

# Oral History and Performance in the Classroom

By Steven High, Canada Research Chair in Oral History

If asked to describe a history seminar at the senior undergraduate or graduate level, I don't think anyone in my discipline would have imagined a dance studio with hardwood floors, mirrored walls, or floor-to-ceiling windows that cover an entire wall. Nor would they have imagined a classroom where students and faculty communally set-up and take-down the tables and chairs each week, sitting instead on foam mats in a big circle. I also doubt they would have expected to see students engaged in song, dance, and improvisational exercises such as the "Fantasy Machine" where one person enters our big circle and begins to do a repetitive movement. One by one, others join in until everyone is a cog in this gloriously strange and silly machine. Yet this is precisely what a group of twenty-six history and theatre students enrolled in Concordia University's inaugural "oral history and performance" course did over an eight month period.

Co-taught with Ted Little from the theatre department, the course is a by-product of the Montreal Life Stories project, a major collaborative research project recording the stories of those displaced by war, genocide and other human rights violations. From the outset, we sought to incorporate these recorded life stories into film, radio, exhibition, digital story, and performance.<sup>1</sup> Canadian archives are filled with audio and video interview recordings that have never been listened to. Digital media and the arts therefore offer a tremendous opportunity for us. Much of my own activity in the project was within the Oral History & Performance group.<sup>2</sup> In experimenting with oral history based performance, the course was designed to explore how we might ethically perform other people's stories.

<sup>1</sup> The online digital footprint of the project is a large one. The Montreal Life Stories website at [www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca](http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca) is a good starting point. For the work of the project's digital storytelling work with refugee youth, see <http://www.mappingmemories.ca/>. Also see the korsakow cinema database at the <http://goingpublicproject.org/>. There is additional information in the research creation section of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling's website at <http://storytelling.concordia.ca>.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the performance-based work on the project, see the twin issues of *alt.theatre: Cultural Diversity and the Stage* on oral history performance, edited by Edward Little in vol. 9.1 (September 2011) and vol. 9.2 (December 2011). See also, Nisha Sajani. "Coming into Presence: Discovering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Performing Oral Histories within the Montreal Life Stories Project," *alt.theatre: Cultural Diversity and the Stage*, Vol. 9.1 (septembre 2011), p. 40-49. Also see the four performance essays in Steven High, Edward Little, and Thi Ry Duong, eds. *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media and Performance* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, forthcoming December 2013); Nisha Sajani, Warren Linds, Lisa Ndejuru, Alan Wong, and the other members of the Montreal Life Stories Project, "The Bridge: Toward Relational Aesthetic Inquiry in the Montreal Life Stories Project," *Canadian Theatre Review*, Volume 148, numéro 1, 2011, p.18-24; and Steven High, "Embodied Ways of Listening: Oral History, Genocide and the Audio Tour," *Anthropologica* 55, 1 (2013).

## From Oral History To Verbatim Theatre

The transformation of recorded oral history interviews into performance is of course at the heart of the work we did in our studio-seminar course. In the autumn, we delved into the methodology and ethics of the interview, examining what was gained and lost in transcription. While the authority of the verbatim transcript is in its "authentic" rendering of what was said during the interview, we soon discovered its limits. Everybody seemed to agree that verbatim transcription largely fails to capture body language and the rhythm of the spoken word. Much is lost in translation to text. But a great deal is gained in our deep listening of the interview recordings.

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Our focus shifted to performance in the second term. To be honest, "embodied learning" in the classroom can be a little bewildering for a historian. The first two weeks consisted of back-to-back theatrical exercises and ensemble building in which everyone participated. At times, I wondered where this was going. I yearned to reconnect to the interviews. Clearly, these weeks were designed to give our class of history and theatre students a common set of performance-based tools and a shared vocabulary. It was also important to shift the class into a new mode of learning. Gone were the tables and chairs. Everyone was required to dance and perform, yes even the faculty.

Verbatim theatre was coined by Derek Paget in 1987 to describe theatrical performances based on interview transcripts. As you might expect, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the authenticity of the stories being performed on stage. While some playwrights insist that every word spoken must originate in the

interview, others use a combination of verbatim and self-authored material. In verbatim theatre, actors often speak directly to the audience and sometimes acknowledge their reactions to what is occurring on stage. Verbatim theatre, like oral history, relies heavily on the “authenticating detail.” Its authenticity is what gives it a certain power to reach audiences.

### **From ‘Interviewee’ To ‘Character’**

Every discipline has its own language. As a result, one of the challenges we encounter when disciplines come into conversation is to find a common “working” language. A variety of accommodations usually result. This was certainly the case in our studio-seminar. In the first term, taking my lead perhaps, the theatre and history students spoke in terms of our “interviewees” thus privileging the interview space which we were in. This is the language of oral history. Occasionally, I remember a theatre student or Ted Little say “character” instead. But this seemed out of place, and I remember that this was quickly followed by a self-correction: “Oh, I mean interviewee.” Almost always, their references to the interviewee seemed forced, unnatural – as if they had to consciously remember to get it right.

In the second semester, as we moved fully into the performance-side of the course, the language shifted decidedly from interviewee to character. This is not surprising. Character is the language of theatre and we were now focussed on the integration of the verbatim text into performance. We were therefore putting our interviewees/characters into conversation with one another in a new story of our own creation.

Our ongoing work raises interesting questions about whose story it is, now that it was being staged in our workshop environment. If the interview is a “conversational narrative” between interviewer and interviewee (questions posed and answered), our performance-based inquiry has become a conversation between interviewers. On several occasions, I heard some of the history students begin to refer to their interviewees as “characters” only to correct themselves. It is the same ‘correction’ as the previous term, except now it went the other way. It became an assertion rather than a concession. For me, at least, I still find the word “character” to be jarring. These are real people who shared their stories with us. To call interviewees characters seems to cross the imaginary line into “fiction.” Now, I am quite certain that I feel this way because we historians invest a great deal into the realism of the work that we do.

### **What Does Oral History & Performance Offer Us?**

One of the questions that I have been asking myself in recent months is how I might integrate what we are learning in the classroom into my research practice as an oral historian? In my case, this is a difficult question. I am not an actor. Nor am I a playwright. How then might I usefully contribute to the staging of oral histories? And, conversely, how might performing these stories contribute to my interpretation of the interviews themselves?

Certainly, the notion of ‘embodied learning’ is central to the work that we did in the course. When we perform our stories as interviewers or perform the stories of others, we begin to know them in a different way. Small details suddenly become important: the sound of one’s voice, a particular gesture, perhaps an article of clothing. All of these otherwise peripheral memories rarely make it into our transcriptions. This shifting perspective is important, suggesting to me that performing oral history has interpretative value in and of itself. Like transcription, it too is an exercise in deep listening.

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Oral history and performance enjoy a unique synergy. But the questions linger. At the end of the day, what is the role of the oral historian in the staging of these stories? When we speak of “oral history and performance” are we imagining two distinct methodologies (and skill sets) in conversation within collaborative projects – where perhaps the interviews are ‘handed-over’ from one group to the other – or are we hoping for a single interdisciplinary practice to emerge that blurs the boundaries between the two? If so, is this a realistic goal? I will be interested to see what new questions and insights will emerge the next time Ted and I teach the course.

*This essay is based on a series of blogs that the author posted on [www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca](http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca) each week during the term. An extended version of this essay was published as part of the *alt.theatre* special issue.*