanted to make a performance,

and that we wanted to correspond with them for six weeks. We stated that after that allotted time we would let them know how the work was progressing, and how it was being received by the press and audiences. So before anyone committed to taking part, we defined what the relationship would involve and asked if they would be interested in taking part with these specific parameters. This meant that all the women knew where they stood before the process even began.

This leads me to wonder to what extent the fact that the women 'knew what they were getting into' alleviates the complexities of the ethics involved in the appropriation of the other. In representing Sally the way they do and in acknowledging the complexities of that representation (in both the performance itself and when discussing it) the company openly highlight both the possibility of it being read as 'unethical', and ask the audience to question precisely that.

In this way, the piece seems precisely to be 'doing its job' as it makes me question how I should act both in the moment of representation and retrospectively. The live event, the theatre or performance event, possibly more than any other cultural practice, positions the spectator as ethical respondent to the presented work and the questions or problems it is grappling with. Generally, not only are spectators at performance events explicitly aware of their position as spectators (there, in a sense, to pass judgement even if it is only at the level of enjoyment), they are also embroiled in a process both of looking and being looked at.

Ridouit argues that by re-situating 'precisely the same images as those circulating in the global media . . . in theatrical situations' the theatre might be able to 'awaken in its audience a feeling of ethical responsibility to the people suffering in the images' (Ridouit, 2009, p. 58). Ridouit goes on to call upon Lehmann's notion of 'response-ability' – the implicit idea that in the act of responding to something we take responsibility for it – to argue that 'spectators are called upon to recognize that there is a relationship between what is shown in the theatre and their own experience of the world' (ibid., p. 59). And this is precisely what happens in *Others*.

## Conclusion: 'Or, Rather, Who Cares?'

Grappling with spectatorship, Rancière argues that visual arts can 'help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, [help establish] a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated' (Rancière, 2009, p. 103). Similarly, Geraldine Harris convincingly contends that television and the internet as well as live performance have

made it hard for more of us, regardless of place or occupation, collectively and as individuals, to avoid engaging with the ethics and politics of representation as that which *both* unites and divides us and which also, whether live or mediated, is always part of the 'policing' of what is thinkable seeable, audible, doable, and sayable.

(Harris, 2009, p. 18).

Thus, *Others* can be seen to be stimulating an engagement with these wider ethical-political concerns as a result not only of its dramaturgical structures and its content but also because it embodies on stage a complex paradox between an attempt precisely to highlight and stimulate questions of otherness and ethics, while at the same time it inadvertently 'unethically' 'others' one of the women who made the production possible.

Such a reading is not to suggest the company acted improperly but that precisely as a result of the testimonial nature of the work and the fact of working to give voice to an imprisoned other they raise an ethical bind. In representing Sally they had/have an ethical responsibility to her and her story and to ensuring that she is 'happy' with those representations; yet Sally in particular has had no opportunity to assert her happiness or her disquiet. As she has not proper access to the embodied text of the performance, she is 'other' in it and arguably othered *by* it. If 'How shall I act?' is a good ethical starting point, the company might need to ask Sally if she is happy with how they acted when they were acting as and 'for' her.

The ethical questions and dilemmas raised by such verbatim performances as this seem to me to be particular within debates on



Performance still of The Paper Birds' *Others* (2010). Left to right: Shani Erez, Kylie Walsh and Jemma McDonnell. Photo: Helen Lindley.

theatre (and) ethics more generally. This is because while problems of banalizing and of ethics can beset any performance work, and particularly those that try to represent (world) historical events and/or traumata, the ethical complexities analyzed here are unique to testimonial or verbatim theatre.

The relationship between Sally's testimony and her subsequent lack of access to the resulting representation raises the possibility that it is within verbatim theatre that an examination of the ethics of representation and of our responsibility to the other might find a natural home.



In representing a version of the 'real' other, verbatim theatre (and other related forms) shortens the distance between 'us' and the representation of that other and in so doing explicitly makes visible the ethical complexities of such representations. In being made aware of the 'real' nature of the spoken text (and possibly situations) we are asked to confront the 'reality' of what Ridout terms 'the fragile life of the other' (2009, p. 8), and so are positioned ethically in relation to the situations and people depicted and their social real referents.

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## Notes

1. Jemma McDonnell is Artistic Director and one of the founding members of The Paper Birds. I interviewed her at the Barbican Centre in April 2011.
2. *Others* was The Paper Birds' sixth show; it toured extensively in 2010 and early 2011 to widespread critical acclaim (cf. Meyers, 2011; Smith 2010; Radosavljevic, 2010). The production I saw was at the Camden People's Theatre, London, in November 2010.
3. I will attend in more detail to questions of Sally's access to the performance and process of making it. However, at this juncture it is important to note that she was sent an early version of the script but could not access the live performance nor was she able to see a DVD due to institutional protocols.
4. The impossibility of representing trauma has been well argued from Cathy Caruth (1995 and 1996) to Peggy Phelan (1997). For a more in-depth discussion and critique of this in a performance context see Duggan, 2012.
5. As well as directing the piece, Jemma McDonnell also performed in it.
6. By 'overt theatricality' I am referring to an ongoing acknowledgement of the event as theatre and as a particular kind of representation. This is a performance which 'present[s] spades as spades' (Ridout, in Castellucci *et al.*, 2007, p. 104).
7. White suggests that 'any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it in its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite, and the other is that the "context" of any singular event is infinitely extensive, or at least is not objectively determinable' (White, 1996, p. 22).
8. When I presented an early version of this paper at the annual conference of the Theatre and Performance Research Association in September 2011 a member of the audience asked, 'So what? Or, rather, who cares?' They went on to suggest that such theoretical ethical concerns as laid out here might ultimately be pointless as they simply lead to stasis, because if my charge of an unethical process is upheld, ultimately either companies stop making work or we become constantly caught in a cyclical argument.