

**Socially Minded Theatre:  
When Verbatim Theatre and the  
#MeToo Movement Intersect**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Edge Hill University

October 2022

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# Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr Lena Simic, my DoS, for her encouragement, patience, humour, empathy, for making me focus, and for being an incredible role-model as an academic, practitioner and mother.

Thank you to Prof Helen Newall for her insight, reassurance, generosity, and gaiety.

Thank you to Dr Kim Wiltshire for her motivating, focused feedback and her affable kindness.

Thank you to Safety Net Cumbria, especially Jo Birch, for their invaluable assistance, endorsement, and support.

Thank you to the brave individuals who allowed me to interview them and share their stories.

Thank you to Bethany McNarney for taking on a huge challenge, trusting me, offering her creativity and wit in rehearsals, and dedicating herself throughout the process.

Thank you to The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster and The Source Collective in Carlisle for offering their space and resources with such generosity.

Thank you to Paul Jefferson for never ending proofreading help and preventing countless crises.

Thank you to Danni Atkins for myriad pep talks and cups of tea.

Thank you to Jack and my children for their unending belief, affection and patience. I would not have completed this without your reassurance and devotion.

# Abstract

This research project examines the current theatre practices in Western countries (primarily in the United Kingdom) relating to the subject matter of the #MeToo movement. The research explores the genre of verbatim theatre in relation to this subject, discussing its beneficial possibilities.

Key points of enquiry are how sexual violence and harassment are portrayed within theatrical works, the characteristics and conventions of the verbatim genre that might provide a safe, respectful platform for sharing #MeToo experience, and what can be considered best practice in-regards-to dramatising #MeToo-related subject matter. The practice research aspect of the work develops a piece of contemporary devised verbatim performance based on the experiences of sexual assault survivors and creates a theatrical manifesto for exploring future theatrical productions in the same area. The manifesto is an original attempt to define and demonstrate the creative methods and ethical methodologies of a Socially Minded Theatre.

Given the requirements for social distancing due to Covid-19 during the research project (conducted from 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2019 to 1<sup>st</sup> October 2022), the practical elements of the research have been designed considering these restrictions. The ability to evolve and adapt when required by social, political, or economic changes reflects a considerable element of Socially Minded Theatre.

# Introduction

This research project entailed a survey of the history of verbatim theatre and verbatim theatre performance, most notably those with #MeToo related themes and topics. This coincided with research on the origins and outcomes of the #MeToo movement, contextualising the project. This was followed by interviews with victims of sexual assault and domestic abuse through the charity Safety Net. These interviews were then used as verbatim text for a devised piece of theatre that was performed in September and October of 2021 at The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster and The Source Collective in Carlisle. The project was finalised with an evaluation of the practice research and the creation of a theatre manifesto for theatre makers attempting similar work.

This research was conducted in Carlisle, Edge Hill University in Ormskirk, Ormskirk, and The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster from October 2019 until October 2022. The research was undertaken through a combination of gathering qualitative data, conducting interviews, engaging in practice research, autoethnography/participant observation and critical analysis. It was conducted within the paradigms of intersectional fourth wave feminism and social activism interacting on stage, alongside the growing requirement for ethical theatre making. The project explored the current research into the #MeToo movement and analysed the attempts to depict it in a dramatic form. It maps the field of verbatim theatre, exploring its aesthetics, conventions, and key texts and practitioners.

My initial approach was to gather qualitative data regarding verbatim techniques and the skills needed for working with assault victims. This initial research led to conducting interviews with four assault victims and/or survivors of domestic abuse via Zoom, with support from Safety Net Cumbria. The interviews were then utilised to develop an original theatre production, entitled *I'm not gonna lie* (Thomas, 2021). The production was created through working with a professional actor (Bethany McNarney), professional venues (The Dukes Theatre, in Lancaster and The Source Collective, in Carlisle), and performing to the general public. The final step in my research was conducting critical analysis through autoethnography, before establishing a theatre methodology and manifesto for using verbatim to explore this type of subject matter.

*Objectives:*

- To examine the current theatre practices being used to examine the #MeToo movement and related topics such as sexual assault and domestic abuse.
- To develop a piece of contemporary verbatim performance on #MeToo related topics using verbatim materials.
- To create a new theatre manifesto through this research to galvanise and enhance future practices.

*Key research questions:*

- How is #MeToo currently being addressed on stage?



- How can the verbatim dramatic form be a beneficial and influential tool for public discussion of sexual violence and harassment?
- What characteristics of verbatim theatre provide a safe platform for sharing #MeToo experiences?
- What artistic enquiry can be made into the methods, aesthetics and conventions of contemporary devised theatre when utilising verbatim materials of this nature?

These are the key research questions that I pose during this study. I have explored current theatre practices and productions relating to the subject matter such as *Locker Room Talk* (McNair, G., 2017), *Bitter Wheat* (Mamet, D., 2019), *Harvey* (Berkoff, S., 2019), *Endless Second* (Toksvig – Stewart, T. 2019), and *Badass Medusa #MeToo* (Mobilise, 2022). This exploration entailed analysing the production choices made, examining their dramaturgical implications, and querying their effectiveness in helping the #MeToo movement or individual victims. My literature review is embedded in Chapter 3 and includes key theatrical texts, academic journals, and theoretical writing relating to the performance of #MeToo related subject matter. I have also discussed what artistic enquiry can be made into the methods, aesthetics and conventions of contemporary devised theatre when utilising verbatim materials of this nature. In doing so I aim to analyse how creativity and artistry can coexist with the #MeToo movement in a theatrical context. The culmination of answering these questions is the creation of a new theatre manifesto, acting as a practical and ethical guide for those wanting to produce verbatim theatre on similar areas of discussion.

The genre of verbatim theatre can be broadly defined as theatrical practice that utilises the words of real individuals to form a dramatic work (Belfield, 2018:ix) and originates from British theatre in the 1970s. The genre has links to political theatre and often engages with societal issues such as mental health, collective trauma, and sexual exploitation. While verbatim theatre has begun to address the socio-political and cultural changes since the start of the #MeToo movement, there is a lack of specific guidelines for verbatim theatre artists or companies to follow.<sup>1</sup> The thesis will provide new knowledge through creating systems and processes (both creative and administrative) that can help theatre makers evolve within the changing landscape of how theatre relates to societal issues. The outcomes of the research include a manifesto outlining Socially Minded Theatre's tenets, designed for theatre makers tackling emotional and sensitive topics through a verbatim format. These sensitive topics include (but are not limited to) the social movement of #MeToo, for example, exploring how the perception of women in Western culture has altered, discussing everyday sexism, or exploring the change in attitudes and rhetoric relating to sexual assault.

## Positionality

My positionality within this research is motivated and influenced by my

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<sup>1</sup> This assertion is supported by comments made by Amy Marie Siedel (dramaturg, associate director and deviser at Tectonic Theatre) during a Zoom meeting with me in October 2019, stating that the company had no set policy for handling experienced emotional distress by cast members, production staff, or audience members. This project does not intend to discredit the work and intentions of Tectonic Theatre and other companies but to provide a system that could support and enhance their practice.

previous work as an academic, a theatre maker and applied theatre practitioner in my role as artistic director of WordForWord Theatre (<https://w4wtheatre.co.uk>), a non-profit community arts company that explores societal issues through verbatim theatre. The topics explored by this company include collective trauma (such as the 2015 Cumbria floods) and invisible disabilities (such as fibromyalgia and mental health conditions).

During my MPhil in Playwriting Studies at the University of Birmingham in 2009 I examined female characters in theatre, notably Jocasta and her role within theatrical retellings of the Oedipus myth. This research led to further questions about how women are represented and engaged with in theatre, but my enquiry evolved to considering real women rather than characters and the use of their real experiences, leading me to verbatim theatre.

Following my MPhil, I have researched applied theatre, the links between theatre and health, as well as the effects of the arts on those who have experienced trauma and on communities that have collective traumatic experiences. My theatre work has focused on sociological issues, through the lens of intersectional fourth wave feminism, as well as my experience of being a disabled artist. This personal context has led to my principles that theatre has a social responsibility and is a powerful platform for social activism.

During the process of this research, I became a domestic abuse survivor myself. The alteration in my relationship to the topic made the practice research additionally challenging and at times emotionally draining. However,

my changed positionality to the #MeToo movement has forced me to consider the effect on the theatre maker and given my research further depth.

## Thesis structure

The structure of the thesis includes this introduction and seven chapters. The content of each chapter following this introduction can be summarised:

- **Chapter 1: A Context: #MeToo and fourth wave feminism:** an exploration of the #MeToo movement and its basis in fourth wave feminism to contextualise and clarify the socio-political causes of the movement and its impact on the general public.
- **Chapter 2: Exposing the Verbatim method:** an examination of verbatim theatre, encompassing its conventions and aesthetics, its methods of creation, and the key practitioners that have successfully utilised the genre.
- **Chapter 3: #MeToo in theatre:** a discussion on #MeToo specifically in relation to theatre, analysing the existing productions that have attempted to discuss the movement or subject matter related to the movement. The chapter also details the changes to policy and procedure within the theatre industry and theatre training institutions.
- **Chapter 4: Methodological considerations:** an exploration of my own methodological considerations before attempting to create a #MeToo-related show. This chapter includes practice research documents such as promotional materials.

- **Chapter 5: Reflexive account of practice:** a reflection on the rehearsal process and final production for my practice research, considering feedback received from participants and audience members. This chapter includes the script from my practice research production.
- **Chapter 6: Manifesto:** a set of demands, detailing the Socially Minded Theatre approach, with an exploration of key points.
- **Chapter 7: Conclusion:** an analysis of my practice research, specifically discussing how my practical work interacts with the description of a '#MeToo theatre piece' and how my methodology of Socially Minded Theatre could be applied to other subjects and/or forms of theatre.

# Chapter 1: A Context: #MeToo and fourth wave feminism

## Introduction

This first chapter details the #MeToo movement and sets the cultural context I am discussing in the thesis. To do so I will discuss the movements links to fourth wave feminism, examine its history and impact, comment on its discreditors, explore the key cultural ideas within and around it, and detail the various modes of activism it entails. The chapter then goes on to discuss the influence of fourth wave feminism on this study.

The overall aim of this chapter is to clarify the term #MeToo and provide appropriate context for the analysis that takes place later in the thesis, specifically referring to theatre productions and verbatim theatre. I will be referring to fourth wave feminism as discussed by author and journalist Kira Cochrane in *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism* (2013), defined as an iteration of feminist theory characterised by its use of social media and intersectionality (2013:60). I will also be referring to the analytical framework of intersectionality, a term coined by critical race theory scholar and professor of law at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School, Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, describing an acknowledgement of the overlapping systems of violence that affect the individual such as racism and homophobia.

## The intersectional activist: fourth wave feminism

My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!

(Dzodan, 2011)

In 2011, at a SlutWalk protest, feminist academic and activist Flavia Dzodan asserted the importance of intersectionality at a fellow activist who was displaying racist behaviour (Romano, 2016). Dzodan's assertion for ideological common ground, which she later published in an online essay, was an acknowledgement of how Latino women (such as herself), women of colour and other racial minorities have been previously excluded from feminist debate and activism. In *SlutWalk: Feminism, Activism and Media* (2015), researcher Kaitlynn Mendes describes the SlutWalk form of protest as 'a march, ending with a range of speeches from sexual assault survivors, sex workers and members of anti-rape organisations' (2015:9). The name of these protests and the often provocative attire of those marching are a response to the patriarchal tactic of victim blaming rape victims alluding to their choice of clothes as a cause for their assault. <sup>2</sup>This attitude has created a 'rape myth' wherein the choices of the victim (typically these include dressing provocatively, drinking alcohol and enjoying sex) make them responsible for their attack, rather than their attacker.

Researcher Lindsay Harriot writes in *Women's Studies International Forum* (2015) that the first SlutWalk, in 2011 in Toronto, was inspired by Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti publicly advising University

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<sup>2</sup> There are numerous examples of victim blaming being committed by court judges during sexual assault cases, one being the 2006 case in Manitoba, Canada. In this instance the judge, Robert Dewar, claimed the clothes of the victim (a tube top, high heels, and make-up were listed by the judge) acted as an excuse for the attacker. Judge Dewar convicted the attacker but gave no prison time for the assault claiming the victim's clothes meant they had met in 'inviting circumstance' (McIntyre, 2011).

students that 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized' (2015:22). The perpetuation of rape culture and victim blaming by a key societal figure was met with anger and action, leading to an online group organising a protest directly aimed at Sanguinetti's remarks. Harriot writes that 'SlutWalks were unabashedly gendered and sexualized body protests; that is, they were designed to draw explicit attention to the female or feminized body as both a subject and agent to trigger a broader reassessment of issues related to the agency and control of women's bodies' (2015:26).

The stratagem to use the female body to attract attention worked exceedingly well, as this initial SlutWalk gained a great deal of attention through social media and has since become a global movement, with protests in the UK, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand and South Africa, organised through online groups and university students. The SlutWalk became a mainstream form of activism in 2016 when celebrity Amber Rose created a SlutWalk Festival with famous musicians (such as rap artist Nicki Minaj) and corporate sponsorship (T-Mobile being a prominent one). The most recent SlutWalk was in June 2022 in Canada but, although they are still part of current feminist activism, they have adopted the message of the #MeToo movement due to its cultural prevalence.

When discussing fourth wave feminist activism, the SlutWalk displays many typical markers. Cultural theorist Debra Ferreday and academic Geraldine Harris write, that 'Dzodan's post went viral, putting intersectionality at the centre of feminist debate' (2017:240). Dzodan's assertion for intersectionality at the 2011 protest, the anti-slut shaming message and the use of social media to galvanise and organise are all indicative of the fourth



wave of feminism. The SlutWalk's performative nature (most notably the need for specific clothing) and its requirement for an audience to witness it, suggests that elements of performance were already seen as valid tactics to share the message of this wave of feminist activism. In analysing this mode of activism as a framework, we can examine the ideological sinew between the #MeToo movement and fourth wave feminism. Discussing violence and abuse of women, Crenshaw notes that, the 'elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class' (1991:1242).<sup>3</sup> The intersectionality within the fourth wave is an acknowledgment of both the intersections of race and economic inequity as feminist issues. In *Women in Performance – Repurposing Failure* (2021) academic Sarah Gorman draws attention to 'the tyranny of colour blindness informing previous iterations of white feminism' (Gorman, 2021:26). The inclusion of these intersections is a key part of understanding, and ideally preventing, the environments and circumstances that lead to sexual assault.

When attempting to make progressive societal changes, the inequity of experience due to race should be analysed if the activism is to be inclusive and embody feminist values of equality. In fact, in the same year as Dzodan's demand for intersectionality at a SlutWalk, the charity Black Women's

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in the USA the National Organisation for Women's 2018 report *Black Women and Sexual Violence* found that 'African American women are 2.5 times more likely to experience physical or sexual violence from a partner or spouse (as white women). However, they are just as likely to lack access to mental health and physical services' (2018:4), indicating large disparity between the frequency of assaults and the support available for those assaulted due to race.

Blueprint made similar criticisms of the SlutWalk's inception. The charity focuses on removing disempowerment and disparities in the lives of African American women and girls through reproductive health services, raising awareness through protest marches and cultural sensitivity training for workplace environments. The criticisms the Black Women's Blueprint made against the SlutWalk movement centred on its lack of intersectionality, stating in their open letter 'as Black women and girls we find no space in SlutWalk, no space for participation and to unequivocally denounce rape and sexual assault as we have experienced it' (Brison, 2011). The lack of inclusion for women of colour partly stemmed from the practical organisation of events, most notably the use of university campuses and their cohorts to coordinate events. This was an issue for many women from a racial minority due to the inequality and inequity they face regarding education, and higher education in particular. The Center for American Progress' report, entitled *The Neglected College Race Gap: Racial Disparities Among College Completers* (Libassi, 2018) showed women of colour and Hispanic women were less likely to progress into higher education institutions and therefore are less likely to be involved in the on-campus organisation of events. The opposing experiences of the education system demonstrates the differing issues of social inequality and inequity women of colour face in comparison to white women. This difference of experience was one the SlutWalk movement did not initially acknowledge but it is arguable that the later involvement of Amber Rose and Nicki Minaj in 2017, both women of colour, has addressed this somewhat.

The other point of criticism of the SlutWalk was the use of the word 'slut', chosen to attract attention and provoke debate. The choice to use 'slut'

indicated a failure to consider the sexualisation of women of colour and how their bodies have been codified as a commodity through slavery, bringing different connotations to this word. In their open letter, the Black Women's Blueprint stated, 'as Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves "slut" without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is' (Brison, 2011). The failure to acknowledge the differing historical contexts of sexualising and degrading language for women of colour showed a lack of intersectional acceptance that has been common in previous iterations of feminism.

However, in the years since the Black Women's Blueprint's open letter, there has been an increase in the discussion and promotion of intersectionality in feminist theory and activism. Gorman comments on this, stating:

intersectionality is enjoying significant currency as part of a fourth wave of Western feminism because it provides a crucial way of articulating the importance of reinvesting in fixed notions of identity after their obsolescence under postmodernism.

(2021:28-29)

Gorman demonstrates that acknowledgement of differing female experiences, each one being unique in the causes of inequality, misogyny and/or violence is required within contemporary feminism. The victims who are recognised and given more attention by fourth wave feminism have also been discriminated because of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, and economic status, as well as their gender and/or gender presentation. Fourth wave feminism also demands inclusivity towards differing gender identities, sexual orientations and the

inclusion of queer theory into its doctrine. This inclusivity indicates an evolving ethos to acknowledge and defend transwomen, recognising how they are affected by patriarchal oppression.

Sociology professor Kim Humphrey writes in *The Guardian* that ‘a fundamental tenet of feminism is to end forms of oppression; and the same rule must apply for a trans and gender-diverse minority’ (2020).

Similarly, to the diverse issues affecting women of colour, the causes of abuse and forms of discrimination against transwomen are unique and deserve their own analysis by feminist theory, as there is a growing debate about the inclusion of transwomen into ‘female spaces’. These discussions have widened the divide between previous iterations of feminism as valid criticisms regarding a lack of intersectionality become mainstream through cultural controversy. A highly publicised example of such controversy is the successful novelist JK Rowling and her use of social media to spread transphobic talking points such as transwomen using female toilets in public will lead to sexual assaults and comparing hormone replacement therapy to gay conversion therapy (White, 2020). As a white, middle aged, economically privileged, straight and cisgender woman, Rowling can be seen as the epitome of this ideological conflict, the perceived “civil war” between younger “wokes” and older liberals’ (Shand-Baptiste, 2020).

The battle between the fourth wave and the third wave, can be encapsulated by the development and evolution of the SlutWalk. The SlutWalk has evolved in five years from being initially criticised as non-inclusive of women of colour, to its most well-funded and most promoted event organised

by women of colour (Amber Rose and Nicki Minaj). The increase in intersectionality in those five years could be read as a 'passing the torch' of feminist activism to the next generation of intersectional feminists. However, the example of JK Rowling shows that not all third wave feminists are content to hand over the figurative ideological torch, with transwomen being a common point of contention between generations. The vital (often lifesaving) importance of trans acceptance by feminists is outlined by writer and scholar Sara Ahmed in her 2017 book, *Living a Feminist Life*,

Throughout feminist history many women had to insist on being women before they became part of the feminist conversation. Trans women have to insist on being women; trans women often have to keep insisting, again and again, often in the face of violent and repeated acts of misgendering; any feminists who do not stand up, who do not wave their arms to protest against this misgendering have become the straightening rods. An anti-trans stance is an anti-feminist stance: it is against the feminist project of creating worlds to support those for whom gender fatalism (boys will be boys, girls will be girls) is fatal, a sentencing to death.

(2017:234)

This powerful assertion validates the need for intersectionality and inclusivity within contemporary feminism if it is to be truly feminist. With the importance of intersectionality in mind, fourth wave feminism has been adopted by the #MeToo movement to better achieve its aims.

The link between fourth wave feminism and the #MeToo movement starts with the deconstructing of phallogentric, patriarchal systems in society that lead to misogyny and abuse. In *Theatre & Feminism* (2016), academic Kim Solga notes that following the mid-1980s 'men and women appeared to have achieved gender equality in the workplace and in the public sphere, and thus in which the original goals of feminist theory and practice appear

redundant' (2016:7). This oversimplification of feminist goals in the public discourse has allowed the subtler inequalities between men and women to continue. Solga goes on to say 'inequality can be insidious in ways that are deeply felt, yet not immediately visible on the surface of our daily experiences' (2016:7). The causes of sexual assault can appear just as insidious.<sup>4</sup>

As the #MeToo movement was started by a woman of colour with the initial aim of empowering other women of colour, the fourth wave is the most appropriate form of feminist theory to attach to the movement, as both aim to highlight the racial inequities that affect women of colour.

## **The online activist: the history and impact of #MeToo**

I pulled out a piece of paper, and I wrote 'Me Too' on the top of it, and I proceeded to write out an action plan for building a movement based on empathy between survivors that would help us feel like we can heal, that we weren't the sum total of the things that happened to us.

(Burke, 2019)

The #MeToo movement was first started in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke, who used social media as a platform for raising awareness and building an online

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<sup>4</sup> Following the prosecution and imprisonment of Harvey Weinstein, Tarana Burke (who founded the #MeToo movement) explained, 'you don't become Harvey Weinstein overnight without having systems of power around you' (2020). Just because women can vote does not mean they are equal, and just because a famous rapist has been incarcerated does not mean women will not face sexual harassment and assault. The issues and causes run deeper into the fabric of our society.

community of survivors, notably among women of colour. This was first initiated on the social media site Myspace before the addition of a hashtag.<sup>5</sup>

The #MeToo movement can be classified as a social justice movement that strives to expose and prevent sexual harassment and assault by sharing victims' experiences, as well as encouraging discussions on consent, the treatment of women and how sexism intersects with race. The movement can be characterised as a mode of fourth wave feminism, which is described by academic Millie Cecile Andersen, as encompassing 'online activism, intersectionality, protesting against sexual harassment and rape culture. All of these components are intrinsic in the #MeToo Movement' (2018:2).

While the movement is well known for revealing the abuse in primarily the film and media industry, there is growing prevalence of its impact in a variety of working environments. This impact can be defined as increased awareness of workplace harassment, public discussions regarding consent and appropriate behaviour towards women, and an increase in the public sharing of survivors' experiences. The movement has had its most prominent media coverage since the 2017 Harvey Weinstein scandal, which remained in the international headlines for over three years.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Burke discusses these origins in numerous interviews, including the 2018 New York Times article, 'She founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma' where she is interviewed by journalist Aisha Harris.

<sup>6</sup> The trial was concluded in March 2020, with Weinstein facing twenty three years in prison for multiple charges of sexual assault and rape (Aratani and Pilkington, 2020). This was a landmark case for the #MeToo movement, with its first mainstream, globally publicised accusations facing tangible and considerable legal consequences for the abuser.

The support of well-known film actresses (such as Ashley Judd, Alyssa Milano and Gwyneth Paltrow regarding Weinstein) and journalists (such as Ronan Farrow, again regarding Weinstein initially) made the movement prominent in mainstream media and present in the general public's consciousness. Academics David Sherwyn and Paul Wagner have since referred to this as the 'Weinstein phenomenon' that has 'fundamentally altered the sexual harassment landscape' (2018:175). The predominant links between the entertainment industry and the movement makes the topic an apt one for theatre to approach and address its own problematic culture regarding the harassment of women. Moreover, the influence of the movement was still being demonstrated during Weinstein's court case through eye-catching protests that increased in theatricality. On January 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, a notable protest took place outside the New York courthouse where the Weinstein was being conducted. The protest appeared in the form of a female 'flash mob' performance of the song *A Rapist in Your Path* (Cometa et al., 2019). Translated from the original Spanish chant *Un Violador en Tu Camino* (2019) the lyrics state 'It's not my fault – not where I was, not how I dress... And the rapist is you' (Cometa et al., 2019). The chant was originally used during protests against sexual violence in Chile in December 2019 and initiated by an all-female art collective, Las Tesis (Noguera, 2019). Researcher Paula Serafini notes that Las Tesis' demonstrations can be seen as 'performances that aim for social transformation and operate in the realm of grassroots politics by intervening in public spaces' (2020:291). The theatricality of these protests, with their inclusion of eye-catching performance methods and conventions, increased their viability as a successful news story or as sharable content on



social media. The high profile nature of the media coverage on the court case against Weinstein and the journalistic focus on these protests show the substantial attention the movement can generate. The international aspects of the protest (as the chant was also performed in both the original Spanish and the English translation) demonstrate the scope of the movement and the unifying potential it has across cultural differences and language barriers. It is also notable that, through using choreography and a 'driving drum beat' (Prior, 2020), the use of performance methods is being used to highlight the mission of the #MeToo movement and draw attention to the message that survivors want to convey to the public. Serafini writes that 'the speed with which it gained media visibility, made it an especially powerful and timely response to the violence experienced by women' (2020:293), indicating the effectiveness of online activism.<sup>7</sup>

The use of social media in starting and growing the movement is also linked to providing access to disenfranchised women of colour. As demonstrated with the SlutWalk protests, the use of online communities and resources is a vital component of fourth wave feminism and its biggest link to the #MeToo movement. An article written by researcher Gulum Sener for The London School of Economics and Political Science entitled 'Digital Feminist Activism in Turkey' (2021) detailed how women are taking part in social activism even in countries where they suffer greater social injustice. In Turkey

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<sup>7</sup> In their article 'Chilean and Transnational Performances of Disobedience: LasTesis and the Phenomenon of Un Violador en tu camino'(2021), authors Deborah Martin and Deborah Shaw describe the demonstrations as a 'clear contravention of the rules of polite society, especially inasmuch as these rules are bound up with gender norms and expectations of women spaces'.

there is a large gender deficit economically and politically, leading to an alarming rise in violence against women (Cinar, H. and Sirin, T., 2017:135). Despite this, Sener describes how social media activism has empowered women in Turkey, using the response to the murder of Ozegan Arslan while resisting attempted rape. Sener writes, 'on the following days, a hashtag campaign was organised on social media using the label #sendeanlat (#youtoo). The hashtag invited thousands of women to share their sexual harassment stories in digital platforms and showed how Turkish women and girls suffer from harassment or assaults in their everyday lives' (2021:8). The adoption of social media by women in markedly oppressive, patriarchal societies shows a potential for social activism online regardless of other cultural restrictions on women. The use of online activism within the #MeToo movement has amplified its impact by increasing accessibility and accessing a large audience. The movement's growth through online activism is evident in a report made by Columbia University's Barnard Centre for Research on Women entitled *#FemFuture: Online Feminism* (2012) that states, 'consciousness-raising groups were said to be the "backbone" of second wave feminism; now, instead of a living room of 8-10 women, it's an online network of thousands. (Martin, C. and Valenti, V., 2012:8). As this report pre-dates the Weinstein case and newer social media apps (such as TikTok in 2016), the 'network of thousands' has grown exponentially.

The increase in online activism has assisted groups like Las Tesis in achieving a global profile, leading to articles about their work by the BBC in 2019, Variety in 2020, and The Guardian in 2020. The high-profile media attention towards

a relatively new activist group (their first online post was on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2018) demonstrates the impact of combining performance elements and social media to protest injustice for sexual assault survivors, as it broadens the scope and accessibility of Las Tesis' message, grabbing the attention of international news outlets. This increase in accessibility enables those who may not have access to books and journals on feminist theory (or theatre productions on the subject) but can access a social media video. Those who struggle to comprehend academic language can engage with the music and movement Las Tesis use. Through social media and performance, language barriers can be removed, and the commonality of the issues can be realised. It is notable that Las Tesis constructed the performance in a manner that 'displays an ethos of collective ownership and horizontality' (Serafini, 2020:293) among women from different intersecting social groups. Serafini notes that 'the potential for adaptation of *Un violador en tu camino* has been crucial to its accessibility, giving rise to performances where wheel-chair users join the frontlines, and others where participants maintain the basic choreography while reproducing the lyrics in sign language' (2020:293), denoting the intersectional and inclusive nature of using performance as a means of protest while engaging with fourth-wave feminism.

## **The berated activist: contentions and objections to #MeToo**

Alongside the swift and intense impact it has had on Western culture, the #MeToo movement has also gained its detractors. When the movement has been criticised, the areas of condemnation are commonly a lack of due

process for the accused and how the term #MeToo has colloquially started to have 'meaning as a verb – the action of accusing' (Badham, 2019).

The issue with both assertions is that they put the focus on the alleged harasser/abuser rather than the victim. The fixation on the consequences (professional or personal) of the accused conflicts with the movement's original purpose of promoting 'empowerment through empathy' (Burke, 2018) and demonstrates a misunderstanding of the aims of the movement.

Similarly misunderstood is the use of online networks and social media platforms. While this is intended (and is often successful) for inclusivity, a common criticism of online activism (and 'keyboard warriors') is scepticism over its authenticity. Author and academic Patrick Lonergan writes:

Social media platforms thus provide a space in which individuals and institutions offer a performance of themselves for public consumption. Those performances may purport to be authentic, or they may be unashamedly fake – but most social media activities will be located somewhere between those two states.

(2016:31)

This analysis, while often accurate about social media in general, has unfortunately caused some criticism and distrust of online activism. Women who share their experiences of sexual harassment, assault and misogyny are impugned and the authenticity of their experiences called in to question. However, a study by researchers David Lisak, Lori Gardinier, Sarah C. Nicksa and Ashley M. Cote entitled *False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases* (2010) showed that the number of false claims of assault was as low as 2% and no higher than 10% in any given year. It is harder to collate the number of accusations of sexual assault that are made online and assess how many are false due to volume, the number of platforms

used, and the frequent anonymity accusers adopt in online spaces. However, the University of California San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health released a report in 2019 entitled *Measuring MeToo: A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault* that showed a very small percentage (12%) believed the accusation made online completely (2019:36). Therefore, despite the fear that alleged abusers will be falsely accused is it highly unlikely claims are false and, paradoxically, unlikely the general public will believe the accusations completely. Fear that false accusations may increase due to the internet providing accusers anonymity ignores the previously mentioned oppression experienced by women in certain countries and with certain protected characteristics. Social media platforms are not necessarily the chosen medium of those making the accusation, but the only one they have available to finally be heard. The mode of online activism denotes accessibility and inclusivity, as contributing to and supporting the movement is easier to access through social media than it would have been a decade ago. Therefore, opportunities for activism that were previously unavailable are now being provided to those facing oppression so severe they require anonymity or those who are restricted by health problems to attend a physical demonstration.

Another related point that has led to critics dismissing the movement, is the common use of a hashtag in its title. The hashtag within the movement's name indicates its online origins as it is used as a form of finding posts about specific topics with ease. The hashtag has altered the way social media sites (notably Twitter) have been utilised to promote socio-political opinions, giving a bigger platform to victims and activists. In 2016's Online Information Review, researchers Rong Wang and Wenlin Liu observed that 'social movements are

increasingly observed to rapidly scale up through networked information dissemination' (2016:853) and the effectiveness of using 'Twitter hashtag as a strategy to enhance the visibility and symbolic power of social movement-related information' (2016:850). Through social media sites and the use of the hashtag, individuals can present these experiences directly to major news outlets and politicians (the vast majority having their own social media accounts). However, the hashtag also implies a momentary trend due to their initial conception as a marketing tool for companies or a method for online-based celebrities to attract an audience. The original purpose of the hashtag was a commercial one such as helping companies to network and promote themselves, but it has since been co-opted by online activists for their socio-political campaigns, indicating the 'paradigm shift' of social media into online activism (Wang and Liu, 2016:853). This shift changed social media platforms from communal, amiable places to talk to friends and family, into online spaces for discourse and activism. If hashtags are mistakenly associated with their original conception, it could be assumed that they have limited potential to sway mass culture in a long term and meaningful way. It could be argued that a broad, fleeting online campaign cannot impact the complicated institutional/societal biases and systems of repression towards women, that there is a lack of permanence to a hashtag and the capitalist co-opting of them for advertising purposes. Author Tanya Horek notes that the conflict within using hashtags is also linked to a cynical fear of disingenuous individuals, stating 'some proclaim the liberatory force of hashtag activism and others argue that it is ultimately an empty and self-congratulatory display of righteousness' (2014:1106). However, the fear of an advocacy tool being

misused, in an unsubstantial or damaging way, should not demean the tool itself.

I would defend the use of a hashtag as its purpose and cultural meaning has evolved and translated into contexts outside of online communities. Academic Rachel Kuo (2018) notes that 'more and more often, hashtags are also written onto posters or printed onto fliers, connecting the offline to the online. They mark people and actions as part of moment and movement', demonstrating the continued progression and expansion of the hashtag since Wang and Liu's research only two years prior. When placing a hashtag in the name of a social movement, the activist is pointing to how the symbol is both a practical method to create global communication of these issues and is a representation of how the use of the hashtag conveys camaraderie, shared experience and compassion to victims. The #MeToo movement has certainly not been fleeting and has inspired nuanced discussion about the harassment of women.

Other criticisms of the movement have been its link to perceived 'cancel culture' where targeted individuals and companies are shamed on social media (primarily Twitter) and face a boycott or losing their jobs. Researcher Eve Ng states:

Of course, dogmatism and oversimplification of complex issues pre-date social media, but platforms such as Twitter can foster ideological rigidity and lack of nuance due to the typical textual brevity of any individual post, the speed with which posts are disseminated, and the rapidity of online exchanges, which militate against considered responses.

(2020:623)

Ng highlights the potential negative outcomes of using online platforms to debate complex socio-political issues when the platforms themselves are not

structured for such a purpose. It is debatable if incidences where online communities criticize an individual (to the extent that they can lose jobs and social standing) constitute bullying or suppression of freedom of speech, or that they are simply consequences for actions that historically have gone unpunished. Ng states, 'Cancel culture demonstrates how content circulation via digital platforms facilitates fast, large-scale responses to acts deemed problematic, often empowering traditionally marginalized groups in the moment' (Ng, 2020:625).

The notion of being 'cancelled' has become a cultural bogeyman of sorts, often weaponised to undermine progressive movements such as #MeToo.<sup>8</sup> Disregarding the validity of these cultural fears, it is important to differentiate between the notion of 'cancel culture' and the #MeToo movement, as the latter is focused on amplifying victims/survivors rather than accusing alleged perpetrators. The work of Burke and Farrow, is done with the intention to empower women, raise awareness, challenge the legal systems in place that suppress sexual assault victims (such as non-disclosure agreements) and highlight problems with how police approach rape cases. Academic Ann Pellegrini writes:

An intersectional analysis of sexual violence shows how responses to sexual violence that centre on criminalization and the punishment of individual perpetrators might actually contribute to fortifying the structural racism of the justice system without in any way addressing the systemic violence that is misogyny. Some survivors of sexual

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<sup>8</sup> In both the United Kingdom and the United States of America, there have been anti-woke/anti-cancel culture laws or bills introduced in 2022. In an article entitled 'The abnormalisation of social justice: The 'anti-woke culture war' discourse in the UK' (2022) political academic Bart Cammaerts comments that 'one might think that the metapolitics of the anti-woke culture war is mainly situated at a symbolic level, but this war of position has concrete impacts on policies' (2022).



violence may also find the experience of reporting an assault to the police and going through a trial as re-traumatizing.

(2018:263)

Pellegrini's observations denote the cultural and individual damage that can be done to assault victims through the criminal justice system. The culture surrounding sexual violence and the police (leading to survivors unwilling to report their assault) can only be enhanced by the recent statistic that only 1% of rapes reported in the United Kingdom in 2020 lead to legal proceedings (Moloney, 2020). The lack of justice given to those who report to the police strengthens the idea that the police are ineffective at best, and traumatising or complicit at their worst, when handling sexual assault claims. As the above statistic is from the United Kingdom and Pellegrini writes about the American legal system, it is clear that the issues surrounding the police and sexual violence cases are a broader problem in Western society. It is also important to state that the initial activism started by Burke was not intended to replace the legal system and bring about 'mob justice', but the ownership of social activism is not fixed. As the movement has become more mainstream, the number of individuals undertaking their own form of activism has grown, all claiming their actions are part of the #MeToo strategy. While some online activists use methods that could be called 'cancel culture', this should not be confused with 'call out culture'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The legacy and effectiveness of the 'call out' strategy gives it legitimacy in creating social and cultural change. It is worth noting that the Reclaim the Night Movement (which became a major social media campaign in March 2021 following the murder of Sarah Everard) began in 1977 with a series of protests and marches 'calling out' the police's response to the Yorkshire Ripper murders (reclaimthenight.co.uk, 2021). Women were told by police in both 1977 and 2021 to stay out of public spaces after dark, implying the responsibility for preventing violence against women, lies with women. Similarly, to the police constable's comments that started the Slut Walk movement in 2011, the message to women was that they must adjust their daily behaviour to stay safe rather than the causal behaviours

The latter is the act of exposing injustice and inequality, and has been a tool used in social movements for decades, as writer Adrienne Matei observes,

A version of call-out culture has been functioning for centuries as a tool for the marginalized and their allies to reveal injustice and the need for reform. The practise of directly addressing inequality underpins countless social justice movements, from civil rights to Standing Rock.

(Matei, 2019)

The danger is confusing this legitimate method with the methods of 'cancel culture' such as doxxing. Doxxing is a key example of negative appropriation of online activism, described by the US Department of Homeland Security as 'gathering an individual's Personally Identifiable Information (PII) and disclosing or posting it publicly, usually for malicious purposes such as public humiliation, stalking, identity theft, or targeting an individual for harassment' (2017). Doxxing often leads to dangerous consequences for those who are doxxed and can leave those outside of a social movement with a negative view of the movement and its aims. Researcher Joshua Atkinson describes cruder methods of activism (such as doxxing) as a 'diatribe' with both positive and negative outcomes, stating

This strategy proves to be useful for grabbing attention, hence giving the activists an opportunity to relay a message to onlookers.

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and attitudes that men have towards women being addressed. While Reclaim the Night and the specific case of Sarah Everard is relevant to numerous aspects of the #MeToo movement, here I am referring to it to demonstrate that the act of 'calling out' in social activism has a long history and it is only in the past decade that it has been adapted to online mediums, utilising the hashtag to mobilise and organise. The notion that 'calling out' is part of a recent 'cancel culture', and that it enables 'mob justice' to take place, dismisses its historical and cultural significance as a tool for social progress.

However, the vulgar nature of the strategy also simultaneously erodes the credibility of the activists.

(Atkinson, 2017:19)

The arguments for and against 'woke' culture and 'call out' culture have become intrinsically linked with the #MeToo movement because of the commonality of seeking social change and using online mediums for activism. The counter argument is a defence of 'cancel culture' and the idea of 'mob justice' as the only opportunity for victims to find justice when legal systems have not. Journalist and scholar Meredith D. Clark notes now 'the term has devolved into journalistic shorthand wielded as a tool for silencing marginalized people who have adapted earlier resistance strategies for effectiveness in the digital space' (2020:89). The argument that 'cancel culture' or 'call out culture' is prohibiting freedom of speech is presented as erroneous by journalist Kuba Shand-Baptiste in *The Independent* (2020):

when you – particularly the famous – do things to perpetuate or legitimise ideas or actions that contribute to further harming others, you are not entitled to remain liked by some members of the public.

(Shand-Baptiste, 2020)

The fear of being 'cancelled' and the concern over freedom of speech has fed into the public's view of the movement and has become a justification for criticising its activism. When discussing the prevalence of the #MeToo movement with Safety Net's Jo Birch, she stated that in the charity's demographic (Northwest England, primarily Cumbria), there was 'evidence of a backlash towards the term #MeToo, a fear that it is a bunch of angry, vengeful women' (2020, personal communication October 2nd). A patriarchal

fear of female rage (and its use in patriarchal rhetoric to defame feminist causes) is connected with the ephemeral nature of social media, most notably on Twitter. Academic writer Gwen Bouvier writes that within Twitter, 'as part of the affective connectivity and engagement, the language used can become highly aggressive and is an important part of the affectivity. It is part of the outrage and certainty of moral stance' (2020:9). The reliance on outrage and aggressive vocabulary in online activism enables and supports the patriarchal mischaracterising of the activists and their intentions.

The danger of the movement being mischaracterised is growing,<sup>10</sup> with a key example being a statue by artist Luciano Garbati named *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* (2020) placed outside the New York court where Weinstein's conviction had been made. The statue is of the Greek mythological creature, Medusa, stood with the head of Perseus (who kills Medusa in the original myth) in her hand. This is arguably a powerful image, showing a reversal of accepted roles, symbolising the empowerment of victimised women. However, journalist Will Pavia writes in *The Times* that the statue 'has come under fire from rape survivors, who say that it offers a 'revenge fantasy' that wrongly casts victims of sexual violence as aggressors' (2020). It is also notable that the statue showed Medusa as fully nude, young, slender and

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<sup>10</sup> The change in public feeling towards the movement was embodied in the online vitriol aimed at actress Amber Heard during the defamation court filed against her by her ex-husband, actor Johnny Depp. Despite evidence that Depp has openly fantasied about murder and necrophilia in relation to Heard, and both video and photographic evidence of domestic abuse committed against Heard, the trial was subject to an online (and in-person) targeted campaign against Heard. Guardian columnist. Moira Donegan criticised the public reaction to the case, stating in the Guardian that 'the backlash to #MeToo has long been under way. But this feels like a tipping point' (2022). We see similar backlash in current court cases involving actress Angelina Jolie and her ex-husband, Brad Pitt, as the rhetoric around domestic abuse and sexual assault becomes more cynical and critical towards alleged victims.

hairless. This, it could be argued, sexualises and glamourises rape and it is notable that the artist who created the statue is a 45 year old man (rather than Las Tesis' female members in their 20s). Therefore, the statue has been created through a male perception of femininity, causing a conflict between the various voices and perspectives within the movement. As the instigators of the movement have their agenda adopted by others, the voices receiving a platform and the content of their message can convolute the identity of #MeToo in the public eye. To clarify the #MeToo message and present the moral nuances of its activism to a broad audience, the case for a theatrical platform becomes apparent.

The large social and cultural impact the movement has made, as well as the high-profile cases within the film industry, makes #MeToo a viable topic for theatre and provides the movement with a coherently malleable platform. The themes of injustice, sharing trauma publicly, the relationship between female activism and social media, and the unwillingness of society to believe female victims have the potential for dramatic tension, conflict and catharsis for an audience. As theatres engage more with online streaming and digital events, the links between theatre and online activism can increase. The range of genres and styles within verbatim theatre make it a suitably versatile medium for to explore sensitive topics, such as sexual violence with nuance and complexity.

## **Influence on this study**

The influence of the #MeToo movement on this study is most evident in the methodological approach I applied to my practice research. The emphasis was

on believing survivors and ensuring their experiences were presented as implicitly true and therefore to be respected. The focus was on the victims/survivors of these incidences, not on vilifying the abusers and unintentionally giving them the public's attention. The arguably erroneous argument against perceived 'cancel culture' is one I aimed to avoid, as such cultural discussions take the focus away from the women who have suffered abuse. The study endeavoured to have a diverse range of participants, acknowledging and analysing the intersectional issues of race, sexual orientation, gender identity and economic status that affects the prevalence, severity and frequency of abuse. The limitations regarding diversity stems from the location the research was conducted as, according to the Cumbria Observatory ([cumbriaobservatory.org.uk](http://cumbriaobservatory.org.uk)), Cumbria has one of the lowest percentages of ethnic groups in its population in the UK. The Cumbria Observatory's research found that only 1.5% of Cumbria's population were Asian, Black or had mixed ethnicity, making a diverse range of participants extremely difficult to attain. However, in working with Safety Net, I presented the project to potential participants as welcoming to all ethnic groups and members of the LGBTQ+.

## **Conclusion**

The well-publicised Weinstein scandal and subsequent trial caused other industries and organisations (such as the music industry, the United States military and the education system) to examine the vulnerability of the women working for them and to have accountability for those committing abuse. The level of impact the movement has had is evident in how it has begun to shape

governmental legislation and policy, a key example being the Member and Employee Training and Oversight on Congress Act (otherwise named the *Me Too Congress Act*) proposed by Congresswoman Jackie Speier to the United States Congress in November of 2017. The aim of the bipartisan bill was to change how the legislative branch of the United States federal government responds to complaints regarding sexual harassment and impropriety (Congress.gov/115th-congress, 2019). The key policies it proposed to change within congress (as a body of employment) was to decrease the waiting period before a staff member could file a complaint and to give them the opportunity to work in a different department, separate from their alleged harasser, without the security or nature of their job role being threatened. This shows how in a brief amount of time the #MeToo movement has made legitimate and tangible changes to how women are treated in the workplace and society in general.

Another systemic change is the financial restitution that survivors are now receiving. The most notable example is the conviction of USA Gymnastics team doctor, Larry Nassar who was 'sentenced to forty to one hundred and seventy five years in prison for sexually abusing more than one hundred young athletes, in addition to an earlier sixty year sentence on child pornography charges' (North, A. 2019). Following this trial, Michigan State University (his employer when the abuse took place), created a \$500 million settlement fund following private negotiations with over three hundred victims. In doing this, Michigan State University set a legal precedent for other educational institutions to do the same for historical cases of abuse and financial impetus to listen to students who report assault/harassment. Both the Nassar

settlement and the *Me Too Congress Act* demonstrates how the movement is being treated as urgent and important by educational institutions and governmental systems, as well as independent companies and organisations.

The cataclysmic phenomenon of the #MeToo movement brings into question how artists respond to themes of women, women's bodies and women characters in theatre. The audience is now attuned to analysing and critiquing these aspects of female representation as well as the treatment of female creatives in a heightened fashion (Wise, 2019). A clear indicator of this is the increased coverage by media outlets on equal pay for female performers, the Bechdel test regarding performance texts and entertainment media, the call for increased employment of women writers and directors, the lack of acknowledgment for female writers and directors by high profile award ceremonies, and how women are depicted in film and television. Some key examples of the growing cultural focus on female rights and representation in the arts include Michelle Williams being invited to testify before the United States Congress in 2018 about unequal pay for female actresses (ABC News, 2018), the critical response to the Golden Globes 2019 nominations (Schaffstall, 2019) and the criticism of how journalist Kathy Scruggs was inaccurately depicted as trading sex for news stories in the 2019 film *Richard Jewell* (Garvey, 2019). In researcher Martha Lauzen's report, 'Boxed In 2019-20: Women On Screen and Behind the Scenes in Television' (2020), Lauzen found that in this time period 'women reached historic highs as creators, directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and directors of photography on streaming programs' (2020:1). The report also showed a



substantial increase in female major characters within new shows broadcast on television Netflix and streaming services (45%), including an increase in Black and Asian female character (20% and 8%). While these figures are still far from equal representation in creative media, they demonstrate a growing trend in catering for diverse, female audience members, and giving opportunities to female creatives.

There have been landmark events relating to perpetrators of abuse such as the conviction of Weinstein and the arrest of Jeffrey Epstein for multiple charges of rape and sex trafficking (Winter, 2019), but, as I previously stated, the movement is keen to examine systemic causes of sexual assault and harassment. These systems include the lack of equipment for collecting physical evidence of sexual assault ('rape kits') at police stations as well as their improper usage, the limitations on presenting legal charges for assault cases, and the patriarchal constructs in businesses across sectors that lead to men being in positions of power far easier, and more frequently, that they can then abuse.<sup>11</sup>

The #MeToo movement has grown from one woman writing a phrase on a piece of paper into a global discussion point with the power to change and create new laws and policies. Its impact has been witnessed in multiple

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<sup>11</sup> A standard example of legal inequality is the 2019 announcement by the Minneapolis Police Department that more than 1,500 rape kits were held in their police storage facilities and remained untested (Law, T, 2019). These tests spanned over thirty years, and, with these forms of malpractice committed by legal authorities, the injustice faced by assault victims is blatant.

business sectors, within political administrations, and has crossed over cultures and races. The speed and forcefulness of this impact has inspired criticisms from a variety of discreditors, but these denunciations are based within a (often disingenuous and performative) misunderstanding of the movement and progressive social agendas. It has been propelled by the involvement of artistry, performance and theatrics; the highest profile supporters of the movement are well known actors, some of the most pervasive abusers are entertainment bosses, and the most effective protests have utilised theatricality to attract attention. The major critics of the movement are also those connected to entertainment industries, showing that artists are currently driving the public discussion. In the following chapter, I argue the case for using verbatim theatre as the favourable genre in which to approach #MeToo-centric subjects as it prevents or counteracts the issues of inclusion, representation and authenticity in how stories of abuse are presented.

# Chapter 2: Exposing the verbatim theatre method

## Introduction

The overall aim of the chapter is to provide a summary of the genre's origins, conventions, notable works, and areas of ongoing debate. The chapter will provide suitable background on the genre before debating its use in discussing #MeToo related topics. I will discuss how the characteristics of verbatim theatre can be beneficial and influential tool for public discussion of sensitive subjects such as sexual violence and harassment.

I will be exploring the origins and characteristics of the genre, notably its utilisation in discussing sensitive, potentially shocking subjects. This will briefly be in comparison to fictional theatre works on same topics, discussing how audiences respond differently and have different expectations when watching a verbatim production.

I will explore verbatim theatre characteristics and origins, discuss performing verbatim, and analyse my preference as a theatre practitioner for devised verbatim theatre. I will then investigate the aesthetics and scenography used in verbatim productions. The chapter will also explore the ethical implications of using verbatim materials in theatre making and issues of authenticity. When discussing the notion of authenticity, I am referring to the accuracy of how the verbatim materials have been presented in both the editing process and the tone of presentation, and if the real-life events and individuals have been dramatised in a credible, factual manner.

The chapter will end with a brief discussion of my own practice within verbatim theatre.

When discussing the above aspects of the genre I will be referring to key practitioners and works, such as theatre maker Peter Cheeseman's *The Knotty* (1970) and his genre-defining work in Stoke-on-Trent's Victoria Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. I will refer to the verbatim theatre works of director Alecky Blythe, notably *London Road* (2011), a verbatim musical based on the 2006 murders of five sex workers in Ipswich and those of playwright Robin Soans such as *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), that consists of interviews with members of different terrorist groups, and *A State Affair* (2000), a project on sexual exploitation of children in Bradford. I will be referring to DV8's *John* (2004), a verbatim production on homelessness and Frantic Assembly's *Fatherland* (2017), a verbatim collaboration with playwright Simon Stephens on fatherhood. I will also refer to the New York theatre company, the Tectonic Theatre Project, who created the landmark verbatim production, *The Laramie Project* (2001) based on the homophobia-fuelled murder of Mark Shepard in 1998.

In the chapter I will also be discussing The Paper Birds Theatre Company - a UK based devising theatre company self-described as "the leaders of verbatim theatre" (The Paper Birds, 2020) in current theatre practice. Their theatre works focus on challenging social themes such as socio-economic inequality, feminist issues and mental health. The Paper Birds are a key reference point as their collaborative, devising approach to verbatim theatre contrasts with the above listed works of lone playwrights. I will be referring to three productions

by The Paper Birds Theatre Company, *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020), *In A Month of Fallen Sundays* (The Paper Birds, 2004), and *Thirsty* (The Paper Birds, 2011), that explore the increase in mental health problems in young people, the stories of women trapped in Ireland's Magdalene laundries, and the UK's "love affair with alcohol" (The Paper Birds, 2020). These productions are ideal reference points as they encapsulate the genre conventions, aesthetics and ethical choices, all from a devised perspective.

When discussing the theoretical origins of verbatim theatre, my key sources will be director Robin Belfield's *Telling the Truth: How to make verbatim theatre* (Belfield, 2018), theatre scholar Deirdre Heddon's *Autobiography and Performance* (Heddon, 2008) and Buffalo Ensemble Theatre's Gary Dawson's *Documentary Theatre in the United States* (1999). I will also be utilising the academic writing of literature and theatre professor, Clas Zilliacus, most notably his 1972 journal article 'Documentary Drama: Form and Content'. I will also make some analysis of the works of theatre scholar Victor Merrimen and British playwright Sarah Kane notably her 1995 play, *Blasted*. I will be referring to Kane during my thesis as her work has been specifically re-examined following the #MeToo movement, as I will detail in my third chapter, #MeToo in Theatre.

## **Characteristics of the genre**

The origins of verbatim theatre are closely linked to, and intersect with, multiple other genres but in *Documentary Theatre in the United States* (1999) scholar Gary Dawson credits British theatre director Peter Cheeseman with inventing

contemporary verbatim theatre<sup>12</sup>. Cheeseman created a methodical outline for producing performances with ‘precise use of oral history in the form of transcribed interview material’ (Dawson, 1999:16). His productions, such as 1970s *The Knotty*, are some of the earliest instances of translating verbatim conversations accurately on stage as dialogue. Following this, the genre of verbatim theatre can be defined in rudimentary terms as theatrical practice that utilises the words of real individuals to form a dramatic work (Belfield, 2018:ix).

However, the conventions of verbatim theatre are varied and often juxtaposed. The fundamental, defining requirement for this genre, as presented by Cheeseman and Belfield, is the use of verbatim materials as dialogue with exacting accuracy. Dawson’s inclusion of the word ‘precise’ in the description of Cheeseman’s work denotes a requirement for accuracy in how the verbatim materials are used in a performance. Accuracy and precision aid the verbatim theatre maker in creating a sense of authenticity; as the use of verbatim materials acts as ‘its chief authenticating sign system that confers actuality: proof that something took place’ (1999:xiii). The required verbatim content creates some artistic rigidity as the dialogue in a verbatim theatre production must adhere to those rudimentary characteristic of the genre – to use real individuals’ words as dialogue only. This means the verbal component of any verbatim theatre production is predetermined before the rehearsal room has been entered. The works from Cheeseman and his predecessors have

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<sup>12</sup> For example, there are links in the aesthetics and conventions of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator’s Agitprop and Epic Theatre. Brecht and Piscator’s use of montage and interdisciplinarity act as a precursor to Cheeseman’s work, as discussed by academic Roswitha Mueller in *Montage in Brecht* (1987:473–486). There are also comparisons to Documentary theatre, as well as Reminiscence theatre – the use of oral histories as the basis for a written script, as outlined in Paw Schweitzer’s *Reminiscence theatre: making theatre from memories* (2007).

created expectation from audiences and peers for verbatim productions to maintain accuracy in the relaying of interviews and testimonials. Dawson writes that ‘The expectation these productions have cultivated can limit the content of performances as no rewrites or alterations to dialogue should be made, to “show the plain reality, the unvarnished truth, (and) unadulterated facts”’ (Dawson, 1999:168).

Meanwhile, the genre’s stylistics and aesthetics offer a strikingly different flexibility of form and structure. The structure of a verbatim theatre piece can be non-linear and expressionistic, highlighting the hyper realism of the content, and conveying non-literal meaning to an audience. Frantic Assembly and Simon Stephens 2017 verbatim theatre production *Fatherland* arranges a number of verbatim conversations on fatherhood into a series of vignettes, performed by a chorus, with no naturalistic narrative structure. Scott Graham, Frantic Assembly’s artistic director, states ‘there was never a time when we allowed *Fatherland* to conform to an existing theatrical shape’ (2018). The lack of narrative structure and use of a chorus symbolically connotes the common nature of the themes among male demographics, with the chorus physically lifting and supporting each speaker, portraying the solidarity the creators have with their interviewees.

The frequent decision to utilise varied theatricality in a verbatim theatre performance is to compliment the challenging and emotionally fraught subjects that verbatim theatre tends to explore such as drug abuse and mental health. It is a consistent trait of the genre that it explores social issues that have high emotionality and potential for controversy. Subjects such as Soans' exploration

of terrorism and Blythe's documentation of the aftermath of multiple murders have a high potential for intense and potentially adverse responses from audiences and theatre critics as 'inherently exploitative or voyeuristic' (Young, 2017).

It is debatable that it is not necessarily a convention of verbatim theatre to explore social issues but rather the genre is chosen by theatre practitioners as a means to explore those issues. The genre's definition of portraying real events with accuracy allows theatre practitioners to justify their subject matter and avoid controversy. Soans asserts, 'artificiality is a charge that cannot be raised against the verbatim' (2008:24) and it is true that verbatim theatre relies on the notion of authenticity. As it deals with the experience of real people and with real life events, the audience expects a sense of authenticity and accuracy for the production to be legitimised. The audience's expectations are for the characterisation, tone, flow and intention of dialogue to directly reflect real conversations and real people. Belfield states that within verbatim theatre 'when something is presented as truth, an audience will more often than not receive it as such' (2018).

It is far easier to justify a controversial statement or provocative scene in a performance if the practitioner can state it is a relaying of a real event or real comment by an interviewee. In many ways the verbatim theatre practitioner can remove some of their responsibility regarding the content of the production as it is an authentic relaying of real conversations, not their subjective opinion. In fact, the shocking elements of a verbatim theatre performance can lend a legitimacy to a production as it exposes the less palatable aspects of human behaviour. With fictional plays there is the



possibility for criticism for depicting shocking moments on stage, for them to be perceived as unjustified and manipulative with no real purpose beyond that emotional reaction. For example, the works of British playwrights Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Martin Crimp in the 1990s received considerable criticism in national media during their premiere productions as gratuitous and pornographic. Kane received the most acrimonious treatment, with Jack Tinker, the Daily Mail's theatre critic, describing her 1995 work, *Blasted*, as 'a play which appears to know no bounds of decency yet has no message to convey by way of excuse...utterly without artistic merit...' (1995). In *Blasted* (1995) Kane's intention was to depict the horrors of the 1992 – 1995 Bosnian war (Dabiri, 2012:92) but the fictionalised reframing of these issues and stylised form of her writing led to a misunderstanding her artistic intentions. Kane stated that 'the thing that shocks me most is that the media seems to have been more upset by the representation of violence than by the violence itself and had missed the purpose of her work (Sierz, 2001:97). The #MeToo-related plays I will discuss in the chapter on #MeToo and theatre refer to (and sometimes explicitly describe) sexual assault, but the literal depiction of sexual violence on stage is something playwrights and theatre makers now avoid. In fact, in academic Lisa Fitzpatrick's *Rape on the Contemporary Stage* (2018), she notes that productions starting from 2010 approach sexual assault by discussing real-life experience (2018:213 – 243), showing the transition to using verbatim materials to discuss the topic. While the fictional depictions of sexual assault in the 1990's was heavily criticised, a verbatim production the same tactics of shock and disgust could be seen as commendable for

confronting the audience with the harsh reality of these social issues and even perceived as a provocative call for social change.

The verbatim theatre genre's characteristics can be difficult to define as there is a range of approaches and methods that have been used historically in verbatim theatre productions. One of the benefits of verbatim theatre is that it offers the opportunity to create a theatrical piece in a bespoke way, to better serve the topic it is covering. The Paper Birds assert that 'with each new show we produce there are different techniques or conventions that we explore and are often derived directly from the theatrical ideas within the show (to share verbatim stories) in breath taking theatrical fashion' (The Paper Birds 2020:3). As this suggests, the particular genre conventions, performance structure and theatre stylistics are unique to the subject matter.

There is also a common trait of multidisciplinary performance within verbatim theatre such as the use of songs and abstract choreography in *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020). This production included photography, live performance, chance choreography, projections, soundscapes and singing. This reiterates to the previously described 'bespoke nature' of creating verbatim theatre, where the individual subject and/or scene demands a different style of content and/or performance skill. An individual scene in a verbatim theatre performance can suddenly contain movement or dance, while another could include singing or non-diegetic sounds and music. These choices are to mark tonal shifts, communicating an implication about the personality of the individual, creating theatrical dissonance between previous and subsequent scenes, and to maintain the audience's attention with

unexpected and surprising theatrical choices. The unrestricted possibilities that can be made regarding the style of a verbatim theatre piece are positioned in direct opposition to the restrictions regarding the flow and intention of the dialogue (which are dictated by the precision that characterises the genre).

The lack of realism in the structure and form of a verbatim theatre piece can provide relief for an audience, compartmentalising the highly emotional content. The contrast between real-life individuals' stories with stylised theatrical methods highlights the verbatim text, reminding the audience that the performers on stage are not fictionalised characters – what you are hearing is real. The most recent example in the work of The Paper Birds is their 2020 piece *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020) that blends the societal issues of self-harm, sexual identity and depression in teenagers with their own personal experiences in heightened, non-naturalistic forms. One example is how the play explores a real teenager's question about losing their virginity in stylised segments that replicate a stereotypical 1990s sitcom (The Paper Birds, 2020:18), which give us the historical and cultural context the scenes can be placed in effortlessly. The contrast between the self-aware artificiality of the style with the seriousness of the content, highlights the emotionality of the overall subject matter.

The use of chance choreography and abstract movement within verbatim theatre communicates the emotions of the subject in an abstract manner, breaking up the text based sections of the play, which can be repetitive in structure. <sup>13</sup> Kylie Perry, Co-Director of the Paper Birds, states, 'if

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<sup>13</sup> The notion of using chance when choreographing dance or movement is often credited to choreographer, Merce Cunningham. The technique includes using isolated movements, dictated by a random method such as tossing a coin. Cunningham's use of chance is well

we use movement like that in this sense...it says enough...we are really conscious of how and when we use gesture...we use it to tell part of the story but can mean' (2020, personal communication July 20th). For example, in *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020), there is climatic sequence where the everyday gestures previously exhibited in the play by the performers become distorted, repeated on a loop and abstracted from their natural context which Perry describes as the scene starting to 'spin out of control...(and) everything (is) falling apart and collapsing' (2020, personal communication July 20th), reflecting the mental health of the interviewees presented in the play.

By breaking the emotional tension with theatrically heightened, stylised scenes and/or songs, the structure of the production heightens the more emotive moments. The structure of the production focuses the audience's attention on the socio-political subject matter by interrupting the emotional connection the audience has with the subject. These juxtaposed techniques and intentions regarding politics and emotions lead to the roots verbatim theatre has in numerous genres.

## **The verbatim theatre actor**

In their *Flying Higher: Devising Theatre CPD* (2020), The Paper Birds describe how, in amalgamating methods from some or all of these genres, a verbatim theatre performance requires a unique form of performance from an actor, as

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documented in the recent book by academic Carrie Noland entitled, *Merce Cunningham – After the Arbitrary* (2020).

well as a rehearsal room that requires a performer to access a range of theatrical skill sets (The Paper Birds, 2020). The practice of blending differing and often conflicting theatrical methods to best portray the verbatim materials with precision and respect is arguably a definitive genre characteristic. This also includes mixing acting approaches and making structural choices in direct response to the subject matter of the piece as a bespoke choice. These choices are reactive to the emotional nuances of a subject and the individual sensitivities of the interviewees. Amalgamating performance styles has a direct impact on the audience's relationship to the actor and the actor's positionality within a performance.

When discussing verbatim theatre and acting methods, there are clear links to the demands of naturalistic acting. There is rarely a naturalistic fourth wall in verbatim theatre as direct address often suits the manner in which the verbatim materials are collected through interviews, testimonials or letters (Hammond and Steward 2008:9). However, the defining expectation of the genre is to portray authentic experiences and emotions, which asks the performer to summon sincere emotionality in their performance by using naturalistic acting methods such as emotion memory or similar variations. The emotion memory technique requires the actor to access their own emotional experiences to present their character's emotions with psychological truth (Benedetti, 2005:17). Naturalism's aim to create a psychologically and emotionally believable portrayal of a character intersects with the verbatim theatre actor depicting the feelings of real individuals as the shared goal is for sincerity and an emotive audience response. However, Naturalism's desire for believability might often be for audience escapism while verbatim theatre

pursues it as a sign of respect for the subject and the interviewees, showing a differing artistic goal.<sup>14</sup>

In naturalistic performances, the audience is aware (despite the fourth wall and potentially convincing performances) that the actors on stage are not the characters they are portraying. Everything within a traditionally naturalistic performance is attempting to distract from the artificiality of the theatrical experience. In verbatim theatre the audience knows the actors are not the people they are portraying on stage before entering the performance space but want to feel an emotional connection to uphold the realness of the verbatim materials. Therefore, verbatim theatre uses some naturalistic aspects with the same emotional aim but for entirely different reasons. The verbatim theatre processes recreate the real experiences, feelings and opinions of interviewees on stage to inspire and provoke, to create intelligent conversation on social issues.

Within verbatim theatre's creative flexibility, regarding structure and form, it is possible for actors to multi-role and switch performance disciplines without breaking the emotional connection between audience and performer. In the case of *ASK ME ANYTHING* (2020) the performers establish this connection by revealing personal experiences such as reading their teenage diaries (*The Paper Birds*, 2020:22). This connection with the audience stems from the explicit awareness that the individuals on stage are performers rather than the

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<sup>14</sup> The ideas surrounding verisimilitude and mimesis in theatre that derive from Stanislavski's work are explored by academic Vicki Ann Cremona in 'Stanislavski's system: mimesis, truth and verisimilitude' (2019:23-32). Comparatively, academic Robert Gordon discusses the opposing use of disrupting the audience in his article 'Brecht, interruptions and epic theatre' (2017).

characters they are portraying, defying the need for naturalistic immersion without severing the emotional connection between the performer and the audience member. The bond between audience and actor is built on honesty rather than escapism. The naturalistic drama's reliance on suspension of disbelief for the audience to achieve an emotional connection to a performance is not required within verbatim theatre as the emotional stakes of the piece are elevated by the content's status as sourced from real life experience. The audience is aware, prior to the performance, that the performers are the vessel for real life experiences and conversations, making redundant the naturalistic need for consistency of an actor to portray one character in order to create audience engagement. The viewer is already invested in the subject and in the stories they are about to hear, as the subject of a verbatim piece is the impetus for engaging with it.

The verbatim theatre actor must then hold this emotional sincerity in tandem with some non-naturalistic performance techniques. Verbatim theatre performances are often episodic in structure and frequently non-linear. Instead, the performer must bring the emotional honesty to seemingly disjointed scenes and to opposing performance styles. Multi-roling is common in verbatim theatre, with the actor being used as a vehicle for multiple stories and experiences. An example of this is within the show *Thirsty* (The Paper Birds, 2011), where two actors performed 'real booze based confessions collected from a "drunken hotline" and hundreds of questionnaires answered by young and old' (The Paper Birds, 2020, interchanging between multiple real individuals throughout the performance.

Actors in verbatim theatre, such as those in *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020), are also often required to perform as themselves, or a performative version of themselves, as part of their multiple roles. The verbatim theatre performer is forced to have a personal and intellectual engagement with the subject to enhance the integrity of the production as it implies the performers genuinely care about the people and the subject they are performing about because they have opinions on the subject matter (The Paper Birds, 2020:7) This method communicates trust between the actors and the interviewees the actors are portraying, as the actors expose their own thoughts, feelings and related experiences. The emotional vulnerability of the verbatim actor when portraying themselves conveys a higher level of commitment and respect regarding the subject matter. This also aids the production in meeting the ethical expectations on a verbatim theatre piece, which I will analyse further later in the chapter.

Verbatim theatre is arguably a form of political theatre as its purpose is to examine social issues and create debate. However, the distinction between purist political theatre and verbatim theatre lies in the former enhancing the didactic aspects of the drama, 'instead of emphasising the emotional or psychological predisposition of characters' (Gordon, 2017). Verbatim theatre differs as, despite its socio-political purpose, it relies on the emotional experiences of the interviewees as an integral part of the genre and aims to connect with the humanity of the audience.



Applied theatre is related to verbatim theatre in that both have a set function, acting as 'responses to social conditions' (Prentki and Preston, 2013:10). Applied theatre is often seen as primarily educational, therapeutic and for a specific audience, such as prisons or hospitals, and therefore can be dismissed as demoting artistry in its aims, functioning more 'as a bandage might be applied to a wound' (Prentki and Preston, 2013:10) than a piece of art. Verbatim theatre can be used as a form of applied theatre with productions commonly touring schools and followed by workshops with audiences (The Paper Birds, 2020) but the focus on theatricality and artistry are more prominent. Within applied theatre 'the boundaries between actors and spectators are purposely blurred as all participants are involved as active theatre makers' (O'Connor and O'Connor, 2009:471) and while this is a practice sometimes used in verbatim theatre, it not a defining convention for verbatim theatre as it is for applied theatre. When the verbatim theatre actor does perform as themselves, it requires a further mode of performance where they have to be prepared for the possible responses from an audience that may stem from the emotionally fraught and potentially controversial subjects commonly explored. The verbatim theatre actor cannot rely on the work they have done in rehearsals and must be equipped with spontaneity, patience and the ability to defuse tense situations during a performance. Soans states that 'in verbatim theatre the audience assumes an active rather than a passive role' (Hammond. and Steward 2008:23). This is similar to the applied theatre performer that has potentially volatile responses; in *Applied Theatre: Facilitation* (2016), academic Sheila Preston asserts that 'self-reflexive awareness is key for the facilitator's well-being...[because] there are radical

possibilities' (2016:57), showing possibility of negative responses when in direct involvement with the audience, notably when discussing a play's subject in post-performance workshops.

In *Autobiography in Performance* (2008) academic Deirdre Heddon states 'focusing on the "potential" of autobiographical performance, I recognise its potential to also do harm' (2008:6) and indicates how there are risks when using real life experiences in performance.<sup>15</sup> There are similarities between autobiographical theatre and verbatim theatre such as both having fundamental links to political theatre and exposing emotionally charged subject matters through real life accounts (Heddon, 2008:11). However, while the verbatim theatre actor might be required to share their personal experiences and feelings, autobiographical performance relies entirely on the performers experiences and therefore risks a narrow portrayal of the subject matter, presenting a singular viewpoint. While it is possible to explore a subject in a nuanced manner through personal experience, it is also possible for it to lack depth and variation of perspective. In *Verbatim, verbatim: Techniques in Contemporary Documentary* (Hammond. and Steward 2008:23) Soans asserts verbatim theatre can show more complexity and diversity of experience through a variety of interviewee testimonials, as well as the actors' own experience, portraying the subject on a personal level but with variation of experience.

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<sup>15</sup> The risks are also clear when considering the close ties autobiographical theatre has to verbatim theatre – both are 'not derived from the imagination' (Belfield, 2018:47).

The variety of skills a verbatim theatre actor is required to possess and the eclectic range of genres that influence verbatim theatre practice makes it a hybrid genre. While this makes it harder to define and less straightforward to practice, it makes it an exciting experience for the theatre maker, performer and audience member. It is unpredictable in many areas of its construction and delivery. In many ways, verbatim theatre is defined by its freedom from definition.

## **Devised vs. scripted verbatim**

Amanda Stuart Fisher characterises the verbatim creative method as an 'ongoing process of self-reflection' that requires the theatre maker to ask, 'why we are doing what we are doing and how we think it will benefit the participants' (Fisher, 2011:119).<sup>16</sup> Playwright Gillette Elvgren's article 'Documentary Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent' (1974) documents how the preference for a collaborative, devised approach in verbatim theatre stems from Cheeseman's original requisite that 'instead of a writer interpreting the factual information according to his own personal prejudices the company hopes to present the many viewpoints' (Elvgren, 1974:90).

Verbatim theatre can be created through devising methods, or a playwright can structure interview transcripts into a playscript before entering

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<sup>16</sup> Paget also commented on the devised theatre method stating, 'In common with any collectively devised show, Verbatim Theatre can bring a tremendous sense of solidarity, almost regardless of the merits of the piece' (1987:329) asserting that devised verbatim creates a greater sense of comradeship and community for actors during the devising and performance stages.

the rehearsal room.<sup>17</sup> While both approaches have benefits, it is my argument that devised theatre ensures the integrity and thematic accuracy of a verbatim project.

When analysing the empirical design of theatre makers such as Robin Soans, who prioritises scripted verbatim play texts over devising, there are problematic aspects to this manner of working within the verbatim genre. The data in a verbatim scripted text is testimonial-based and fallible to the playwright's perspective and personal ethos. It is arguable that a playwright such as Soans is not an appropriate practitioner for some of the subjects his plays have focused on. For *Talking to Terrorists* (Soans, 2005) he interviewed terrorist organisations such as The National Resistance Army from Uganda. It is debatable if Soans, as a white man, is a suitable individual to reframe the verbatim dialogue of Ugandan men on his own, as the structure chosen by the playwright, whether consciously or not, contextualises and attributes an implicit meaning through its relationship to the rest of the play. Regarding the scripted verbatim play, it is possible that the director and cast are restricted in making suitable alterations in response to cultural changes in society, making works such as *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) problematic to contemporary audience. As world events unfold, the audience's understanding and perception of subjects alter and plays such as Soans' become dated without room for updates because of its form. It could be argued that scripted theatre

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<sup>17</sup> There is also an argument for a combination of approaches, or a 'massaged verbatim', as discussed in Cyrielle Garson's 'Verbatim Theater and New Writing in Britain: A State of "Kindred Strangers"?' (2015). For the purposes of this somewhat brief discussion of the verbatim genre in relation to creative methods, I will focus on the two opposing approaches for the sake of clarity.

work dictates permanent thematic messages and narrow depictions of societal issues because the content, structure and tone have been established by the singular author. Therefore, someone such as Soans will always attach his cultural background and gender identity onto his work in some form or another.

Writer Kit De Waal writes that in the currently more socially aware, more 'woke' cultural landscape, writers need to ask themselves

are we the best person to say it? Have we examined our privilege and our attitudes sufficiently to give us the necessary perspective to be authentic, sympathetic and true? Are we sure that we are not dabbling in exotica, in that fascination with the other that prevents us portraying a rounded, rich culture with all its nuances, diversity and reality? By writing our story are we taking the place of someone better placed to tell it? Our aim should be not only to write well but to do no harm along the way.

(2018)

When collating stories and structuring them for a performance, a diversity of creative influence is vital so the lone playwrights 'do not dip (their) pen in somebody else's blood' (De Waal, 2018).

By comparison, devised theatre allows theatre makers to continue socio-political and moral discussions within the creative process,<sup>18</sup> making changes to the performance when required and to continue to be responsive to cultural developments while rehearsing, without the concerns of changing an existing play text. In *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (2009) Scott Graham describes how during the devising process he advises 'just

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<sup>18</sup> Playwright Rony Robinson described the verbatim rehearsal room (specifically in a devised process) as a democracy, 'whereby you don't take the piss out of somebody else's material if they don't take the piss out of yours - and somehow you end up not acting the verbatim material in the way that you would normally if it was a script' (1987:330).

keeping eyes and ears open and truly trusting that the spark might appear at any time from any source' (2009:14) and this indicates the responsive nature of group devising. Frantic Assembly are another example as a leading British devising theatre company with a large creative team and have produced verbatim productions such as *Fatherland* (2017) with playwright Simon Stephens. The company work collaboratively during their development process as Graham states, while describing the creative team, noting that 'their vision, experience and expertise are invaluable' (2014:14). The devising process forces the theatre maker and performer to self-evaluate and collaborate, which is ideal for making well-rounded, multi-faceted theatre. When creating verbatim theatre and navigating sensitive, complicated subject matter, an ability to measure the flow and intensity of the piece is required, as well as on-going discussions about the material and the ethical, moral implications of how it is being used. The creative team 'should be commenting... this should be a mutual flow of energy and idea' (2014:14). Devised theatre allows theatre makers to have that creative and sociological discussion as the work is developed, giving a higher success rate in appropriate tone and structure of the end product.

This gives opportunities for sensitivity and cultural relevance to be upheld while exploring controversial, provocative and highly emotional subject matter. In *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020) the company acknowledge that their initial idea for the piece (to write to young people, inviting them to ask the cast questions about life) was not ideal. They realised that they 'asked [the interviewees] what [their] problems are, but we should have been asking how we can help' (2020:47) and therefore, they changed

tactic midway through their rehearsals and instead asked young people how best to help them – ‘What do you need? How can we make sure you talk to us? ... How do we support you?’ (2020:47). By acknowledging this issue in their practice and discussing it on stage, the interviewees are given a high level of on-going consideration and empathy. It shows honesty and dedication to the subject matter. However, the opportunity to change approaches towards the subject matter is not available to the cast in a scripted verbatim play, making the potential for tackling a subject insensitively much greater.

## **Aesthetics and scenography**

Verbatim theatre relies on a varied set of aesthetics to maintain the bespoke nature of the genre. These aesthetics must serve the purpose of representing the interviewees successfully, as well as symbolising the overall subject matter a production is exploring. There is often the need to clearly identify each individual who is being portrayed, especially when actors are multi-roling, with the flexibility for quickly changing into a different role. Staging a verbatim theatre piece means production design that can meet the practical needs of the production and also hold a unifying symbolism relating to the subject matter, allowing quick changes of location, character and tone while providing a consistent thematic backdrop.

A clear example is the set for *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020) which was constructed as three teenage bedrooms (one for each performer) that could also transform, through television screens and projection placed among the set, into different locations. This choice denotes the teenage themes of the play and the seating, consisting of beanbags, pillows and

cushions, implying intimacy and a breakdown of the conventional theatrical seating model. Perry asserts that for *The Paper Birds* 'it's about emotion and about atmosphere' (2020, personal communication July 20th) and these choices were intended to communicate informality, sincerity and that the audience, through their physical proximity, were involved in the performance. The set also acted as a template for other locations through the use of screens and live streaming cameras. These made the set less literal as a depiction of a real place, as the scenes were not all set within a bedroom, and more of a thematic background that could become various places.

In *Designing Costume for Stage and Screen* (2014) costume designer Deirdre Clancy states that 'a good costume "tells" the audience about the status, relative wealth, age, profession or trade, attractiveness, temper and underlying psychic state of each character in relation to the others' (2014:67) communicating the extensive importance of costume choice in a theatrical production. Though their costume, the verbatim theatre actor is frequently presented as themselves (such as everyday clothes worn in *ASK ME ANYTHING* (2020)) or as a symbolic, primarily blank template. This is similar to the thematic set as, beyond the unavoidable signifiers of the performers' age, race and visible disabilities, actors can be presented in a symbolic uniform such as the identical, period-appropriate nightdresses worn in *In a Month of Fallen Sundays* (*The Paper Birds*, 2004). The theatre makers' reasoning for these can be to either communicate vulnerability to the audience by exposing the performers and their personalities, or to contrastingly display them as a vessel for the experiences of real people. In selecting the everyday clothes



option the theatre maker is persuading the audience that this is a truthful theatrical communication, that the authenticity of the piece can be trusted. In instances of a template costume being used, this particular choice communicates that the cast are an ensemble, unified by a theme. They have removed their individuality to authentically present the interviewees to the audience. Each interviewee can be differentiated by accent, physicality or use of props. There is a danger that in putting on a different costume (a different scarf, a cardigan or wig) to define each person an actor is representing that the real-life individual is being belittled or their experience and their cultural or economic background are being overtly simplified. Even if the costume choices are accurate to the clothes worn by the real-life individuals, it could be seen as patronising or reductive – these are real people (who have usually experienced trauma) and are not a character or costume to be encapsulated in one set of attire. Carol Lingwood, head of costume at the National Theatre, states that (consciously or not) audiences are accustomed to viewing ‘the costume and the props (as) the things that have to tell the story about that character and the journey that that character has through the show’ (National Theatre YouTube Channel YouTube Channel, 2015). Costume fundamentally contains symbolic meanings that portray a hegemonic ideology or theme within a theatrical context but when depicting a real individual this can be mistranslated. A real life individual’s clothing, while often linked to a sense of identity, are not selected to convey thematic meaning. Everyday clothes are selected due to various factors besides symbolism; comfort, affordability, ease of access, as well as conveying an identity unlike theatrical clothing that is used to ‘emphasize intellectual constructs, parallel experiences and narrative forms’

(Clancy, 2014:64). A person's unconscious choice of outfit when interviewed has inherently different meaning when translated into the language of theatre. This translation can make a simple choice (such as to wear a jumper because it was cold on that particular day) to become an overarching statement about the person's social, economic, cultural or moral status and affect the audience's perception of them. The same can be said of instances where actors have portrayed one individual throughout a performance rather than multi-roling. In these instances, the interviews undertaken (no matter how thorough or plentiful) are used to form a conventional notion of a character on stage and the real person becomes defined by these limited interactions with the theatre makers. In *London Road* (Blythe, 2011) real people are defined by their experiences of one event and their portrayals are ultimately subjected to subconscious assumption and stereotype based on how they view this single aspect of their life. This can be reductive in communicating to an audience the socio-economic or cultural influences on these events or issues, investing in the emotional. While theatre is ultimately always a form of representation and the level of complexity it can depict is finite, when the lives of real, often vulnerable, people are being used as a means of entertainment and a source of income for venues and theatre makers, there are important, self-reflective questions the theatre maker/s must make, and more in-depth analysis given to the creative choices made before a performance reaches an audience. In *Austerity and the Public Role of Drama* (2009), academic and author Victor Merrimen comments that 'strategies...to expose to ethical reflection the process of human relations, are core features of drama as an art form' (2019:103) and that 'acts of theatre... interrogate especially ethical problems

arising at moments of social mutation' (2019:103). These moments of social mutation include the verbatim theatre subject matters I have already mentioned (the rise of mental health problems in young people, the growing socio-economic stress on families and the increased media coverage of terrorist incidences) and for any form of theatre to address these 'mutations', theatre's ethical role in public discourse has to be analysed and respected by those creating it.

Within verbatim theatre scenography and use of multimedia can be deployed to connate meaning as and when it is needed. The use of complex soundscapes and projections is a common component in verbatim theatre such as those in Tricycle Theatre's *The Riots* (Slovo, 2011) and New York Theatre Workshop's *Sontag: Reborn* (Angelos, 2013). In these instances, the use of projections supports the performance in the way a literal, naturalistic set would normally establish the geographical setting of a scene, but projections provide this information to an audience with more flexibility for the production (as no extensive physical set changes have to take place) and more atmospheric possibilities (as the restraint of a historically accurate set is not present). While a template or blank set is needed for flexibility of setting, the use of projections and soundscapes, recorded or live, help denote a precise place, historical setting or even communicate unspoken information about the individual being portrayed on stage.

Projections and use of screens have numerous benefits for a verbatim theatre performance. For example, in *ASK ME ANYTHING* (The Paper Birds, 2020), when a question from a young person relating to race or sexuality could

not be answered by the white, heterosexual, cisgender cast, a video of a real person responding was played. This increased the sense of emotional authenticity and sensitivity to the subject matter. The modern audience's increased relationship and dependency on screen can be used as a positive tool. It also means a photo or video can appear to symbolically change the setting of a scene or, through use of news footage and interviews, ground the performance in reality even further for an audience such as the screen of a live rabbit (rather than a fake prop) in *ASK ME ANYTHING* (2020:21). *ASK ME ANYTHING* (2020) also used a Siri-inspired narrator who would explain cultural references (such as Teletext) and relay the more statistical verbatim theatre materials through screens and voice recordings (2020:1). The concept of 'Bridge it' is to replicate an artificial intelligence personal assistance such as Siri or an Alexa, which are commonly known to a teenage audience. The Siri-like narrator proclaimed itself to be named 'Bridge it' (2020:1), acting as a bridge between the actors and the audience. This implies that in this instance, the use of technology is to make the audience more comfortable to explore the emotional themes of the performance. For example, 'Bridge it' starts the performance by informing the audience 'this is a mobile friendly show, which means you can keep your phone turned on if you like. But probs best if you don't take a phone call during the show. Take pictures and share stuff if you want #AskMeAnythingShow' (2020:1). This sets a tone of connectivity and sharing between the cast, audience and the world outside of the performance space. Therefore, verbatim theatre uses scenography to create an informal relationship with an audience, enabling emotional exploration rather than a primarily didactic one; for *The Paper Birds*, 'one of the main aims behind

everything we make is we want to make audiences feel' (Perry 2020, personal communication July 20th).

As with the use of acting methods and differing structures, each verbatim theatre piece will demand different aesthetic approaches, bespoke to its specific subject matter. The genre therefore offers a huge range of creative possibilities but ones that need careful consideration. When selecting the conventions, aesthetics, and stylistic methods to create a verbatim theatre piece, the theatre maker must be aware of potential sub-textual messaging to an audience regarding the stories and participants being dramatized.

## **Authenticity and ethics**

The notion of verbatim theatre as authentic stems from its origins within documentary theatre and the emergence of Documentarism in art during the 1960s and 1970s. Zilliacus described this as a post-war artistic dispute with Romanticism, as a 'return to Functionalism, to a *neue Sachlichkeit* which was by no means restricted to theatre and drama' (1972:225) due to post-war disillusionment. Zilliacus states that 'no poems...were possible after Auschwitz' (1972:225) and there was a commitment to more didactic and clinical depictions on stage. In *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (1988) playwright David Edgar described the genre as 'created to give credibility to the playwright's analysis of the incredible happenings in our times' (1988:54). The connection between verbatim theatre as a response to extreme occurrences in society can be supported by the rise in its popularity following the 9/11 terrorist attack, with the works of Soans and David Hare receiving notable success. Soans' *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) premiered 72

hours before the July 7<sup>th</sup> London attacks (Wolf, 2005) and received in-depth analysis due to this event, such as Matt Wolf's review in prominent publication Variety magazine who described it as 'both necessary and important' (2005).

This correlation suggests that the genre of verbatim theatre having authenticity and ethical practice is fundamental to its relevancy and success, notably in how it is received by audiences and peers. Victor Merriman states that,

performance is a means of imagining life-in common as the ethical underpinning of public life. Acts of performance are, but are not reducible to, forms of social dialogue. At their core is the capacity to imagine public life, and to inspire public deliberation, toward action for democratic change. Because performance is made, and happens among and between people, it is a radically collective achievement.

(2019:20)

This social dialogue can only be achieved in verbatim theatre through the ethical underpinning of authenticity and honest representation. It is the authenticity of the production rather than the genre or style that attracts an audience to verbatim theatre (unlike fictional texts where an individual's preference for drama or comedy, for example, may influence a potential audience member more than subject matter of a play). The requirement for accuracy in the delivery of verbatim theatre is a vital component of a production's positive reception. If a production has achieved this is dependent on how audience members and interviewees/participants respond to it, and if it has achieved its initial artistic and/or social goal.

Verbatim theatre provides the interviewees' idiosyncratic colloquialisms, malapropisms and diverse vocabulary and thus lends an authenticity that is impossible for the lone playwright to replicate. Alecky Blythe states that the

process provides 'dialogue I could never hope to write' (National Theatre YouTube Channel, 2014) as verbatim theatre encapsulates the individual's personal philosophy, psychology and demonstrates the varying socio-economic backgrounds of those affected by the issue of discussion, through their language choices and vocal characteristics. David Hare states that 'if you simply write from your imagination, then you write from your recollection of other peoples' way of life but if you go out and collect evidence about peoples' way of life, things are revealed to you which are completely extraordinary, that you don't see coming' (National Theatre YouTube Channel, 2014). The use of real peoples' transcribed stories provides more surprising interactions between the audience. The position of the performers and performance material as a fabricated source of entertainment is stripped away, leaving a rawness to the performance.

The context of a theatre performance may well protect the interviewees as well as providing a safe space for their stories to be heard. From a practical perspective, the unspoken rituals within a theatrical space that dictate to the audience how to behave, may well prevent the verbal abuse that vulnerable individuals, such as assault victims, mental health patients or homeless people, often experience when sharing their stories online or in their everyday lives. The prescribed expectations of an audience to sit silently and behave respectfully toward the performers, allows the uninterrupted sharing of stories, lending more empowerment to the interviewees as they have a protected social platform. It is also expected during post-performance discussions for those taking part to behave respectfully toward the creative team behind a

production, even when being critical, with clear consequences of expulsion from the venue acting as an unspoken deterrent. These conditions make a theatrical space a physically and psychologically safer one for, for example, any sexual assault victims who may be in attendance, preventing verbal or physical assault that they could experience or be threatened with in other contexts such as social media websites. For example, in 2017 Amnesty International found that 'nearly a quarter (23%) of the women surveyed across the eight countries said they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once, including 21% of women polled in the UK and 1/3 (33%) of women polled in the US' (Amnesty.org, 2020). Given the widespread abuse women face in other sharing platforms, theatre could be the ideal vehicle for productive discussion on these societal issues where this can be prevented.

The intentions of the theatre maker within verbatim theatre could be seen as duplicitous or juxtaposed, depending on the practical decisions made about text collation, editing, and how to stage the work stylistically. When considering the genre's reliance on working with vulnerable individuals, the level of profit the individual practitioner or company make from verbatim performances may be scrutinised by theatre critics, theatre scholar, and audience members, leading to potential accusations of exploitation. However, while The Paper Birds have withheld their moral stance to give a platform to those who are without one, to 'be quiet rebels, amplifying the voice of everyday people' (The Paper Birds, 2020), by working as a charity and delivering a large amount of community outreach programs to young people, which is not always the case with verbatim theatre companies such as DV8 and the Tectonic Theatre



Project . It is arguable that the funding that larger verbatim theatre companies receive and the profits their productions make, directly conflict with the vulnerability and economic status of their interviewees. When considering the cost of theatre tickets for viewing verbatim theatre performances there is a conflict between the vulnerability of the interviewee with the financial gain for theatre makers. A key example of this conflict lies within the well-known and high profile verbatim theatre company New York's Tectonic Theatre Project. The company's work has explored controversial societal issues such as homophobic violence in *The Laramie Project* (2001) and the Holocaust in *The Album: Here There are Blueberries* (which is still in development), using collaborative devising with its cast. However, Tectonic have a substantial budget, raising \$1.2 million in 2017 (ALMA, 2018) and have been able to work with high profile actors such as Jane Fonda in *33 Variations* (2007). Their audience is in the economic position to afford New York theatre prices of, on average, \$116 (Statista, 2020) and therefore lacks economic accessibility, creating a conflict between the purpose of their projects, which is to highlight disenfranchised, disadvantaged areas of society, with the business aspects of their productions. A similar, pertinent example DV8's 2004 production of *John*. The piece details the experiences of an addict through verbatim interviews and abstract movement sequences. DV8's revered status in the theatre industry and the popular venues they perform in lead to a similar economic inequity (such as the National Theatre, where tickets can cost £69 each (Nationaltheatre.org.uk, 2020)). While *John* (2015) was shown on the National Theatre Live's 2015 programme, which provided access to the production to cinema audiences across the United Kingdom, the cost of these cinema tickets

is still exclusionary for the demographic the piece is about, with tickets for these screenings costing £18 per ticket (Vue Cinemas, 2020). Both DV8 and Tectonic Theatre raise questions about possible exploitation of the individuals and groups they gather verbatim materials from, as they use the experiences of these people to sell theatre tickets with limited accessibility to those they explore in their theatre outputs.

Presenting the interviewees' experiences with reverence and in a responsible manner is often cited as a key motivation for creating a verbatim theatre piece. This motivation has been consistently asserted by the genre's practitioners such as Robin Soans who writes that 'transferring a deeply personal conversation onto the stage in this way confers a responsibility... and this partially accounts for the increased intensity of their listening' (Hammond and Steward, 2008:24). The sensitivity that Soans discusses suggests that the genre intrinsically requires considerate and ethical approaches. In the seminal book *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theatre* (2018) Belfield dedicates a notable chapter to ethics, which begins with the assertion that he

would always advocate that a verbatim theatre practitioner should conduct themselves in an ethical way, and therefore our habits, our customs, our very practices must in themselves be ethical. By this I mean they are carried out with honesty and integrity'

(2018:103)

While these general moralistic tenants can be reassuring and affirming, the practicalities of producing and presenting a verbatim theatre piece offer less definitive guidance. The notions of displaying sensitivity and integrity are arguably open to the personal interpretation of these concepts, making

practical actions likely to deviate between each producer of verbatim theatre performance. This is also amplified by the changing relationship between audiences and theatre makers, with a recent expectation for theatre productions to be created in an ethical manner. This cultural change in large part due to 'woke' culture, as outlined in culture critic Charles Pulliam-Moore's article 'How "woke" went from black activist watchword to teen internet slang' (SplinterNews, 2016).

One example of problematic practice is the lack of safety protocol Soans had in place when meeting drug addicts in a bail hostel (Hammond and Steward, 2008:36) for *A State Affair* (2000), a project on sexual exploitation of children in Bradford. Soans met with two vulnerable young women who have been victims of childhood sexual abuse that led to drug abuse. There were no health and safety protocols in place or safeguarding policies in place to protect the young women or Soans. Soans' subject matter in this instance is one with large ethical and safeguarding implications but these were not addressed during his process (Hammond and Steward, 2008:36). Judging how the current trends of 'woke' culture (Pulliam-Moore, 2016) is permeating art and entertainment en masse, it seems unlikely this would be acceptable practice while making a contemporary piece of theatre. It is difficult to discern the honest intentions of a playwright or director, and the possibility of conscious or subconscious hypocrisy might also be present. The balance between artistic expression and moral credibility is not a simple or binary one, especially in the midst of a rehearsal process with deadlines and budgets applying external pressures on the theatre maker. Therefore, the integrity of the morals asserted by practitioners is merely speculative without analysing their creative actions

and production choices. It could be argued that the artists' role is one of a provocateur, and not, as asserted by artist and academic Anthony Schrag in his article 'The artist as social worker vs. the artists as social wanker' (2018) 'the problematic notion of the "artist as social worker"' (2018:9). However, the role of provocateur as an artist and advocacy for social responsibility in theatre are not mutually exclusive; the choice between these two stances is not binary. The nuanced role of a theatre practitioner can balance these juxtaposed roles and it could be argued that the socially responsible creative choice can be the most provocative by exposing the reality of a traumatic experience.

The reverence that Soans and Belfield claim to have for the genre is commendable but vague for implementing into practice. While there is academic and critical literature on verbatim theatre, applied theatre, political theatre and how ethical considerations within theatre have evolved, there are no precise guidelines or specific systems for verbatim theatre companies or artists to follow. These may prove to be a requirement when accommodating the recent societal changes such as 'woke' culture (Pulliam-Moore, 2016), when protecting the participants and the theatre makers. Within the heightened scrutiny that creatives currently face there is potential to have large negative professional outcomes regardless of if the error has been claimed speculatively or can be genuinely evidenced, and whether it was committed consciously or subconsciously by the theatre maker. The prevention of such errors can be assured by engaging in ethical modes of practice, ensuring mutual benefit for all participating in verbatim theatre projects.

In 'The Impact of Participating in a Verbatim Theatre Process' (2017) verbatim theatre researcher Sarah Peters writes about the relationship between trauma and verbatim theatre and, in doing so, reiterates the need for ethical practice. Peters investigates the potential for positive social impact within the genre, indicating that the benefits for those participating in verbatim theatre projects can reach the families of those interviewed and larger communities through 'positive self-awareness, enriched interpersonal communication among family members and a stronger connection to the broader...community' (Peters, 2017:1). This implies that the negative ramifications of unethical practice, if the theatre maker does not ensure the safety of the interviewees and ensure accuracy in their representation in their production (such as race, age, sexual orientation etc.), can also spread across families and communities, creating unproductive conflict, emotional damage and stigma towards the subject matter.

## **My practice**

I will now examine my own practice as a verbatim theatre maker as it is important to contextualise my work within the genre characteristics that I have detailed in this chapter. The WordForWord Theatre productions I will be referring to are *Rain will be heavy...*(WordForWord Theatre, 2017), *Living with...ANXIETY* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018) and *Living with...FiBrOmYaLGiA* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018). As previously mentioned, when discussing my positionality within my research, these productions were explorations of the 2015 Cumbria floods, the experiences of

those with anxiety disorders and the lives of those living with the invisible disability, fibromyalgia.

In all three of these productions, an interdisciplinary approach (that was reactive to the verbatim materials and subject matter) was used, including use of photography, live performance, chaos choreography, projections, soundscapes and singing. The use of scenography and multimedia was utilised in these productions to create bold transitions and/or symbolic statements. A clear example of this was the staging used for *Rain will be heavy...*(WordForWord, 2017), which consisted of black rostra and steps with a projection screen at the back. The projections included film footage of well-known locations in Carlisle and the areas affected by the 2015 floods, where the interviewees and actor were from. The use of projections made it possible to travel to different locations easily, quickly and effectively but it also grounded the performance in reality through familiar, real locations, giving the production a sense of authenticity.

Another notable example is the influence of digital scenography in my own work, which can be seen through use of video projections and live streamed video in *Living with...FiBrOmYaLgiA* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018) at Carlisle's Old Fire Station. I am drawn to digital scenography in my work as it provides a variety of creative expression and varied opportunities to connect with an audience. Just as the previously described, juxtaposed acting styles in this production communicated a specific meaning; the use of scenography also has thematic purpose. The live video stream that was projected onto the walls of the performance space was filmed through a Bluetooth connected GoPro

camera to highlight specific hand movements and facial expressions of the actors during a physical theatre section of the performance. The intention in doing this was to split the audience's focus, symbolising the conflict between the perceived life of suffers from an able bodied person's perspective, in contrast to the isolating, painful reality of living with fibromyalgia.

My aim as a verbatim theatre director is creating a juxtaposition between my cast members showing emotional authenticity when portraying a real person with the contrivance of embodying faceless organisations. I employ multi-roling as a method to achieve this juxtaposition, highlighting the emotionality of the former and the emotion-less, clinical approach of the latter. In *Living with...FiBrOmYaLgiA* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018) the performers had to quickly jump from performing testimonials from fibromyalgia sufferers to relaying medical statistics. This meant part of their performance required emotional authenticity and sincerity, while other parts required them to be representative of the medical community.

While an actor might attempt to portray an organisation in a neutral fashion to avoid bias, the neutrality can in actual fact contain an unintentional socio-political message. Within *Living with...FiBrOmYaLgiA* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018) the neutrality of the performance (neutral posture and positioning, even vocal tone and rhythm) was intentionally used to imply a common lack of empathy towards fibromyalgia patients in the medical community (Camberlain and Myhal, 2012:148). Therefore, the blending of Naturalism and Epic Theatre acting methods can be a socio-political statement

itself within a verbatim theatre piece while still stating accurate facts and real-life experiences only.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the requirement for ethical and responsible creative practices are not an optional component in verbatim theatre. The need for ethical representation and the sense of responsibility within a verbatim theatre piece is evident across all areas of the production's process. Aspects such as acting style, costume design and scenography are all hinged on the ethical implications of creating such a piece. Ethics and responsibility are ultimately a definitive of the genre if it is to be fully realised. Cheeseman's intentions when creating the inaugural productions in the 1960s and 1970s have not been realised in some of the more high-profile claims to the genre. However, I conclude that the moral responsibility involved in creating true verbatim theatre informs the respective production processes, rehearsal methods and creative choices regarding stylistics, aesthetics and scenography at a fundamental level. The use of collaborative devising is not only a practical option but an ideological one in which the purpose of the genre can be fully captured on stage.



# Chapter 3: #MeToo in theatre

## Introduction

This chapter discusses the influence of the #MeToo movement on theatre, exploring specific productions that tackle #MeToo related topics, and how since 2017 the movement has changed the processes of theatrical practice in the rehearsal room and the lecture room.

#MeToo movement has inspired discussions on theatre practice and been the subject of multiple stage representations. Explorations of the topic include artist and scholar Meghan Brodie's case study 'Lysistrata, #MeToo, and Consent' (2019), researchers Eloise Migon and Paul Rae's article 'Masculinity after #MeToo in Mainstream Theatre' (2019), academic Michelle MacArthur's article in *Canadian Theatre Review*, "'Sorry Not Sorry": Apologising in the Wake of #MeToo' (2019), 'Institutional Responses to #MeToo: A Conversation' (2019) which was hosted by academic Natalie Alvarez for *Canadian Theatre Review*, *#MeToo in the Theatre: Understanding the Warning Signs of "Grooming"* (Hurwitz, A. 2020), *Theatre after MeToo: sexual abuse and institutional change in Poland* (Jakimiak, A. 2020), and *Performing #MeToo – How not to look away* (2021) which is a collection of writings, edited by dramaturg Judith Rudakoff. I will also analyse the Royal Court Theatre's No Grey Area events in 2017 and the 2021 Susreti Theatre Festival in Bosnia.

When reviewing how theatre has captured the cultural moment of the #MeToo movement, I will be referring to these examples as well as the following theatre plays: *Cock, cock...Who's There?* (Elagoz, S. 2017), *The Prudes* (Neilson, A. 2018), *The Empty Chair* (Peer Play, 2018), *Locker Room Talk* (McNair, G., 2017), *Sexy Lamp* (Arnstein, K., 2019), *Bitter Wheat* (Mamet, D., 2019), *Harvey* (Berkoff, S., 2019), *The Pussy Grabber Plays* (Brownell, J. et al., 2019), *You Too* (Ritual Art Troupe, 2019), *Boycott Esther* (Acker, E., 2019), *Endless Second* (Toksvig – Stewart, T. 2019), *Badass Medusa #MeToo* (Mobilise, 2022) and *Taking Measure* (Hanna, C. 2022). These texts are pertinent examples of theatre tackling #MeToo-centric subjects in both verbatim and fictionalised genres. In analysing these texts and their productions I will discuss the dramaturgical strengths regarding the portrayal of the topic, as well as asserting the areas that could be developed and learnt from.

Texts I have not included in this analysis are *MeToo and Beyond – Perspectives on a Global Movement* (Alcade & Villa, 2022) and *#MeToo: Essays About How and Why This Happened, What It means and How to Make Sure it Never Happens Again* (Perkins, 2017). While these texts deepened my knowledge and understanding of the #MeToo movement, I was wary of repetition in my writing on the topic. These texts provide multiple perspectives on the notable court cases and reported incidences in the mainstream media but essentially cover the same areas as the texts I use in this chapter and in Chapter One. Other texts that were useful in developing my understanding but were not included in the thesis are *Why does he do that? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (2002) by domestic abuse consultant Lundy Bancroft and *The Right Amount of Panic: How Women Trade Freedom for*

*Safety* (2018) by researcher Fiona Vera-Gray. Bancroft's work has informed my understanding of how the justice system in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America are ill-equipped to prosecute sexual assault and/or domestic abuse cases, and how they routinely fail to protect the victim. Vera-Gray's research provided further first-hand experiences of women who have experienced harassment in public and victim blaming, challenging the cultural rhetoric around women's safety. These texts were a valuable aspect of my research but as Bancroft's text was written pre-#MeToo and dealt primarily with the perspective of the male abusers, which is not my focus in this project, it does not feature in the thesis, Vera-Gray's text informed some of my further research into #MeToo but is a broader examination of these topics, rather than an examination of how they intersect in a theatrical context.

## **#MeToo orientated productions**

In the next section I will list and discuss some notable theatrical attempts to present #MeToo-related topics for contemporary audiences. The productions will be primarily in chronological order of performance with some divergence when relevant comparison between productions is relevant. I have chosen to present the productions in this order to demonstrate how the discussion of #MeToo-related topics has evolved since the Weinstein case.

The productions explored will be examples from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and other Western countries, with some reference to relevant Western television and film projects. The decision to focus on productions from these areas of the globe is based on the differing social and cultural influences within other countries, such as those within Asia

and Africa. The often-fraught gender politics in Asian and African countries, as well as their comparative differences to Western countries, is a complicated issue that this thesis cannot fairly represent.

The theatrical works I will discuss will be viewed through the lens of ‘woke culture’ (as defined in ‘#MeToo and Fourth Wave Feminism’ chapter) since given the cultural landscape that #MeToo emerged within, a ‘woke’ perspective seem to be the most relevant to contemporary productions. Author Imaan Mirza writes for the Harvard Political Review that ‘the rise of these “woke” pundits has placed the new, important onus of conscious viewership and discernment on consumers of contemporary media’ (Mirza, 2021). Mirza indicates that how entertainment and art are consumed by audiences has been altered, with audiences questioning appropriate authorship of works and representation regarding gender, sexual orientation, and race. Mirza writes that ‘In 2021, more people of colour took the mantle in screenwriting and directing’, indicating how having diverse characters is no longer enough to please ‘woke’ contemporary audiences – there is now intense scrutiny of who is in the writer’s room, rehearsal room, or within the production team.

As ‘woke culture’ and fourth wave feminism are intrinsically linked, and my thesis has been conducted with fourth wave feminism as a research paradigm, I will consider issues of authorship and representation related to these theatrical examples.

The movement was initially depicted in fringe theatre pieces such as and *Locker Room Talk* (McNair, G. 2017), *Cock, cock...Who’s There?* (Elagoz, S.

2017), and *The Empty Chair* (Peer Play, 2018). All three are examples of how verbatim theatre has explored #MeToo in with varying approaches and differing levels of success.

*Locker Room Talk* (McNair, 2017), originally staged at Edinburgh's Traverse theatre, is a response to the infamous Access Hollywood tape recording of Donald Trump . The tape was released during the 2016 United States presidential election but recorded in 2005. During the recording Trump can be heard describing sexually assaulting women in a gleeful manner, stating 'And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy' (Ryan, M. 2020).

McNair's play was extremely well received by theatre critics and was performed especially for Scottish Parliament.<sup>19</sup> The play's inspiration (the Access Hollywood tape) recorded Trump in 2005 (and was later released to the public during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign) describing how his status as a famous celebrity allowed him to freely assault women (Fahrenthold, 2016). Trump later dismissed his comments as 'locker room talk' (Jacobs, Siddiqui and Bixby, 2016), giving the play's author, Gary McNair, his title and the inspiration to create the piece. McNair chose to use verbatim interviews with male volunteers, asking them to discuss women and the issues of the #MeToo movement candidly.

The men talked about privilege and patriarchy, about where to draw a line of acceptability, about rating women on a one-to-ten scale and

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<sup>19</sup> This special performance was an attempt to educate members of Parliament so new legislation and policy changes regarding sexual harassment would be put forward, including the *Victims Code for Scotland* (The Scottish Government, 2018). This document advises victims on their rights when reporting an assault, such as being able to specify the gender of the police officer that interviews them.

about what women might think of that ('It's not even on the radar'). In the playground, boys used much the same prejudicial language as their fathers ('They found it so funny to make fun of girls').

(Fisher, 2017)

The public release of the Access Hollywood tape was a pivotal moment in the #MeToo movement. As observed by author Maureen Ryan, 'women in all industries and workplaces could point to it as proof of the misogyny and (white) boys-club atmosphere that they so often faced' (2020). The crude vocabulary and blasé attitude towards sexual assault that Trump used ('grab 'em by the pussy' (2016) being the most well-known) have become part of the lexicon and a reference point for misogynistic opinions towards women's ownership of their anatomy.

By using part of this lexicon as his title, McNair alludes to this pivotal moment in the current cultural debate of sexual assault and consent. In relating the comments of such a high-profile figure to the 'man on the street' the play conveys the commonality of these attitudes regardless of economic or social privilege. The responses from the interviewees were then performed by female actors, reframing them through a female voice. By using the contrast of chauvinistic male opinions with female performers, the play creates a new, jarring context for these cultural 'norms'. However, although the verbatim material is presented by female performers, this is still the perspective of male opinions and a male writer. Therefore, the considerations of female victims of harassment and assault could be seen as being side-lined, and the female actors are merely props for exploring modern masculinity. While debate can be created through exposing the degrading view some men have of women, it is also prioritising male opinions and rhetoric. This could be equally harmful as

the jarring new context might be seen as a gimmick and lessen the impact of the message about female abuse. It is notable though that McNair's work was directed by a female director, Anna Ryder, perhaps indicating McNair's awareness that the play needed a female perspective. When interviewed by Live Theatre, Ryder stated that 'it's important to note that it was Gary who raised the topic of women and banter with his interviewees. These men are responding to a provocation' (2019). The implication is that the interviewees would only be fully honest (using the crude vocabulary they normally describe female anatomy with) when speaking to another man. It is debatable that in using the verbatim conversations with men, the play provides further evidence to support the allegations and complaints made by women. However, this is not the production's aim but the potential 'woke' criteria when the work is assessed. Audience members who may doubt or dismiss women's experiences of abuse and harassment may well re-evaluate their opinion by hearing direct quotes from men, as these verbatim conversations support the ideological problems that women have drawn attention to. It could be argued that that providing male voices should not be required as evidence for women to be believed by the public, but in doing so (and by referring to Trump's infamous defence of the Access Hollywood tape in the play's title) a wider audience will be attracted to the piece, creating more opportunities to change misogynistic or apathetic viewpoints.

*The Empty Chair* (Peer Play, 2018) was a recent exploration of the themes and issues surrounding the #MeToo movement in a theatrical environment at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival's Pleasance Pop-Up venue. The play was

created by surveying female university students and then constructing a fictional (but relevant) scenario to dramatise and explore the results. The fictional scenario is a group of Hollywood actresses discussing the abuses they have experienced at the hands of an unseen male character. This setting and character are familiar due to the well documented and high-profile instances of abuse reported by Hollywood actors during the #MeToo movement. The invisible abuser who sat in the eponymous chair could easily be Harvey Weinstein, but it could also easily be any male member of the audience. The empty chair sits on stage as an accusatory indictment of the male audience member's potential behaviour, opinions, or failure to empathise. It is arguable that by making the focus on the empty chair, the focus is on the enigmatic, mysterious abuser rather than the victims. In reconstructing the verbatim materials into a fictional narrative, the real-life experiences of the women interviewed are attributed new meaning that is irrelevant to their own stories. The use of a Weinstein-like figure as a theatrical framework arguably places the audience's concentration on an invisible, monstrous being who, now having been convicted, we can rest easy about. This concept of a fictional narrative to structure verbatim voices simplifies the issues that enable male abuse of power and protect the perpetrators of assault and harassment. However, the reference to Weinstein is also a familiar framework for audience members to relate the verbatim materials to and contextualise the interviewees' experiences to a high profile #MeToo example. In a similar method as McNair's reference to Trump to attract a larger audience to these issues, the show's creators (Peer Play) used the infamy of Weinstein and celebrity status of his victims to highlight the experiences of everyday women. This methodology



uses the controversy and intense media coverage of these men to give females a platform, as director and academic Orla O'Loughlin states, 'the first step towards positive change is visibility and discussion' (Furmage, 2017). The ideal scenario would be an audience keen to hear the stories and perspectives of women without the use of the abusers' fame to attract them but, at least initially, the priority is on raising awareness to as broad an audience as possible.

Samira Elagoz is a multi-disciplinary and multi-media artist who creates personal works about social and political issues such as sexual violence and the male gaze. Her 2017 work *Cock, cock...Who's There?* (Elagoz, 2017) is an award-winning, one-woman show that toured across Europe in 35 different locations. The production examines society's attitudes towards sexual assault, the female body, feminism, and the male gaze (notably through online platforms such as Tinder and Chatroulette). Elagoz explores how the virtual and real world are intertwined and therefore so are the abuses towards women. The use of multimedia reflects the online nature of the #MeToo movement and through using herself as a solo performer, Elagoz highlights that, despite the global solidarity between women that the movement has nurtured, there is a physical isolation that the online activist can experience. She is part of a community and alone simultaneously. Through Elagoz's use of more implicitly sexual online platforms, such as Tinder and Chatroulette, this loneliness is explored, as these websites profit off the need and desire for human connection. Elagoz presents her own personal experiences to discuss broader themes and relies on her own lived experience. The decision to create the

piece autobiographically showcases her unique and specific voice, never pretending to represent all demographics affected by the issues the piece raises. It could be argued that a diversity of voices would keep a broader depiction of these themes, showing the commonality and individuality of multiple experiences. A range of socio-economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds should arguably be represented in a piece to convey the historical intersections of the movement with race and its aims for inclusivity. Inclusivity that is respectful of all voices is, as I previously argued in the chapter on verbatim theatre, the potential benefit of applying the verbatim genre to these topics. In this instance though, Elagoz's work is admirable in its use of online platforms, communicating the global scope of the issues surrounding assault and harassment. It ultimately portrays a singular voice, and a more economically and culturally privileged voice than some victims of the same abuse, but it is authentic and sincere. By speaking from her own lived experience, she cannot be accused of restructuring and recontextualising the words of interviewees for her own creative aims. While the issues surrounding sexual assault are complex and steeped in inequalities, Elagoz shows her individual experiences in a personal way to connect the audience to the sociological arguments of the topic. Similar to the use of familiar cultural frameworks in McNair and Peer Play's pieces, the empathy created by a single-voice acts as the first step into broader, more politicized discussion for the audience.

The relationship between the abuser and the public is explored in Michelle MacArthur's feature in the *Canadian Theatre Review*, "Sorry Not Sorry":

Apologizing in the Wake of #MeToo' (2019). MacArthur, who is Assistant Professor at the University of Windsor's School of Dramatic Art, notes that the public's response to apologies and/or justifications for reprehensible behaviour is increasingly scrupulous and conscientious. These responses (often on social media including the term '#sorrynotsorry') query the authenticity of the apology or assert the belief that the apology is disingenuous. MacArthur writes that the 'apologies issued in the wake of #MeToo, then, open up several questions around truth, trust, and reparation' (2019:20). MacArthur's research is focused on the theatre industry specifically, where the same scrupulous and untrusting responses towards apologies from men are prevalent. This makes the use of the male voice plays such McNair's work potentially problematic or ineffective in achieving its aims of protecting women from harm. If the public (and therefore the audience) is unwilling to accept the apologies that men offer, the benefits of listening to their often-misogynistic points of view in McNair's play is arguably limited.

Another response to Trump's Access Hollywood tape was *The Pussy Grabber Plays* (2019), a one-night-only performance in New York produced by Kate Pines, Hope Chavez, Sharyn Rothstein, and Shira Milikowky. The performance consisted of a collection of short plays, focusing on the women who have accused Trump of sexual assault or harassment. When viewing the promotional trailer for this project the initial focal point was Trump's position (at that time) as 'the most powerful man in the world' (Chanez, 2019) and began with the words 'in the lead up to the 2016 election' (Pines, 2019), presenting the work as politically motivated. While there is nothing inherently unethical

about advocating for better political figures regarding their attitudes to women in this way, it could be argued that the alleged victims should be the focus rather than the perpetrator. This argument is further supported by the methodology used by the theatre makers regarding how they translated these stories into a performance. Out of the nineteen accusers approached, seven agreed to have their experience staged. These experiences were then dramatised by a selection of female playwrights and theatre directors, with one of the alleged victims playing themselves on stage. A playwright creating a script around these experiences will be unavoidably influenced by their own conscious or subconscious cultural viewpoints and life experiences . With unavoidable influences in mind, the playwright's methodology and level of collaboration that takes place with interviewees is crucial. If an interviewee is given more control over how their experience is staged, it limits potential subconscious biases of the playwright shaping the piece of theatre that is made. While *The Pussy Grabber Plays* (2019) ensured they had approval from interviewees before performing the finalised plays, it is unclear from the information in the public domain how much input the interviewees had during the creative process and how consistent this input was across the different stories, indicating the need for a consistent practical methodology.

However, this is still arguably an improvement on McNair's approach as female voices are prioritised over male, and then dramatised by female theatre practitioners. While McNair's production utilised the sexist opinions of men to outrage members of the Scottish Parliament into action, *The Pussy Grabber Plays* (2019) explored the differing aspects of being a victim, such as how these women told their families about the abuse they had experienced. It is

also notable that all proceeds from this performance went to the #MeToo movement fund and The New York Women's Foundation, and the plays are available to be performed for free. These creative and financial choices imply that the makers of the show genuinely wanted to represent and support female victims of abuse. It is stated in the project's trailer, that 'these plays should be about the women themselves and not about him' (Rothstein, 2019) but this is in conflict with some of the other choices that have been made regarding the show's promotional material. The trailer shows an actress doing a comedic impersonation of Trump with the audience laughing, which frames Trump as the focus (despite the producers' words to the contrary) and the comedic tone chosen is a difficult one to fathom given the seriousness of the project's topic. While comedy and satire can be effective methods to critique those in positions of power, it is confusing to see this creative choice has been made while purporting that the plays are not about Trump.<sup>20</sup> While a reference to Trump is possibly unavoidable, to use this moment in promotional material implies it is a selling point of the show and representational of the tone of the show. In fact, the trailer depicts mostly comedic moments throughout which is jarring when edited next to the producers discussing the project in a sombre, sincere tone. Similar to McNair, the choice of title presents Trump as the topic of the show, potentially attracting a broader audience but possibly taking focus away from the victims. It is also debatable if the audience who would watch a New York theatre show that criticises Trump are the demographic who need their opinions on the topic of sexual abuse and harassment against women

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<sup>20</sup> The use of comedy to challenge those in power and the political/economic structures in society is also closely linked to Agitprop and Epic Theatre, as discussed by academic Yakubu Abdullahi Nasidi's 2021 paper 'Between Comedy and the Epic Theatre'.

challenged. Jeffrey Eric Jenkins, a theatre professor at the University of Illinois, states that ‘the Broadway audience, in general, is several clicks to the left of an audience in Oklahoma City – generally more liberal and inclusive – and people going to see Broadway shows aren’t there to be challenged’ (2015). Jenkin’s assertion implies that a Broadway audience are likely to already dislike Trump and sympathise with the victims’ stories, with *The Pussy Grabber Plays* (2019) merely reaffirming previously held views. Ultimately, the production’s focus appears to be on solidarity at a time when publicly sharing experiences was a less common action. Arguably, production such as these may enable and reassure other victims regarding their trauma, aware that others care about victims.

A production with similar intentions and areas of criticism was Ritual Art Troupe’s *You Too* (2019) that marketed itself as a ‘play about abuse’ (ritualart.org, 2019). The play was a fictional drama but its depiction of a former Hollywood director, now running for a seat in the United States Senate, who has been accused of harassing women, alludes to both Donald Trump and Harvey Weinstein. The piece invited the audience to a live panel discussion with the director and playwright, alongside cast members and representatives from domestic violence charity SAVE (ritualart.org, 2019). This invitation shows a genuine desire to educate and invoke meaningful discussion on the topic. However, some of the promotional material is potentially problematic, stating that the production plays ‘with true and false accusations, and questioning the whole nature of harassment’ (ritualart.org, 2019). By making the idea of false accusation a prominent part of marketing content, it invokes

the distrust and disbelief women often experience when sharing their experiences of harassment and abuse.<sup>21</sup> By promoting the notion of accusations being false, the production could inadvertently feed into the distrust women are met with when they share their experiences.

Two contrasting plays on #MeToo that were written by male playwrights are *The Prudes* (2018) by Anthony Neilson and *Endless Second* (2019) by Theo Toksvig-Stewart. *The Prudes* (2018) was the Royal Court Theatre's first play on #MeToo-related themes and centred around a couple who are experiencing the impact of sexual assault on their relationship. The play's female character, Jess, has shared online that she was assaulted as a child. Despite using a pseudonym, her partner (Jimmy) feels the trauma second-hand and has to process the complicated emotions surrounding this situation. Neilson reflected on his positionality to the #MeToo movement regarding his gender stating, 'I am fascinated by, and invested in, the #MeToo movement and the issues surrounding it. Clearly, however, one could argue that the last thing needed right now is a middle-aged man sticking his oar in' (2018). Neilson's self-awareness was admirable but the criticism he highlighted was also levied at the male character in the text, Jimmy, with the perspective of the play coming into question. In *Performing #MeToo – How not to look away* (2021), Catriona Fallow and Sarah Jane Mullan write that,

At his worst Jimmy performs a grotesque inversion of solidarity where, despite his protestations, he is still centrally concerned with himself. The majority of critical responses noted how much Jimmy's hand-wringing and male guilt dominated the play's narrative,

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<sup>21</sup> As stated in Chapter One, while accusations are frequently dismissed as untrue, only 2% of all reported claims of sexual assault are false (Lisak, D. et al, 2010).

underscoring the various ways in which Jess and her experiences are marginalised.

(2021:135)

The choices made by Neilson regarding his male character could be seen as an expression of the self-awareness Neilson voiced and a necessary discussion point regarding male allyship. However, if audience members could not identify this as a creative choice or simply did not agree with the choice, it could be suggested that despite Neilson's best intentions, female-led performances are desired for topics of this nature. Fallow and Mullan define the play as 'centrally concerned with the 'grey area'' (2021:136) in how it discusses consent in relationships and male allyship.

Similar to *The Prudes* (2018) is Theo Toksvig-Stewart's *Endless Second* (2019) which was first staged at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the Pleasance Theatre. The play examines sexual assault and issues of consent within a relationship, highlighting the problems with male allyship to the #MeToo movement. When addressing that he is a male playwright, Toksvig-Stewart writes,

Some people may question what right I have as a man to write a play about consent, and I understand those concerns. I would hate to feel that my play is yet another 'mansplain' to women about something they understand only too well. However, the play isn't just about the female experience, it's about the male experience too. I strongly believe men have to take a more active role in the conversation around consent.

(Toksvig-Stewart, 2019)

While it is admirable of Toksvig-Stewart to address male responsibility regarding sexual assault and to openly discuss his positionality to the play



regarding his gender, there are further issues with his status. Toksvig-Stewart is the son of well-known comedian, presenter and writer, Sandi Toksvig, and therefore arguably has an unfair advantage in having his work staged and published. According to Sphinx Theatre's 2019 study 'What Share of The Cake?', there is a great deal of inequality between male and female playwright. The study states that 'our audit of theatre websites found 25% of productions in the National Theatre's autumn November 2018 – April 2019 season were by women (3 productions out of 12)' (2019:12). This statistic and the findings of the report demonstrate the disparity between opportunities given to female playwrights in comparison to their male counterparts. Therefore, while a male perspective on #MeToo and its related topics may be required, it is unfortunate that a movement led by women is explored in high-profile theatrical settings (such as The Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the Royal Court Theatre) by men. Another consideration that needs to be made regarding Neilson and Toksvig-Stewart is the lack of racial diversity in their casts, side-lining the intersectionality associated with #MeToo and its fourth wave feminist origins, as the movement was started by and for women of colour. It is also notable that since the Covid-19 pandemic and the reopening of theatres, it is Toksvig-Stewart's work that was produced again in 2021, including a radio play on BBC Radio Four.

Theatrical works dealing with the issues that the #MeToo movement tackles increased further in 2019 and became more mainstream, such as David Mamet's *Bitter Wheat* (2019) starring John Malkovich at the Garrick Theatre, London, and Steven Berkoff's *Harvey* (2019) at the Playground Theatre,

London. These productions, which focused on the Weinstein story, received heavy criticism such as Michael Billington's (2019) review of *Bitter Wheat* which stated, 'what is dismaying is the clumsiness of the satire on manipulative moguls'. These productions arguably oversimplified the subject and invested the audience's time in the abuser's thoughts and feelings. Both productions used the Weinstein case (literally and allegorically) as the pinnacle of #MeToo's impact, which can be considered as an understandable choice – Weinstein serving as recognisable reference point for an audience – but is also reductive of the movement's scope and impact. By focusing on one individual, the extent, and the regularity of violence against women and sexual assault is arguably condensed into a neater, more cathartic narrative than real life presents us with.

Therefore, despite their subject matter, these two plays cannot be considered as theatre pieces that encapsulate the #MeToo movement's ethos. The productions' status as written, directed and performed by men also means they take away opportunities for women to use that mainstream theatre platform for their real-life experiences. By fictionalising, and essentially parodying, the Weinstein story (such as Mamet creating a fictional character, Barney Fein) the audience is not able to explore the consequences for victims. The plays' inquiry into the subject, as well as it being perceived through the lens of male experience and creativity, is preoccupied with a two-dimensional villain rather than the nuanced and complex experiences of real women. In vilifying the abuser in a cartoonish way and depicting them without moral nuance, the systemic problems that enable male abuses of power and the oppression of women are masked by a simplified rhetoric of the 'evil rapist'.

This, serving as a 21<sup>st</sup> century fable, distracts from the economic and political structure that disempowers women and therefore misses the purpose of #MeToo activism.

Parallel to Elagoz's work is Katie Arnstein's *Sexy Lamp* (2019). Performed at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the Pleasance Courtyard venue, *Sexy Lamp* (2019) tackles Arnstein's experiences of sexual harassment as a young actress. The piece is autobiographical and takes on a linear, confessional structure. Arnstein's choice to make the production a one-woman performance implies the strengths and limitations of her work – it is focused on one perspective and, in a similar way to Elagoz's work, the singularity of the voice within the production allows the audience to connect to an individual. The performance is an honest and intimate sharing, demonstrating Arnstein's genuine empathy and frustration for women who experience harassment and abuse. However, the argument could be made that Arnstein's position as white, cisgendered and able to afford to perform at the Edinburgh festival also serves to indicate substantial privileges. The Edinburgh Fringe's website estimates that taking a show to the festival can cost between £1000 and £25,000 (edfringe.com, 2022), indicating the economic barrier women of colour, working class and trans women face when voicing their experiences and sharing their performances and artworks. Arnstein has created a piece from her own lived experience and, regardless of her inherited social privilege, this choice was arguably a considerate decision regarding representation. This choice helps Arnstein avoid misrepresenting other societal groups (such as women of colour) who have different lived experiences to her. Her voice should

not be disqualified from having a platform, but it is disappointing that hers is not one of many, varied voices in mainstream British theatre discussing these topics.

Emily Acker's *Boycott Esther* (2019) is more complicated given the writer and performer's history. Performed at Philadelphia's Azuka Theatre, the production uses Acker's experience of working with Weinstein in real life to explore 'how the scandal impacts her own career as well as the quickness with which snap judgements are made using the internet' (Hatmaker, J. 2019). While the play has multiple characters it is still very singular in its perspective and could be seen as imbued with entitlement.<sup>22</sup> Acker was never abused by Weinstein; her concern is her own career and how 'cancel culture' might affect her. Acker stated that 'I was balancing my personal disappointment with my feelings of solidarity with the movement and empathy toward the women speaking out' (Hatmaker, J. 2019), listing her disappointment that a television project she had sold to the Weinstein Company may not go into production as her first reaction. The production uses screens and projections to symbolise the internet and the online communities' role in the #MeToo movement but, given the premise of the play, the depiction is concerned with the bogeyman of

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<sup>22</sup> It is also notable that all of the productions listed so far have had white writers, directors, and performers. As the movement was created by, and originally for, women of colour, this in itself highlights the lack of diversity prevalent in Western theatre industries, where (in Britain) '92% of top theatre bosses are white' (Snow, 2020). The listed productions are almost entirely focused on the Weinstein scandal or some aspect of the entertainment industry's role within the #MeToo movement which could arguably demonstrate an insular, narcissistic absorption within theatre and film itself. There have been other narrative genres that have explored the issue, often in more mainstream forms, however this thesis is focussed on theatre and whilst I acknowledge these other pieces of work, there is not scope here to fully explore this area.

'cancel culture'. It could then be contested that this production, regardless of Acker's intentions, could be perceived as counter-productive for the movement and potentially promote the criticisms the movement has received. However, Acker uses her unique position as someone who has had contact with Weinstein to highlight the less discussed impact of the movement and show the nuance issues surrounding a high-profile figure in the #MeToo movement's history. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the discussion of 'cancel culture' is potentially inflammatory but is arguably a debate that needs to happen to prevent the misuse and misrepresentation of the movement; to refocus its purpose or to assess how 'cancelling' someone may actually be a positive act culturally. By using her unique position, Acker attracts a broader audience (due to Weinstein's notoriety) and therefore exposes more people to the issues and discussion points she highlights.

A 2022 production by Mobilise (part of Worcester Arts Workshop) is presenting #MeToo themes with more diverse presentation and an all-female production team. *Badass Medusa #MeToo* (2022) is described as a 'bold and brave retelling of Medusa's story through collective rage, agency, and a female gaze for International's Women's Day' (2022). The retelling of the Greek myth of Medusa is reminiscent of the statue I discussed in the previous chapter on #MeToo and fourth wave feminism, *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* (2020) by Luciano Garbati. Both Garbati's piece and *Badass Medusa #MeToo* (2022) re-examine a well-established mythological narrative about female abuse to discuss current attitudes towards women. As I have previously stated, there are potential issues with *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* (2020) as it is

created by a 45-year-old man, whereas *Badass Medusa #MeToo* (2022) is written and directed by Hannah Philips and co-created by film maker Nicola Prestage. The cast shows a range of racial backgrounds and physical sizes, displaying a better level of diversity than previously discussed theatre productions. The piece is also interdisciplinary and uses film and 'immersive technology' (2022), before inviting the audience to 'collectively and digitally rewrite a future utopia offering alternative perspectives of gender, sexuality race and desire'. The use of multimedia is reminiscent of Elagoz's work, reflecting the importance of social media and technology in enabling both online abuse and social activism. However, while Elagoz's work was arguably insular in perspective with a singular creative voice, Philips seems entirely focused on inclusivity and using theatre as a tool of social change. By inviting the audience to bring their opinions and experiences to imagine an ideal future, Philips arguably inspires those audience members to strive for a better society and actively seek change.

Another production that took place in 2022 is Chris Hanna's play *Taking Measure* (2022), performed in February at the Goode Theatre at Old Dominion University in Virginia. The play is a reworking of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (Shakespeare, Nosworthy and Briggs, 2015) where Hanna saw links between the sexual misconduct in Shakespeare's text and the discussion happening since the emergence of the #MeToo movement in 2017, stating 'what's interesting is the conversations and the power structures really have not changed in those 400 years' (2022). Hanna also uses the play to examine Shakespeare's problematic writing regarding women, stating 'he has

somehow been considered above the conversation, which in a way I think belittles him because he is worthy of the conversation' (2022). While I agree that established playwrights and the theatrical canon require analysis and discussion, it is perhaps disappointing that Hanna's new work on the topic of #MeToo and sexual harassment, needs patriarchal texts as a contextualising framework. Similar to the theatre productions that have used Weinstein and Trump as reference points, it is possible that focusing on a male individual distracts from the broader issues of the #MeToo movement such as everyday sexism and misogyny, detracting from the experiences of those who have been abused and harassed. However, when the male individual is as historically revered as Shakespeare, Hanna removes his almost mythological persona and accurately recontextualises Shakespeare's work as plays written by a white, cisgendered male, that deserve to be questioned rather than merely venerated.

As with *Badass Medusa #MeToo* (2022), Hanna's cast was diverse, encompassing a variety of racial backgrounds. Hanna's lead actress, Mya Correa, states that 'no matter what our colour or gender is, our voice should be heard' (2022), displaying that intersectionality had been considered and championed when constructing the plays. In both *Taking Measure* (2022) and *Badass Medusa #MeToo* (2022) there is evidence of broader considerations for intersectionality and acknowledgment of diverse voices when #MeToo centric topics are discussed. The progression regarding intersectionality and diversity demonstrates the evolution since *The Prudes* (2018) and *Endless Second* (2019) of how #MeToo is discussed and who is given a platform.,

Hanna argues that *Taking Measure* (2022) asserts that discussions have grown in complexity and nuance since the beginning of the #MeToo, stating 'what we define as harassment is not just what happens in the office of a Hollywood producer' (2022). Hanna's assertion here implies that the impact of the #MeToo movement has become more extensive, growing in nuance, with the aim of long-lasting change.

## **Influence on theatre practices**

To designate a theatre an 'institution' implies that its work and significance are in some way exceptional, often defined in terms of its longevity, contributions to the wider local or global theatre ecology, or in advancing a unique set of perspectives and practices.

(Fallow and Mullan, 2021:125)

The impact of the #MeToo movement has been high-profile and ubiquitous in the media and on social media, most notably when discussing accusations made against well-known actors or directors. As I have explored, the influence on the content of theatrical productions can also be seen. However, it is vital to explore the impact of the movement on the structural policies and procedures within theatrical institutions and performing arts schools/university courses.

Since 2017 and the start of the Weinstein allegations, there is an increase in how the #MeToo movement is influencing and changing the creative industries, including theatre. One of the earliest instances of the theatre industry acknowledge the #MeToo movement was the Royal Court Theatre's 'No Grey Area' events in 2017, that took place on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2017 in their Jerwood



Theatre space (royalcourttheatre.com, 2022). The events including a sharing of stories from abuse and harassment victims, as well as sessions to discuss best practice in instances where complaints are made. While it is debatable if one day is sufficient to discuss the complexity of these issues, the speed of The Royal Court's response to the #MeToo movement is due to the accusations made against the former artistic director of The Royal Court, Max Stafford-Clark. These accusations included the sexual harassment of actress Tracey Ann Oberman and theatre staff at both The Royal Court and Out of Joint theatre company (Fallow and Mullan, 2021:124). In *Performing #MeToo – How not to look away* (2021), academics Catriona Fallow and Sarah Jane Mullan write that the accusations against Stafford-Clark 'transposed the issue of status negating accountability, which the #MeToo movement seeks to address, directly onto London's theatrical scene' (2021:124). The sudden inclusion of London's theatre industry into the #MeToo movement was met with the Royal Court's 'No Grey Area' events but these efforts were somewhat circumvented by the restaging of Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982), three months later. Dunbar's play is about a sexual relationship between two teenage girls and the adult man they babysit for. The is the subject matter uncomfortable in the #MeToo era, with the narrative presented as a comedy. While comedy has a long history of being used to challenge social norms and discuss provocative topics, the tone of the piece is not satirical or confrontational (such as Bertolt Brecht or Dario Fo) but a light-hearted 'sit-com'. Even if the choice of genre can be defended as a provocative device, the original production was also directed by Stafford-Clarke, receiving a co-director credit for the 2018 revival alongside Kate Wasserberg. Fallow

and Mullan write that ‘the decision to continue to use Stafford-Clark’s name despite Wasserberg primarily serving as a sole director both speaks to the credentials that Stafford-Clark’s involvement afforded this latest revival and is an attempt to clearly and decisively distance him from the production’ (2021:132). Therefore, the Royal Court appeared to be endeavouring to profit off Stafford-Clark’s highly-renowned career as a director and please those who would criticise his involvement.

Following the ‘No Grey Area’ events, The Royal Court created a new code of behaviour with the aim of ‘preventing sexual harassment and abuses of power’, describing the policy as ‘an offering, a provocation, a hope for culture change’ (royalcourttheatre.com, 2022).

This was one of the earliest examples of tangible policy and procedure change evident in theatrical institutions after the Weinstein case began. Since then, there has been a global response in theatres and theatre training institutions.

Various examples of changes in theatrical practice are present in ‘Institutional Responses to #MeToo: A Conversation’ (2019) where Natalie Alvarez hosted a discussion with theatre administrators, artistic directors, and heads of programs from Canada for Canadian Theatre Review. The discussion highlights the changes in policy that have occurred in theatre related institutions in the wake of the #MeToo movement. One example is Kathryn Shaw, Artistic Director of Studio 58 at Langara College in Vancouver, detailing how the Not in OUR Space! Principles from Canadian Actors’ Equity

Association (or CAEA) were introduced to the theatre department to ‘create safe work-places and the expectation of safe workplaces’ through new policies and training. The Not in OUR Space! principles are a ‘national anti-harassment and respectful workplace program’ (CAEA, 2022) that ‘seeks to ensure safe working conditions for all professionals working in live performance’ (CAEA, 2022).<sup>23</sup> The conversation also includes Melanie Dreyer-Lude, Chair of the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta, who details how the department has established a ‘group to invest in educating faculty, staff, and students regarding what constitutes sexual violence, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination’ (2019:43). Similarly, Jacqueline Warwick, professor and director of the Fountain School of Performing Arts at Dalhousie University, details the education being offered to students to prevent incidences of sexual assault and harassment. Warwick states that the university has ‘offered workshops aimed at male students in ‘rejection resilience’, with the goal of helping students cope with romantic rejection without falling apart or lashing out. This seems like a positive step towards dismantling the models of toxic masculinity that make boys and men feel their worth is tied up in their ability to dominate’ (2019:45). The developments discussed by Warwick indicate that the #MeToo movement has instigated institutional changes in how instances of sexual abuse or harassment are discussed, how complaints are handled, and how the culture that perpetuates abuse towards women can be counteracted.

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<sup>23</sup> The CAEA offer a variety of policy documents for institutions regarding how complaints about sexual harassment or assault should be handled, alongside guidelines and promotional materials to advertise the policies within the institution.

The focus in this discussion was primarily on the changes taking place in higher education and performing arts training, but specific instances of #MeToo changing the professional rehearsal room are also evident. For example, in Eloise Migon and Paul Rae's article, 'Masculinity after #MeToo in Mainstream Theatre' (2019), they write, 'new connections between different aspects of the theatrical process and its place in the wider society have come to prominence, and are influencing working practices, creative processes and public attitudes' (2019:106). Migon and Rae's article displays the growing differences in rehearsal etiquette and how existing texts (that do not discuss #MeToo directly) are approached in a post-#MeToo rehearsal room. One example Migon and Rae present is the 2018 production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne, Australia, where Migon starred as Cate. The play infamously contains explicit scenes of sexual assault and violence but within the context of war and genocidal conflicts. Migon describes how the actors were informed at the start of the rehearsal process of the theatre's updated procedures for dealing with harassment claims (2019:110) and the newly implemented protocols to protect the actors' emotional well-being such as 'group and individual sessions with a psychologist were offered at company expense, and our production team made daily 'check-ins' to discuss any concerns that arose as we worked through the material' (2019:111). While the causes of the sexual violence that Kane's play presents the audience with are different from those encompassing the #MeToo movement, Migon's experience shows how productions where sexual assault is depicted (such as in Kane's works) are being treated with a more tentative and empathetic approach towards performers. This indicates a

broader impact on theatre where #MeToo is not only the topic but influences the modes of creative practice.

Another example of approaching an existing text differently due to #MeToo is Meghan Brodie's case study in 'Lysistrata, #MeToo, and Consent' (2019). Brodie is an assistant professor of theatre and a faculty member in the gender, women's, and sexuality studies program at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. Her production of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (2003) was performed in 2018 in the wake of the Weinstein accusations, with a cast made up of Ursinus College students. Brodie decided to rework the classic play by looking at the epidemic of sexual assault on higher education campus. Brodie states, 'the college sexual assault epidemic is just one of the sexual violence crises to which the #MeToo movement responds' (Brodie, 2019:183) and there is evidence to suggest it is in fact an epidemic. In 2019 Columbia University's Sexual Initiative to Foster Transformation released their final report on sexual assault on university campuses. The report revealed that 'nearly 1 in 4 (22%) students had experienced sexual assault' (Hirsch, J. and Mellins, C., 2019:2) but 'only 2% of students in the survey who had experienced sexual assault said a formal complaint was filed' (Hirsch, J. and Mellins, C., 2019:3). These statistics show now only the frequency of sexual assault on university campuses but also the lack of effective policies to prevent or correctly handle these instances of assault.

Brodie was aware of these statistics when she made the decision to use a female-authored adaptation of the play, opting for Ellen McLaughlin's 2005 version. One of the reasons for this decision was the removal of dialogue that

refers to sexual assault threateningly towards the female characters. Brodie notes that, 'in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, for example, Athenian housewife Kalonike and Lysistrata discuss what to do if the women's husbands try to rape them during their planned sex strike' (2019:185). Within numerous adaptations of the play sexual assault is presented as a normal eventuality to prepare for, especially when women are defiant towards patriarchal society. Out of respect for victims of sexual assault Brodie wanted to pick a version of the play that removes this rhetoric. Brodie writes, 'Given the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses, I wanted to direct a version of *Lysistrata* that promoted consent, not one that accepted sexual violence as a given or a consequence of the women's sex strike' (2019:185). It is also important that sexual violence is not normalised for the male members of the audience and misogynistic viewpoints are not perpetuated.

The influence of #MeToo was also evident in how Brodie conducted rehearsals, stating

In rehearsals, I began by explaining to the actors that they are not chess pieces to be moved around the stage to create tableaux devoid of meaning and intention. I communicated that I was interested in building on their impulses, not imposing blocking on them. I also acknowledged the challenging power dynamics inherent in actor/director and student/professor interactions and stressed that I wanted actors to communicate their boundaries to me rather than feel obligated to attempt blocking that made them feel uncomfortable.

(Brodie, 2019:187)

Brodie's approach demonstrates a change in the power dynamic in the rehearsal rooms, with open communication encouraged and the trauma the actors may have experienced being respected. This approach also ensured that the consent of each actor was required before any blocking that involved

physical touching between actors was rehearsed. The aim for Brodie's production was safety – something that #MeToo has demanded for actors since the Weinstein scandal.

In 2020 Alison Hurwitz (a clinical psychologist who specialises in sexual trauma) wrote for the On Stage Blog an article entitled '#MeToo in the Theatre: Understanding the Warning Signs of "Grooming"' (Hurwitz, A. 2020). The article was an advisory list of the key indicators of grooming in general that could then be applied to various contexts, including theatre auditions, meetings, and rehearsals. Hurwitz asserted that 'we are currently living in the zeitgeist of the #MeToo movement, which has empowered and emboldened sexual abuse survivors to speak up about the perpetrators' (2020). Such an assertion from an expert in sexual trauma indicates the impact the movement has had – it is not just celebrities using a hashtag. Hurwitz discusses the abuse of power that perpetrators look for (such as age, strength, or being in a prominent job role) and how this directly relates to theatre, stating that 'in the theatre world, with so many individuals working extremely hard to make connections and gain opportunities, there are unfortunately multiple inroads for abusers to use to their salacious ends' (2020). She then advises the reader to 'be mindful of people trying to step over the boundaries and maintain boundaries that make you feel comfortable' (2020). Hurwitz's mode of writing appears to be taking general markers of grooming, relating it directly to theatre, and advising the reader of how to apply this to their professional lives in the theatre industry. The article is an indicator that the industry's attitude towards these issues has changed – rather than the ominous producer/director's 'casting couch' being

an inevitability, it is now something that needs to be prevented and those with the ability to speak to a large audience (such as an established theatre blog) are compelled to educate on the topic.<sup>24</sup>

Another article from 2020 is academic Agnieszka Jakimiak's 'Theatre after MeToo: sexual abuse and institutional change in Poland' (Jakimiak, A. 2020), that details how the movement has impacted Polish theatre practices, mostly notably starting with a series of accusations by theatre staff in Cracow. In November of 2019, a group of female employees of Bagatela Theatre released a public statement that detailed sexual harassment and misconduct from the director of the theatre, Jacek Schoen. The employees described how they had complained to the Mayor of Kraków, Jacek Majchrowski in the hope his office would help them. Jakimiak writes that 'contrary to their expectations, Majchrowski has not only ignored their appeal, but he has also disclosed the names of the employees to the manager of the Bagatela Theatre this betraying their trust' (2020). Jakimiak writes that the American origins of the #MeToo movement has inspired the staff at Bagatela Theatre, but their initial complaint has led to broader discussion about #MeToo-related issues and the creative industries. Jakimiak writes that,

The case of Bagatela Theatre employees is part of a wider context. On one hand, it obviously has a strong connection with the ongoing process of revealing cases of sexual misconduct on a global scale, which began with actresses coming forward with testimonies against Harvey Weinstein. On the other hand, it is strictly linked with the

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<sup>24</sup> Academics Shona McIntosh and Josh Davis explore the history and impact of the 'casting coach' in 'The "Casting Couch" Scenario: Impact of Perceived Employment Benefit, Reporting Delay, Complainant Gender, and Participant Gender on Juror Decision-Making in Rape Cases' (2020), describing the scenario as one 'in which a powerful figure obtains sometimes non-consensual sexual acts from subordinate actors in exchange for employment' (2020:1).



demand for introducing transparency in theatre institutions all around Europe, which has been formulated by artistic unions and organizations in the past years.

(2020).

The increased discussion in Poland has largely been in Warsaw where a conference took place in 2019, entitled 'Change Now! What Have We Been Silent About at Drama Schools', examining how institutions could be reshaped to avoid instances of abuse. One of the main examples was National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw that had received numerous complaints from students that had been dismissed by the academy's disciplinary advocate. Jakimiak writes that the lack of procedure and policy was a key factor in the academy's problems, stating that 'the feeling of operating with insufficient procedures, which results in engaging with counterproductive solutions, became so omnipresent and alarming' (2020).

Following this conference, a group of current and former staff at the academy worked together to fix the existing policies and to create new procedures where needed, formulating officially and in detail. It is notable that the America-based Weinstein case and the #MeToo movement is having a tangible effect on European countries and their theatre industries. Another example is the 2021 Susreti Theatre Festival in Bosnia, where performers at the festival united in their rejection of a member of the festival's jury, Branislav Lecic. Lecic had been accused of sexual assault by multiple actresses. Natasha Tripney wrote in *The Theatre Times* about the controversy at the festival and the connection it has to the #MeToo movement, stating

The impact of the MeToo movement has only been felt in the Balkans to a certain extent. In part this is because, as a movement, it is western-centric and doesn't always encompass or address non-western societal and cultural contexts. But there is a growing

resistance to patriarchal structures and systems in the region, women growing increasingly weary with having to out up with certain behaviours and practices. As has been the case in many countries, the theatre and entertainment industries have become focal points. Several women have come forwards with stories of abuse, assault, and an entrenched culture of harassment, going back years, sometimes decades.

(Tripney, 2022)

Following the announcement that Lecic would be on the festival's jury, theatre companies began withdrawing from the competition in protest in 'a mass rejection of collective gesture of solidarity' (Tripney, 2022).<sup>25</sup>

These events show both the international impact of the #MeToo movement on theatre and on the rhetoric surrounding abuses of power within theatre has changes. Tripney writes that,

This power imbalance in the industry means that victims still find it difficult to come forwards, justifiably worrying about the impact doing so will have on their careers as well as their emotional wellbeing. In the absence of structural accountability. It is easy to see why hashtag activism feels like the only viable option, and how social media can become an arena of release and catharsis – and solidarity.

(Tripney, 2022)

Tripney's assertion regarding 'hashtag activism' indicate that the #MeToo form of online advocacy is a key part of making activism accessible to a wider demographic. It is also evident that the online activism people have undertaken has had tangible and long-lasting effects on the theatre industry.

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<sup>25</sup> Lecic did not resign from the jury, but a fellow jury member (playwright Almir Imsirevic) left in protest.

## Conclusion

The impact of the #MeToo movement on theatre has been sudden, often sensationalised, and leading to institutional change. The content of theatre has been noticeably altered, with differing perspectives on #MeToo-centric topics undergoing staging. There has been a broad array of genres and methodological approaches, from verbatim accounts of abuse to fictionalised stories inspired by real-life events. These productions have ranged in tone and aesthetic, including musical theatre and multimedia performance art. The variety seen within these productions demonstrates the commonality of the movement's discussion points and, through the inclusion of male writers, indicates the movement's impact has been intersectional across genders, socio-economic backgrounds, and racial identities. Further discussion is still required on who should be presenting these stories and how they should be presented, but the awareness of theatre makers is still a positive development. The importance of the movement is also evident in the breadth of discussion that has taken place in the theatre and film industries and within academia. This discussion has led to important explorations of the movement's impact in written form but also in the methods theatre makers now use when creating work. There have been substantial changes in how universities, drama schools, and theatres approach complaints and attempt to prevent incidences of abuse or harassment.

When considering the #MeToo movement's origins and its primary intentions, the use of autobiographical or fictional theatrical techniques to explore its themes (or major court cases) is often effective but not entirely suited. In the

following chapter, I will argue the case for using verbatim theatre as the most appropriate genre in which to approach #MeToo-centric subjects as it prevents or counteracts the issues of inclusion, representation, and authenticity in how stories of abuse are presented.

# Chapter 4: Methodological considerations

## Introduction

This chapter will document and discuss my own practical enquiry into using the methods, aesthetic and conventions of contemporary devised theatre and utilising verbatim materials linked to sexual assault and violence against women. The chapter will relay the methodology considered and utilised in my practice research, alongside the ethical questions posed by the project. This will be an analytical and reflexive part of my thesis, concerning my own practice and autoethnographic evaluation. The chapter will outline the considerations and alterations that are a required aspect of the process when making trauma-based theatre.

## Preparation: staging trauma

The first ethical principle must always be *do no harm*.

(Baim, 2020)

Baim's acknowledgement of the gap in theory for staging traumatic and personal stories, presents the theatre practitioner with a dilemma. Without a detailed and socially relevant theoretical framework, the practitioner's decisions regarding sensitive verbatim material can be difficult to make and potentially ill advised. As cultural discourse and socio-political engagement change rapidly, is it possible that a historically used theoretical framework

becomes redundant as it may lack the 'woke' awareness previously discussed in my chapters on verbatim theatre and the #MeToo movement (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). Baim discusses Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of ethics and 'otherness' as a foundational set of principles for staging trauma (2020:66) that has influenced Baim's practice when undertaking this trauma-based theatrical work. In academic C. Fred Alford's article, 'Levinas and Political Theory' (2004) Levinas' theories are encapsulated in the phrase, 'the individual is to be fostered and protected for the sake of the other individual' (2004:147) meaning the way we treat each individual person has a broader impact on others and society in general. In a theatrical context this means that the impact of one production, one rehearsal session, or one interaction with a performer is not isolated or not without larger consequences. Therefore, the responsibility on the theatre maker extends beyond the rehearsal room or performance space. Academic Nicholas Ridout writes in *Theatre and Ethics* (2009) that Levinas' writing on humanism 'has encouraged a consideration of the relationship between spectator and actor, audience and performance, in terms of this ethical situation' (2009:54), preventing a compartmentalisation of theatrical spaces from everyday spaces, or a differentiation between the theatrical roles of audience/performer and the individual in their daily lives.

When considering the ethical implications and moral responsibility that are inherently part of my practice research, an applicable philosophical framework aids decision making in both the conceptualisation and the practical creation of a trauma-based production. When defining trauma, a clear definition is provided by academic Cathy Caruth,

an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of and other intrusive phenomena.

(Caruth, 1996:11)

In the specific context of my practice the events that constitute trauma are sexual, physical and psychological abuse but, as Caruth indicated, the effects of these events continue and become develop long after the initial occurrence/s. Caruth illustrates that trauma is defined by the longevity and often erratic intrusion on the individual's life.<sup>26</sup>

When staging trauma, it could be argued that all decisions in this process are important, but some do have more direct and predictable negative outcomes for the researcher, the actors, and the audience who view the work such as how sensitive topics and challenging verbatim materials affect the emotional state of those in the production. Having the tenets of a suitable philosophical hypothesis (such as applying a humanist approach to the production process) can be a source of guidance and reassurance for preparing and undertaking such sensitive work. The underlying ethical principles contained within my research (and within the theatrical works I have undertaken previously) are underpinned by a cognisance of social humanism. In *Social Humanism: A New Metaphysics* (2012), philosopher Brian Ellis defines this as 'the principle of unconditional equality of concern for the dignity

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<sup>26</sup> In 'Trauma Studies: Contexts, Politics, Ethics' (2011), Susan Radstone states that 'trauma is often associated with the stripping away of agency and the rendering helpless of victims of catastrophe and disaster' (2011:63) demonstrating that the damage created by trauma is not only physical and/or psychological but can affect individual's self-image, including feelings of disempowerment and a lack of autonomy over their lives.

and wellbeing of all people’, that ‘does not see itself as just a liberation philosophy; it is much more constructive than that’ (2012:16), translating its concerns into action. Ellis goes on to precisely list the principles for social humanism philosophy as such,

- (a) *The principle of no unjustified disadvantage.* No people should be arbitrarily prevented, hindered, or otherwise disadvantaged in their quest to live as well as they can in the society in which they live.
- (b) *The principle of no unjustified advantage.* No people should be arbitrarily advantaged in their quest to live as well as they can in the society in which they live.

(2012:27)

The disadvantaged social group within my research are victims of misogyny, misogynistic violence, and misogynistic sexual violence, with their unjustified disadvantage being their gender. The articulated artistic imperative my research poses is how theatre, specifically verbatim theatre, can explore the ways women are prevented and hindered from living safe and fulfilled life in society. By implementing a social humanist and fourth wave feminist approach to my practical work, an unambiguous and objective solution can potentially be made for future application by theatre makers.

There are intersecting characteristics between social humanism and fourth wave feminism, making a social humanist approach applicable to this project. Fourth wave feminism’s demand for people of colour, queer, trans, non-binary, and intersex individuals to be included among those who feminists protest for (and for them to be interpolated into feminist activism) links with social humanism’s demand for the individual to be acknowledged. This is further supported when considering the theoretical amendment to feminist theory – intersectionality. As I have previously explored in my thesis, the term



insists on recognising the intersecting individual characteristics of a person (such as race and social class) and the potential impact these characteristics have on their social obstacles. It is arguable that feminist intersectionality calls for the same understanding of the individual as social humanism philosophy, as Ellis writes that 'Humanism is the principle of unconditional equality of concern for the dignity and wellbeing of all people, independently of their natural characteristics and their social, cultural, and religious backgrounds' (2012:15). The proactive, duty-based responsibility of the social humanist also reflects the activism of the fourth wave feminist, as both are called to consciously act, as well as merely empathise or pronounce. The fourth wave feminist's use of online mediums to increase access to activism for disenfranchised demographics, reflects the commonality of that social humanist responsibility – in both cases it can be asserted that inaction is immoral.

The social humanist stance that the individual's dignity and autonomy is paramount is reflected in the decision making undertaken in my practical work, such as the previously mentioned production choices I made in *Living with...FiBrOmYaLGiA* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018) to accommodate audience members with fibromyalgia such as shorter performance times with more performances available. This ensured that those with mobility issues would not risk missing the experience of seeing the show, would not feel anxiety about arriving on time, or worry they would not be able to sit through the performance due to its length. Within the theatrical process, from initial concept to realisation, it is imperative to my work that each person involved, in

whatever role, has their individual concerns understood and pragmatically responded to. This includes pre-emptively considering and preparing for numerous outcomes regarding emotional distress, physical well-being, and ensuring accessibility to the production for them in a precautionary rather than reactive manner. This includes, but is not limited to, being prepared for multiple seating options to be available, for suitable trigger warnings to be displayed prior to the performance, and to have theatre staff prepared for any emotional upset from an audience member during or after a performance. Ellis refers to this pre-emptive mindset as a form of moral intuitionism containing the 'modalities of necessity, probability and contingency' (2012: 168). The social humanist's conviction for the individual's rights and the acknowledgment of their worth, places the responsibility of curating and protecting these rights with the singular practitioner. It is the practitioners' duty to act ethically, and, in this context, this translates to the behaviour displayed and decisions made in the pre-production meetings, in the rehearsal room and within the performance itself by the theatre director. What this means in practical terms can be described as creating an inclusive and accepting environment for protected social groups or vulnerable cast members such as trans actors. The creative team (whether this is led by a singular director or is a collaborative devising company) must ensure inclusivity in the production practically (such as choreographic choices or staging decisions that consider disabled cast members) or in the social environment in the rehearsal room. The creative team must reflect on and consider the range of audience members that could come to view the performance, not only preparing for accessibility issues but making the theatre space as inclusive as possible through the promotion of the

production. For my production *Living with...FiBrOmYaLGiA* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018) I made the above-mentioned accessibility decisions a key component of the marketing interviews and articles that were released for promotion, thereby assuring any disabled individual that the theatre space was a welcoming one that considers their needs.

The benefits of humanist approaches in the rehearsal room are discussed by playwright Terry Galloway, and academics Donna Marie Nudd and Carrie Sandhal in their chapter for *The Community Performance Reader* (Kupper & Robertson, 2007), referring to an 'ethic of accommodation' (2007:227) that, as well as striving for inclusivity, promotes innovation and inventiveness in the rehearsal room. Galloway, Nudd and Sandhal assert this by stating, 'The Ethic of Accommodation inspires creative aesthetic choices from casting, choreography and costuming, and also the use of space for the creation of new material. Practicing the ethic enhances theatrical practice' (2007:229). Working with accommodation at the forefront of theatre practice will lead to an inclusive and welcoming rehearsal space where creatives can feel safe to make the mistakes and errors in their process that are needed to make compelling work. In the case of the verbatim theatre genre, this accommodation and social humanist approach begins with the undertaking of interviews.

## **Interviews: when the data is personal**

The emotional distress for interviewees that could be caused by reliving trauma was a serious concern prior to conducting interviews as, despite the often-therapeutic nature of sharing life experiences through theatre, the

potential for triggering mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder was probable. Baim confirms this by writing,

While on the one hand such individuals are often remarkable survivors, and in that sense are 'tough' and 'resilient', on the other hand, facilitators have a duty of care to work with an awareness not only of the outward, often highly proficient coping exterior of the participant but also with the person, who might have underlying vulnerabilities that may to a certain extent lie outside the person's conscious awareness because their coping roles have predominated in order to keep them alive and safe.

(2020:70 – 71)

What Baim is asserting here is that the individual's mental state, emotional stability, and ability to cope with the process of discussing their trauma should never be assumed by the theatre practitioner. The possibility of further psychological damage occurring because of this process needs to be considered and contingency plans made for any incidence that occurs from emotional distress.

When initially preparing for the interview stage of my practice research I chose to consult Jo Birch (head of operations at Safety Net) who, through decades of experience with sexual assault victims, could give informed and constructive advice on conducting these interviews. With this input, a consent form and an information sheet for potential interviews was constructed

The information sheet (see appendix A) detailed the project's style, purpose, and outcome for those interested in participating as an interviewee. It was suggested by Birch that the specifics of verbatim theatre and what participating in that genre entails were a key component of the information sheet so interviewees who came to see the production would not be surprised (and

potentially upset or angered) by having their individual vocabulary and mannerisms presented on stage. It was also decided that the interviews' specific talking points would remain flexible, giving agency to the interviewee, and allowing them to feel uninhibited in what they discuss, the order they discuss it in or the length of the conversation. However, so that interviewees did not feel unsure and hesitant of what they might be asked, some potential areas of discussion were included in the information sheet, listing them for the interviewee.

Through giving these examples it helped to suitably prepare the interviewee without them feeling inhibited by an overly structured interview. It was also vitally important that those being interviewed knew who was conducting the interviews and what their overall aim was, so an initial sense of trust could be formed, and interviewees could feel confident in how their experiences would be used. Storage of the interviews and how long they would be kept was also detailed to demonstrate that the sensitive nature of these experiences was respected and considered by the interviewer. The consent form (see appendix B) also reiterated that the interviewee was aware of how their interview would be used, stored, and that they had the ability to voice concerns.

Through discussions with Jo Birch, we decided that such sensitive topics might be difficult to talk about for some people but that it was important this did not exclude them from the project, accommodating for their individual emotions and needs. To assist in this, further flexibility was offered to potential interviewees by including a written response as an alternative mode of

involvement in the project, welcoming a letter that shares the writer's experience and/or addresses the outlined topics of discussion in the information sheet instead. While the interviews were originally meant to be in person, the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures that were in place during 2020 meant that this was not possible. Instead, the interviews were conducted utilising 'Zoom' video calling software. This made interventions for distressed interviewees harder, but Safety Net offered their support by having a staff member on hand during and following each interview, with each interviewee made aware that they could contact these resources if they needed to.

Following the interviews, the participants were also given twenty-eight days to withdraw from the project if, after reflecting on the interview, they decided they no longer wanted to be involved. They were also offered access to the video recording and written transcription of their interviews if they wished, giving them agency in how their story was told and how they would be represented on stage. By giving as much information, guidance, and flexibility as possible, interviewees could feel safe, autonomous, and confident in their part of the process. Ultimately, all participants agreed to being interviewed over Zoom, with no one withdrawing from the project. The use of Zoom was both hindering and beneficial when conducting interviews with ethicality and sensitivity to the interviewee. In *Into the Unknown: Scripting the Aftermath of the Stockwell Shooting* (2014), academic Sarah Beck documents her own experience of interviewing those who have experienced trauma (in this instance the family of police shooting victim, Jean Charles de Menezes), stating,

through face-to-face encounters with the interviewees there came a sense of accountability based on trust that fostered a set of moral ground rules that guided us as researchers/writers through the scripting process. These 'unspoken conditions' are crucial for practitioners working with the verbatim technique, as I believe face-to-face interaction reduces the impulse to sensationalise and exploit personal narratives for dramaturgical purposes.

(2014:70)

Due to the restrictions created by the pandemic, attempting to replicate face-to-face interactions (and some aspects of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee that Beck describes) was not possible. While the argument could be made that online video interviews can somewhat reflect physical interaction, the interviewer and interviewee are existing in vastly different spaces in this online context. Both participants in an online interview are present both in their own home physically and as a digital version of themselves on a computer screen. This duality of location creates a disconnection from the emotion of reliving trauma, which can ultimately be beneficial. Those participating in the interview are in their own personal spaces where they are more likely to feel safe and comfortable to explore the trauma they have experienced. The disconnect created by using Zoom partly separates the interviewee from the emotion of reliving their trauma. It instead becomes a part of this new digital representation of themselves that they can see in front of them. While the intimacy and trust that Beck refers to may have been lacking in a physical sense during these interviews, the unspoken trust between interviewer and interviewee was still intrinsically felt. The amount of preparation and consideration I had undertaken could be seen in the information provided to the interviewee prior to the interview, demonstrating that the unknown interviewer is ardent in conducting the interview respectfully.

This builds a sense of trust before ever meeting, confirmed by the interviewee signing and sending the consent form. During the interview stage of the process, one interviewee had to be accompanied in the interview by a Safety Net staff member, Helen Davies, as the interviewee was seventeen years old and therefore classed as a minor. Following the interview, I received an email from Jo Birch that stated she 'had rave reviews from Helen about you' (2020, personal communication 9<sup>th</sup> November) regarding how I had approached and facilitated the interview. This reassured me as I continued my interviews that my preparation and accommodations had been successful.

Through conducting and relistening to interviews with sexual assault victims, the risk to the practitioner's mental health also needs to be considered, and the same offer of support following each interview was given to me by the Safety Net team. While I never needed this support, I did have to carefully manage my own anxiety leading to the interviews and the emotional exhaustion following them. This management entailed allowing myself the time and space to recover, such as having a lie down or listening to music. It was important that I maintained an accommodating and self-aware approach to my own well-being throughout the interviews so that I could continue this in the rehearsal process.

## **Socially Minded Theatre: putting research into practice**

When starting the practical component of the research I attempted to reduce risk throughout the process. For example, within this practice research, I



selected to meet with four interviewees and work with one actor, so the project was manageable regarding emotional distress for participants and myself. In doing so I was approaching the project in a realistic and responsible way, aware of the potential negative outcomes, and chose what seemed like a suitable number of individuals for a single practitioner to manage. It would be easy for a practitioner to feel ambitious and want a larger number of interviewees or cast members as the topic can inspire a passionate response. However, the responsibility the practitioner has to manage the project ethically and safely has to align with any aesthetic ambitions they may have. The practical benefits of using a small cast and small pool of interviewees also lend themselves to an intimate and immediate performance experience.

With the philosophical framework of social humanism in mind, the initial ethical considerations that the research presented were concerned with the emotional well-being of participants, these being primarily the interviewees and those in the production team. As well as my role as interviewer and director, considerations needed to be made for actor Bethany McNarney, and eventually the audience who watch the final performance. In regard to my own well-being, it is naïve to assume that the director can emotionally withstand further trauma from reliving the interviews in the rehearsal room or having further traumatic experiences disclosed to them from the actor. It is important to remember that the rehearsal room or theatre bar is a very different environment to the interview room, physical or virtual. Without the carefully prepared circumstances of the interview space and professional support readily available, the rehearsal room can be an unexpectedly high-risk

environment for the director and performer, especially when using verbatim materials. In *Others, Spectatorship and the Ethics of Verbatim Performance* (2013) academic Patrick Duggan writes that, 'the theatre might be considered an ethically dense and complex space, especially when attending to questions and representations of trauma' (2013:47). While staging any representation of trauma has a huge ethical implication, the use of verbatim material complicates the process further. As well as the requirements for showing respect to interviewees and maintaining their dignity, the reality of the material can have a negative impact on those interacting with it creatively. There needs to be a consideration of the self-applied pressure an actor will experience in portraying these real victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse. In 'Ethical stress and performing real people' (2010), writer and academic Mary Luckhurst writes that,

A significant difference in both non-documentary and documentary forms appears to be the complicated ethical terrain that actors have to negotiate when performing a real person, whether living or deceased. These ethical concerns revolve around issues of representation and reception and are greatly coloured by the processes of research and preparation undertaken by individual actors. The portrayal of a real-life character is still an artistic representation, but not all representations have the same phantasmic ontology, and evidence demonstrates that actors assert a different ethical attitude towards playing real-life figures than they do towards performing invented characters. This suggests that the shibboleth of playing the real has a distinctive impact on the emotions and attitudes of actors and provokes a different ideological position, which is at odds with their approach to fictional characters. It would seem that the performer's own political and artistic desires to do justice to the person become a crucial part of the ethical picture.

(2010:136)

The aim leading to and within my rehearsal period was to counteract this pressure on the performer through earnest and forthright discussions with the actor throughout the process to evaluate their wellbeing at each stage of the process, leaving the schedule open to adjustment if the actor's wellbeing was notably deteriorating. This led to highly productive but shorter rehearsals, so the actor and director could focus objectively on the show's content and structure without leading to emotional exhaustion.

The well-being of the performer is a vital component of a trauma-based theatre piece as they must relay these experiences numerous times in rehearsal and on stage. It is of vital importance that the director and other production staff do not assume that an actor does not have their own similar experience that they may not disclose or assume the actor will/should disclose these experiences to them before the rehearsal processes begin. These assumptions consciously or subconsciously disregard the importance of maintaining the dignity and well-being of the individual. In these less thoughtful moments, Baim writes that 'the facilitator has become a perpetrator, all the while telling him or herself that they are helping' (2020:75), often acting naively 'in their eagerness to alleviate oppression and "empower"' (2020:75) their performer and/or participants.

The need to act pre-emptively regarding potential risks is far preferred to responding reactively and I engaged practical methods to both counteract and prepare for potential eventualities. These methods have included undertaking training with the mental health charity Mind to become a Mental Health First

Aider.<sup>27</sup> In undertaking this training, I am more prepared to intervene and assist if a cast, crew, audience member, or venue staff member is distressed during the production process. The training also helped me ‘develop the skills and confidence to approach and support someone while keeping yourself safe’ (Carlisle Eden Mind, 2021) so I can ensure my own well-being is protected. Acquiring these new skills is a vital preparation for undertaking trauma-based theatre as the practitioner must ensure they are sufficiently capable of conducting the work it requires. In “‘You can’t just take bits of my story and put them into some play’: Ethical dramaturgy in the contemporary Australian performance climate’ (2020), researchers Shane Pike, Sasha MacKay, Michael Whelan, Bree Hadley and Kathryn Kelly tabulate their approach to community theatre including the need for ‘conscious consideration of expertise in relations to a project’ (2020:82), asserting that ‘good intentions are not sufficient. Like lived experience, professional expertise needs to be acknowledged and supported’ (2020:82). The consideration of having sufficiently trained production staff lends itself to successful processes where limited distress is experienced by those participating in the project. When translating this training and philosophical research into practical methods, the first undertaking was preparing all parties involved in the production and ensuring they felt open to sharing concerns. This began with conversations with the actor, Bethany McNarney, to establish emotions and psychology boundaries, coping strategies, and create the opportunity to raise concerns about the show at an early stage in the process. In deciding to have these

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<sup>27</sup> This training is accredited by MHFA England and teaches people ‘how to identify, understand and help someone who may be experiencing a mental health issue’ (Carlisle Eden Mind, 2021).

conversations with the performer, the director is creating a safe rehearsal space mentally before the physical rehearsal space is stepped into. It develops an ethos of trust, mutual respect, and openness that will be vital for the production's safety and success.

This ethos extended to the interview transcriber, preparing them for their role in the production. I purposefully chose an individual I had worked with before who was experienced, capable, and suitably trained in both transcription, verbatim theatre, and in staging trauma, Amie Petricca-Lear. Petricca-Lear is a frequent collaborator of mine who has worked on several productions that centre on emotionally charged topics (such as *Living with...FiBrOmYaLGiA* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018)) and where respect for the interviewee and consideration for the production team's well-being is a vital consideration. In one such production, *And we are young again* (WordForWord Theatre, 2018), the focus was on dementia, and it was Petricca-Lear who conducted and collated interviews with dementia patients, their families and those who provide care for them. This previous experience assured me that Petricca-Lear was a suitable candidate to watch and transcribe interviews with assault victims with respectful professionalism. Despite having confidence in Petricca-Lear's abilities and experience, I still had a detailed preliminary conversation with her to indicate certain trigger warnings in each individual interview, so she was suitably prepared for the content she was about to hear. During the transcribing process, I regularly contacted Petricca-Lear to ensure she was handling the content without undue distress.

A further consideration was preparing the venues (The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster and The Source Collective in Carlisle) for the potential risks that needed to be considered. This included making all front of house staff aware of the content of the show, to be prepared for emotional or distressed audience members, and to demonstrate to the audience that the show was over as there were no bows taken after each performance.

Another practical concern for the performer and myself was the physical requirements for undertaking such a project as both of us are disabled artists. The physical limitations that most notably the performer has due to fibromyalgia means that the practical content of the rehearsal exercises and the blocking for the performance had to be considered under the same ethics of accommodation as discussed by Galloway, Nudd and Sandhal (2007:227). In *Theatre and Disability* (217), author Petra Kuppers states that 'disabled actors are not easily served by pedagogies that mark non-conventionalized bodies and try to achieve "neutrality", and this leads to the ongoing dearth of disabled professional actors' (2017:71) showing how combining theatrical performance and inclusivity can be complicated and easily mishandled. A considerable advantage I have as the director for this particular production and this specific actor is that I am also a fibromyalgia sufferer with lived experience of how the condition presents itself. My aim for rehearsal planning and facilitation was to combine my knowledge of fibromyalgia with similarly sincere and honest conversation with the actor about their physical wellbeing alongside the discussions around their emotional wellbeing. Again, a flexible and responsive rehearsal schedule was a key strategy for dealing with any

physical illness that occurred during the production. The shorter but highly productive rehearsals helped prevent and manage any issues in this area, with no requirement for time off due to illness occurring.

When preparing for the performance itself, the audience's potential emotional response is less easy to prepare for or predict due to the increase in numbers. Radstone writes that audiences who view depictions of trauma become second-hand witnesses to the events and that 'these secondary encounters are understood to render their witnesses, like first-hand witnesses, susceptible to symptoms – if perhaps in dilution – of that traumatization provoked by lack of agency and feelings of helplessness and paralysis' (2011:64).

The audience itself is an unknown participant in the theatrical process with former trauma and mental health conditions undisclosed. The number of audience members may vary abruptly between performances and the demographics they belong to can be vastly different, each with an individual relationship to the topic and their own perspective on the trauma being discussed. This makes the potential for emotional distress in an audience member highly likely due to mere mathematical probability, without the pre-interview chat or drama workshops to create a bond between the practitioner and the individual that directors have with interviewees and performers. The responsibility for the practitioner regarding the audience is just as important as the actor and the interviewee as being exposed to trauma in a theatrical setting (where they are expected to sit in silence for the entirety of the performance) 'can leave audiences almost powerless to defend themselves, or at the very

least feeling exploited' (2020:76). The director and theatrical team have no opportunity to connect with the audience prior to the performance or to discuss the work in the same amount of detail as they do with the actor/s. This leaves a substantial list of risks prior to the performance such as emotional distress before or during the performance, aggression towards performers or theatre staff, or even extremes such as non-epileptic stress-induced seizures. Psychiatrists and academics Dan J. Stein, Matthew Friedman, and Carlos Blanco write in *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2011) that,

in situations of massive stress, a substantial number of people show symptoms of dissociation varying from individual possession as an 'idiom of distress' to classical fugue states and epidemics of mass psychogenic illness with or without non-epileptic psychogenic seizures

(2011:233)

While it would be easy to assume that someone with a diagnosis of severe post-traumatic stress disorder would not attend a performance connected to their source of trauma, this is not a risk a theatre maker should take as it is possible an individual may not be diagnosed or may miscalculate their ability to withstand the experience of watching the show. Therefore, the production staff, cast, and venue staff need to be made aware of the potential risks and have suitable first aid protocols prepared, information on support and resources readily available, and to discuss the potential for a post-performance question-and-answer session with the audience, production team and appropriate support group members (in this instance Safety Net staff). The promotional materials for the production had clear trigger warnings and indicated the subject the piece was exploring, preparing any potential audience member of the show's content. When attending the piece there was an



information leaflet that included details about the show and a list of resources related to the topic. On the following pages are the designs for the promotional materials and the information sheet for audience members on arrival at the performances.

# “I’M NOT GONNA LIE”



A verbatim performance based on real interviews about sexual assault and abuse.

**29th September - The Dukes, Lancaster**

**30th September - The Dukes, Lancaster**

**1st October - The Source, Carlisle**

**2nd October - Arts Centre,  
Edge Hill University**

**Show Start: 7:30pm & 8:30pm**

Due to restricted audience numbers please book at [imnotgonnalieshow@gmail.com](mailto:imnotgonnalieshow@gmail.com) or through our facebook event page, tickets are free with donations for SafetyNet accepted on the door.

**TRIGGER WARNINGS: Rape, sexual assault, domestic abuse, child abuse**



This performance is a culmination of several years of research and work, with support and assistance from Edge Hill University, SafetyNet Cumbria, Arts Council England, Carlisle City Council, Dobies Charitable Trust, The Dukes, and The Source Collective. It is an honest and sincere portrayal of women's experiences, who have bravely shared their stories for this project.

Please be aware that this show contains content some people may find upsetting, and that mental health first aiders are in attendance to ensure the wellbeing of our audience members.



#### Grace Thomas - Director

Grace is a director, deviser, dramatist, producer, performer and educational arts practitioner. She trained in performing arts at Clwyd Theatre Cymru and the Cumbria Institute of the Arts, before studying for an MPhil in Playwriting Studies on the University of Birmingham's seminal course. In 2019 she received a full three-year scholarship from Edge Hill University to write her PhD, which focuses on theatre's relationship to the #MeToo movement.

She is Artistic Director for WordForWord Theatre - a non-profit arts company that focuses on societal issues such as disability, mental health, and collective trauma. She is also a researcher, producer, and scriptwriter for Plus3K Limited, and a visiting director/lecturer at the Academy of Live and Recorded Arts [ALRA North] and the Arden School of Theatre. She was part of the team that produced and delivered the Carlisle Collective Fringe Festival in 2019 and has had her work commissioned for performances throughout Europe, most recently at Theatre by the Lake in Keswick and Carlisle Cathedral.

She has worked as a performer, director, deviser, consultant, researcher, producer, community fundraiser, scriptwriter, and workshop facilitator for Clwyd Theatre Cymru, HeadsUp Productions, Big Time Productions, Carlisle Youth Zone, MADEafterDARK Theatre, Minerva Cumbria and Whistling Crew Productions.

#### Bethany McNarney - Performer

Originally from Carlisle, Bethany "Fig" McNarney trained at Birmingham University. Their performance in 'I'm Not Gonna Lie' will mark their third piece with WordForWord Theatre, having previously played in 'Rain Will Be Heavy' - a verbatim piece depicting the consequences of the Carlisle Floods - and the Fibromyalgia instalment of their award-winning series 'Living With...', exploring invisible disabilities.

In addition, their credits also include A Dream Play [2018] and Mourning [2014].



Please feel free to leave your thoughts in our feedback book.

Alternatively, you can fill in our anonymous online form by heading to [cutt.ly/imnotgonnalie](https://cutt.ly/imnotgonnalie) or scanning this QR code.



If you've been affected by the issues raised in this piece, please contact:

Safety Net UK  
01228 515859

The Bridgeway – Sexual Assault Support Service  
0808 118 6432

Rape Crisis  
0808 802 9999  
Open 12:00-14:30 and 19:00-21:30 every day of the year

National Domestic Abuse Helpline  
0808 2000 247  
Open 24/7, every day of the year

Victim Support Support Line  
0808 1689 111  
Open 24/7, every day of the year

In an emergency, call 999 and ask for the police. If you're unable to speak, dial 55 when prompted to choose an emergency service

Another aspect to consider when staging trauma-based performance is the culture surrounding violence against women and the risks this can entail. In *Men Who Hate Women – The Extremism Nobody is Talking About* (2020) writer Laura Bates describes these groups as a growing problem, as ‘a community devoted to violent hatred of women’ (2020:11), who are mostly overlooked by the general public. These hate groups are referred to as the ‘incel’ movement (‘incel’ being an abbreviation of ‘involuntary celibate’) and are moving their hatred from online into in-person attacks. Bates reiterates the very real threat behind these online groups stating that this is ‘a community in whose name over 100 people, mostly women, have been murdered or injured in the last ten years’ (2020:11).<sup>28</sup> Even more distressing, these online threats are increasingly leading to physical violence and death. A recent example of actual violence committed by a member of this movement was the mass shooting by Jake Davidson on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2021, in Plymouth, where five people (including his own mother and a three-year-old girl) were murdered (CNN, 2021). Regarding the incel movement, researchers Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen write in their article ‘Incel culture: what we’ve learned from investigating Plymouth attacker’s digital footprint’ (2021), that

While this condition is not necessarily confined to one gender, incelism exists largely in misogynistic online forums frequented by men. Within this ecosystem women are demonised as the architects of men’s failure to have sex. Incels claim that women control the sexual marketplace, leaving them without chance of a romantic partner if they are not considered good looking. While not

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<sup>28</sup> Bates describes how this extremism has led to distressing online threats towards women, for example the Labour MP Jess Phillips who, after speaking out against online abuse towards women, received 600 rape threats in a single night (2020:195).

all incels support violence, the subculture has been connected to a string of attacks.

(2021)

Given the increase in these anti-women groups, the signs of anti-#MeToo rhetoric growing (as I have previously discussed), and the growing violence being committed by individuals (rather than wholly online abuse), it is not improbable for a production of this type to be targeted by misogynistic individuals or more organised hate groups. This, although an extreme and unlikely risk, is an aspect of staging this type of performance that the performer and venues need to be aware of and prepared for. With this risk in mind, I had open discussions with the venues about conducting bag searches before each show and considered having an invitation-only audience. Ultimately, the performances went underway without any safety issues or incidences regarding audience well-being, with the preparations made by the production team and the venues (alongside the resources given by Safety Net) working successfully.

## **Conclusion**

The idea of trauma is multi-faceted in how it is caused and how it is experienced by the individual. The varied social and cultural contexts of experiencing trauma, as well as the long-term outcomes, makes staging trauma ethically intricate and challenging. By researching and interrogating differing methodological and philosophical frameworks the theatre maker can navigate these challenges with more care, diligence, and accommodation. While the vulnerable individual or group being examined will be different (and

therefore bring idiosyncratic challenges to each project) the crucial need for research is the same. By examining the social contexts, psychological understanding and philosophical theory surrounding trauma, the theatre maker can create affective and effective performance without causing harm.

The preparation and consideration that is required for this type of performance cannot be understated. The emotional and physiological repercussions of undertaking such a project are of a potentially grievous and varied nature. The practitioner has to pre-emptively assess the multiple risks to all those involved in the process and formulate suitable provisions, acquire useful skills and knowledge, and develop beneficial relationships with those involved. The practitioner must then be ready to react to a range of stressors and highly emotional scenarios, with sufficient resources at hand. The emotional and mental demand on the practitioner is a specific one that is unlike that experienced in other theatre processes, both in content and intensity. These considerations do not, however, reduce the requirement for the practitioner to also work creatively and dramaturgically, making an affective and effective piece of art.

# Chapter 5: Reflexive account of practice

## Introduction

Theatre as a cultural commodity is probably best understood as the result of its conditions of production and reception.

(Bennett, 1997:106)

In this chapter I discuss the outcomes and feedback resulting from my practice research, furthering questioning how the verbatim dramatic form can be a beneficial and influential tool for public discussion of sexual violence and harassment. The chapter will reflect on the rehearsal process from creative and dramaturgical perspectives, the performance's affect, and effect on audience members, and evaluate the feedback received following the live performances from audience members, interviewees, and members of Safety Net UK. This chapter will describe the manner in which the piece was created and how it was received by audiences, to better understand its success as an example of Socially Minded Theatre, in line with Bennett's assertion.

Before I begin to dissect the production, I will first provide the final script from my practice research, entitled *I'm not gonna lie* (Thomas, 2021), below.



## **Script: “I’m not gonna lie” – a verbatim performance installation**

Collated and edited by Grace Thomas

*Notes on staging:* The performance is a one woman show, portraying five identities; interviewer, Megan, Fritha, Gio, and Rowan. Each have a separate area on the stage, taking up a corner of the stage with the interviewer in the middle. Each individual, besides the interviewer, has an object or objects that link literally and figuratively to their story. Megan has a chair and table, with a jar of instant coffee, a teaspoon, and a coffee cup. Fritha has a seat and a mobile phone. Gio has three large cardboard boxes. Rowan has a blanket and a plush cow teddy. Each of these has a post-it notes with the individual’s initial written on. The interviewer’s area is established by a laptop, several appropriate theatre textbooks, a bottle of water and a folder of ‘notes’.

*Notes on performance:* As each identity is a real person, it is key that the performer uses the right mannerism and speech patterns without performing an impression. The following mannerisms and speech patterns should be integrated into the performance –

Megan: conversational, informal, wry sarcasm at times

Fritha: tense, stiff, staccato

Gio: talkative, fast paced, casual

Rowan: fidgety, precise, upward inflections in the voice

The 'Mannerism' section in the script is an opportunity to establish these mannerisms and differentiate between the individuals for the audience.

*Notes on direction: **The below script is a guideline only.*** The actor has free reign to alter the order of the text and have an honest emotional journey through each performance. The stage directions are merely suggestions on how and when to transition to each part of the text. The actor can pause and return to the interviewer area of the stage to 'refer to notes', drink some water, and reflect on what is being said at any point. This is to ensure the performance has a reactive and authentic quality, the intention being to make the audience uneasy and uncomfortable. By withdrawing from polished performance expectations and precise theatrical conventions, the audience can experience the tension felt by those who shared their stories and be reminded that the performer is not those people. They are not merely a character. Telling their stories is difficult, listening to them should be too. They deserve to be shown as something other than a slick theatrical show - as an evolving, unsettled retelling.

### **Script**

*The performer sits and types on the interviewer's laptop while a soundscape of recent relevant news features are played, overlapping one another. At the time of the original performance the clips included news coverage of Sarah Everard's kidnapping, rape and murder, news coverage of the 2021 incel*

*Plymouth shooting, Evan Rachael Wood's 2018 testimony to the US Congress, and an interview with Laura Bates on incel culture.*

**Interviewer –**

And so just, just speak, just naturally, just, just, you know, don't worry too much about wording things in, in any sort of way. Yeah, just be you. Okay. So, yeah, just to pull the plaster right off, because you know, as you were saying he would rather get this done sooner rather than later, I think we'll probably just get straight into it rather than you feeling any more anxious.

**Mannerisms –**

*(picking up post it note)*

*Megan:* I think. You know.

*Fritha:* Yeah. You feel like.

*Gio:* So, you know.

*Rowan:* Yeah. Yeah.

*(she places the post-it notes next to the interviewer's laptop)*

**Introductions –**

*Megan:* *(struggling with jar of coffee)* Hi, one second! Sorry I've just got to make a coffee cause this isn't gonna go well without it. I've kind of been thinking a little bit about, you know, I suppose the, the words I'd use to describe my experiences. I think there's something that you don't necessarily really think about. Kind of how you how you speak to people about it,

because obviously, it's something that you don't necessarily talk about all the time. So, I have to kind of think about the language that I might want to use  
*(goes to leave but - )* Oh! excuse my cat, if she comes into frame. Sorry.

*Fritha:* Hi, can you hear me? Okay, I'm not great at it just, just, spouting stuff. I don't mind. I have no issue in speaking about any of it really. Okay, well, um, this is why I'm not sure if I'm kind of what you need for this.

*Gio:* Yeah, I can hear you just fine. There we go. Right okay. So excuse the mess. I have boxes and bags everywhere. Oh, *(mouthing silently)* can you hear me, I can hear you *(speaking again)* fine. Oh! Now I've lost your picture.

*Rowan:* Yeah. Yeah, that's fine. I'm just gonna close the window. All the cows again.

### **The context –**

*Megan:* *(naturalistically spooning coffee into mug)* So I ended up moving in with a male friend and his father. And during that time, I think I kind of got the parental support that I was lacking, and you know, I was praised highly, and I was basically groomed. Like you know, I just didn't expect it at all.

*(glances over at Fritha's phone)*

*Fritha:* He left the house in 2013. And so, you know, it's all really messy when we broke up. We didn't know anything at that point but later my daughter

went to the police to report my husband for abusing her. yeah, that's why I'm not sure if, if my story is what you want. He, he used to go into a room first thing in the morning to wake her up, you know, but he used to go very, very, very early. And he was doing that for a very, very long time. And just didn't realise what he actually was.

*(checks post-it notes)*

*Gio:* I suppose I start off by saying I spent eight years of my life with him. And we had a little business together, big house, nice cars, all the usual things because people tend to think, I don't know, I think even my ideas or being with somebody like that was that it only happens to a certain type of person and a certain lifestyle. And no, it's not true. And I don't know if I even makes it harder because I was so, you know, embarrassed by him and by the whole situation that I just, you know, usual thing, you don't tell anybody you keep it quiet. You just get on with it and deal with it, and it becomes the norm. So, you know, the usual things, you meet them, it's all so fast. And, you know, he's very manipulative and controlling, and so charming and funny, and the life and soul of the party, and you know, thinks everybody loves them. And isn't he wonderful? And you know, and before I knew it, I was pregnant, within days, weeks, and then I was giving everything up because I lived in Scotland, had that a lovely house, a life of my own and a great career. I ignored all the red flags, there was loads of them.

*Rowan: (talking as she walks over)* And so it was someone that I trusted, and he was he was supposed to be a friend. He came here for sleep over during the eastern half turn. And one of my other friends came over and my brother had his mates it was that she just like full house. And I had a few drinks and me and my friend thought we'd try a joint, so we smoked some weed. I remember that but I know that I went up the stairs in my room by myself. anyway, I am I didn't really know how long I was actually like laying in my bed for and, but I know I completely passed out and then I heard my door open and I physically I couldn't move.

*(A moment of resistance – she doesn't want to, but she has to...)*

### **The attack –**

*Megan:* And then his father came into my bedroom after I'd been drinking quite heavily which is something I was doing quite a bit of time. And yeah, I was in a room naked, climbed into bed and raped me that night. And then I had, I went to work the next day I didn't sleep because he was, he was in my bed with me until like 5am. And my alarm went off, and I had to go to work I remember he kissed me on the lips. And as I left the house, and I just remember walking out the house, and just burst into tears, because everything that happened, like it was awful, but then that final kiss on the lips was just really personal. And it was just kind of like, it just felt like a step too far out of everything that happened.

*(she walks past and checks her notes)*

*Gio:* So typical pattern. And it was just yeah, his mood swings. He doesn't like being called out on his bullshit, basically. So, you learn without really realising it, and not to challenge it or to confront it, you think, oh, well, that hacks him off. So, I'm not talking about that. And then it's tiny, tiny little things that aren't big at the time, but over a period of time, forms a new type of habit, a new type of way of being living. When he lost his temper, he's a big man. He was six foot one. And when he lost his temper, it was just a rage and he's got huge, big fists. He's got hands like shovels. And I always thought it would take one punch with him at the side of my head, and I'd be a goner. You don't realise it slowly eats away at you. yeah, the physical parts of it got very good at avoiding. And I used to take photographs, and some of them are just tiny, small, little bruises, maybe my arm on my head and mark on the neck or from a push against the wall or something. And I've got over the years, quite a few. I've not looked at them for years. I don't actually know why I've got them. I always thought if anything ever happens to me, you know, the police or somebody might look at a computer and find them. So that's why I kept them because I knew it wasn't right.

*(she walks over tentatively)*

*Fritha:* My daughter went to - so she was at university at the time in Durham. She went to the police. The friends she told, told what had happened to her,

they took her to the police. I received a call. to say that I was going to be hearing from the police, and the police are going to be in contact.

You can imagine that that was massive. We kind of waited and waited thinking what you know, what on earth what, what on earth and, and then eventually on the Tuesday, the police got in contact, and I can't remember much about that time. The minute I heard he'd done something, by just, you know, I just I threw a chair across the kitchen and started punching the work surface. There was a big issue because she had disclosed to the police in Durham. And we were in Cumbria, so it had to be dealt with by Cumbrian police, not Durham police. So, there was just a lot of waiting. I couldn't confront him or anything. I couldn't say anything to him.

*(talking as she walks over)*

*Gio:* Most of the time is usual little cycles, it goes to the happy, lovely periods, and then it's just like this, like spiral. I just had to wait 2-4 days, and then it'd be right as rain, things were back to normal. When I look back at the mental stuff, and the emotional abuse, it's far worse than anything physical. Because at the time, it doesn't hurt. At the time your adrenaline's firing so much. But I do remember the fear, and the being scared. I mean, I could go days and weeks, and everything would be tickety boo. I don't like the word abuse because if he knew I was saying that he'd be livid. If he knew any of that, that I was even talking to you about it he would flip out. And then he would turn around and say, you know, but it's not me. It's you. It's your fault. I'm sure you've heard that a hundred times before. I think subconsciously, I



was thinking if he ever goes too far, and I'm in hospital, or something, just in case, I'll just keep those photographs. I always thought you always see things on TV and stuff. And you think police are always looking through computers and stuff. They'll find that folder of photographs.

*Megan: (moving backwards to table as she talks)* And, and anyway, I ended up staying there because I had nowhere else to go. I'd had like a conversation with him. I was like, that can never happen again, you know, as if that was gonna work. But you know, I think I kind of thought that he had taken the opportunity rather than it being something planned. I think throughout this, like the entire process of even taking it to the police, etc. It was always a case of me kind of excusing it to an extent, trying to understand kind of where his thought process was, rather than, you know, what he had done. It was, it was always kind of me trying to be like, well, I don't think he actually meant to hurt me, I think he probably thought I might enjoy it.

*(she goes to walk over to the blanket. She stops but then forces herself)*

*Rowan:* he came on to my bed kind of like on top of me and put all of his weight on me which felt awful. Kind of felt like has been suffocated. It just wasn't, it wasn't great. Whenever I've got male friends around, I always wear like, extra stuff cause I'm always paranoid about coming off is like, flirty. And I wasn't wearing a bra and I had a top on underneath my hoodie. And he, he, managed to get his hand underneath my top. And, um, he um squeezed my

breasts That really hurt. And I did try and call out. But that didn't happen. I kind of I froze. And I tried, but like nothing came out. I tried to move my arm to get him off, but my body just wasn't responding to what I was wanting to happen. And he moved the quilt right off of me. And, and he then went to pull them my trackies down at this point - it was definitely - being manhandled like that was not very nice. At this point I was crying but not crying. There was like tears rolling, coming out of my eyes, but it wasn't like full blown crying. and then he put his dick in my vagina first and like I had had sex before. But I went really tight. And it he rammed it in there and I was really sore. I remember I cried quite a bit when that happened. Then all of a sudden, he kind of he pulled out but put it back in, in my, in my anus. It was the worst experience I've ever had. And, and it was a hell of a lot of pain. And at this point, I was full blown crying, it wasn't just slightly. He moved my hair out the way and I remember I think he licked my neck. I'm not entirely sure, but I know something like that happened.

*(she takes a breather. She has a drink)*

*Megan: (unthinkingly filling the coffee cup)* And he didn't give a damn about what I wanted. Because when I asked him to stop, he didn't. And he told me, you know, I remember saying stop hurting me. And he said, I don't care and carried on and I had bruises of a handprint on my shoulder where he pinned me down. And you know, bruises on my thighs and hips and things. I confronted him about it. He basically, the words he used was, it was all for your pleasure. And which is like the insinuation was that he had like, given

me oral sex while I was asleep, which I hadn't been aware of at all. And that again, kind of felt dirtier than anything else. Because I had no recollection.

*(she walks away from the coffee mess)*

*Gio:* I sort of learned how to would you say I'm manipulating him that sounds really bad. But how to learn to get on the right side of him and not to make him worse. . But I was trying to get the best out of the situation so that I wouldn't make things worse. It was survival tactics, right? you lose a lot of your personality, you lose a lot of your independence, because you have to give that up to keep the peace. I found out about all his cheating with many people, and he was taking cocaine and all sorts of stuff. I confronted him and he had me pinned to the back of the sofa with his hands around my neck , the chest, and I was trying to push him off. And in that scuffle while I was defending myself, when he was pinned on top of me, I've got long nails, and I was trying to get him off as you do. You claw and you're scratching, do whatever you have to. And he was bleeding quite a lot. And I didn't know but he'd gone and taken photographs of himself bleeding all over and sent them toward his family and friends. Look what she's done to me. She's going mad. He told somebody, we've got a TV, massive, big, huge, big thing. And he was telling people I picked it up and throw it at him. And I know never in a million years would I have done that to him? Because I would be dead. I wouldn't have survived that.

*Rowan: (text flows into one another as she moves)* He held my nose so that I couldn't breathe. So, I'd open my mouth and he put he put his dick inside the mouth. I managed to kind of gain enough consciousness to like, push back. And then he finished in me. I was in a lot of shock, and I was in a lot of pain. That's the first time I've said it properly. I've never been able to do that.

*(she runs to the phone)*

### **The aftermath –**

*Fritha:* So, they did a deal with him. And he been abusing her from the age of 12 to the age of 18. And they the, the, sentence for pre 13 there's much more than a sentence for after 13. So, they did a deal with him where they didn't count the 12 year old bit, man, they didn't count the 18 year old bit, they just counted the bit in the middle.

She didn't talk for a long time. Um, the first thing, obviously, I just wanted to get in my car and drove to Durham, on that Thursday. And her friend was like, you know, no, that's, you know, she can't, she can't do, that she can't manage. She can't, she can't talk. And she shut herself away for quite a while. And I don't think she talked to us at all for quite a few days. Which was, which was hell. . And, and eventually, eventually, she, she said, you know, she communicated on the phone. And, you know, she's never talks about any of it. So, you know. I don't know, what was in her witness statement, or, you know, I don't know what happened, but you know I can't think too much about that, because I can't survive. If I'm constantly thinking

about things like that. *(walking to the interviewer area, leaving the phone there)*. I don't, I don't think there's a way to make people believe I think they either will, or they won't really do. And I think we can read all the time, you know, are constantly read about cases and prosecutions and all sorts of stuff. And I think some people are able to get their heads around stuff, and some people really aren't. I know some people that that have said that they absolutely know that things have gone on really very, very, very close to them, but still don't accept that it's widespread, and it's happening all the time and everywhere. And people, people might make that really hard with by false accusations. And many, many people out there just believe that women still cry rape, just for the sheer hell of it.

I mean, you know, the answer, it's, it makes you doubt everything. Things get very jumbled. And I mean, I could look for records of anything and I could give you dates for anything, but it doesn't, it doesn't remain in your head. The anxious brain doesn't remember. It's, you know, you just, you can't believe that things can happen for ridiculously extended amounts of time without you having any idea. You just can't believe that. So, it just makes you feel like, how could you be so blind? How could you not realise? How could you not have done anything? How could you not have questioned everything? But then afterwards, after it's, you realise it's millions of people's lives. And it's so common. It's unreal. Absolutely unreal.

*(she goes to walk over to Megan's table but comes back to Fritha's chair)*

He's never gonna care kind of thing. And you know, we're all left to pick up the pieces. Like it is just it will never go away and never ever, ever will go away. But in my mind, prison couldn't have been harsh enough in my mind it.

I see it as a time where you didn't have to think about anything, worry about anything, pay for anything, deal with anything, do anything. That's definitely not what I'd consider justice. *(she goes to move again but-)* But that's how I see it in mind. Right now, I'm a glass half empty girl, not a glass half full girl.

*Megan: (stirring the coffee)* I came back and reported it. And it's no further action. There isn't enough evidence, and which I kind of expected to be honest. But at least if this ever happens again, there's something somewhere for, you know, to maybe strengthen somebody else's case. Yeah, but that that's what happened.

I think it reinforced a lot of those ideas that I mentioned at the start there. Yeah, it really kind of cemented it for me that you are this sexual object. And this is the only reason that, like, men especially are going to give you time, this is the only thing they want from me. And my body just did not feel like mine at all. And, you know, if somebody could take that from me in a matter of seconds or minutes, it was, it just felt like, you know, well, how can this belong to me if somebody can take that, you know, just whenever they want. I didn't want to make somebody else a rapist. And that's not on me. But at the time, it felt like it was it felt like I'd created you know, I'd, I'd turned this person into a rapist.

I kind of just felt like a liar. I've felt I felt like I was blowing it way out of proportion. And I felt like, you know, I was destroying this man's life I was these allegations were huge. And, you know, what if he thought I wanted it was, it's all a big misunderstanding. And now I'm saying that he's raped me. And you know, that's a big weight to that word. When in actuality, I was just

shining a light on what actually happened. I was experiencing, like, panic attacks, and just really not doing very well at all, and had a lot of kind of like suicidal ideation, but never wanted to follow through with anything, but I just didn't want I just didn't want to be that person. And like, who do you think you are to kind of accuse somebody of this. Actually like, actually, no, that really hurt me, and it's not okay. *(she walks to the interviewer area taking the jar of coffee)* It's like, well, it's out of my hands and I know that I fought as hard as hard as I could. But for now, I just think, you know, maybe it scared him enough to realise that he actually did something wrong. And maybe that can be his punishment. It's not chivalrous when you're kind of coercing somebody into a relationship.

I like, to be able to talk about it again, like, like you're doing now, you know, to, to get those conversations started. And for people to feel okay with talking about it. it shouldn't, it shouldn't be a burden for anybody, but the person that's done that, you know. It shouldn't be a weight on anybody else's shoulders, it's horrible. And it's horrific. And it can be uncomfortable to hear that somebody has been through something. But I think it's really important that people do kind of know about it and hear about it and feel okay to speak about it. *(walking back to her corner)*

And, you know, consent is really easy to identify. And if it's not, then don't. Sorry, I just don't know where a sentence is going to go. God women just apologise for everything, don't they? Sorry, I was raped. Yes. I'm so sorry. You did this to me. I really hope you're okay.

*(she sincerely glances over at Rowan's blanket)*

*Rowan:* In the morning, I didn't, I didn't go downstairs. went into the shower and I remember I was scrubbing myself because it's, I wanted to get him off of me. I know a lot of my family still blames themselves for like, not hearing, not checking, like, basically for being asleep. First off. It's not their fault. It's not my fault. It took me a couple days afterwards to tell my parents what happened. The police process was not nice. Gave me a fear of doctors. Very first police officer I spoke to, she's great. And she took me to the rape Centre in Penrith. I can't remember what it's called. And when I had an examination done, the nurses were horrible. And they were not gentle. And they didn't let me know that that's what they were doing. They didn't ask or anything before they did it. And they got me to completely undress in front of them. They put me on the bed, and they had asked me to put my legs up. They've got swabs and, and they got like a clamp thing that opens you up because they wanted to see what damage had been done. They were not gentle. They did not take their time. This was the scary bit; I had to roll and lay on my side with my knees to my chest. And at this point is when I had like a massive panic attack. And they didn't stop what they were doing. This woman, instead of waiting for me to calm down before she did it, she just put her finger straight up there. But no, my dad helped calm me down to do the video interview. I went through a lot of tissues, and I couldn't stop shaking, either. I had to sit weirdly on the chair because sitting down hurt so much. And nobody given me anything for the pain either. And I wasn't allowed to take anything until I left the building because the nurses hadn't given me it. So, the paracetamol that my dad had, I wasn't even allowed to take, because the nurses hadn't



given it to me. I know we had a camera malfunction halfway through. So, I had to restart the whole thing. The camera died. So, we had to restart the whole thing. As I left, the nurses from the rape centre asked me to fill out a form about what the service was like and if I'd recommend that centre to someone else. Yeah, that was a major issue. My dad hit the roof. *(she walks over to the interviewer area with the blanket).*

I became scared of the dark and so I was had sleep with a light on.

And my brother didn't have any friends around anymore. And I didn't want anybody around. We then heard back that it was not going to go to court, because they had spoken to him, and he said that I had given consent. And because I had waited a few days before I told the police, they could not prove I was drunk or high. And a couple weeks after I appealed it, it was a male police officer that came which I wasn't expecting, I was expecting another female officer. He was very abrupt. And he blamed me, he said it was my fault for not going to the police unit. We had to stop my dad from actually killing him. When he turned around and said, oh, you didn't come to us sooner, my dad came running in. And I immediately stood up to go and, like, stop my dad, like, get in between them. And, and I just I kind of I broke down into tears. And then this guy gave my mom pieces of paper about the appeal. And, and literally, like ran out of our kitchen so quickly. It's awful when you blame yourself. But to have an adult, a police officer tells you that, that's awful. That hurts. But I got a letter through the door saying that is if someone else came forward, I had to go to court. And I'm being so if somebody comes forward, I don't have the choice in it. I have to go to court and testify. And

which I probably find a bit unfair. you shouldn't, shouldn't force somebody to talk about something if they don't want to.

I don't actually see him doing it again. I don't know why.

Yeah, I think you know, people's responses, I guess people often don't know how to respond, but they minimise it as a way to manage it, or cope with it, you know, because people don't want to kind of admit to the horror of it, and admit that actually, perpetrators are people that they know. And people do not want to live with that truth. They're trying to make it that perpetrators are these evil people hiding in bushes, and as we know, that's bullshit. *(she stands up)* All I can say is at least at least I'm still alive.

*(she drops the blanket as she walks over)*

*Gio: (moving boxes over to the middle)* I've lost all my money, the financial abuse is the thing that will last me longest because that was catastrophic. when I think about it, now, it doesn't actually upset me, I think because I've been through so much now. And I've dealt with it. It's almost like a different person. But the financial abuse is the biggest impact on my life. To this day, I think, God, that was such a close call, you know, eight years of my life with him. There's this expectation, this kind of idea in our heads of all of these things happening to certain social classes and stuff like that. And like, I always kind of say that it's like people, you know, watch the storylines on EastEnders, and it pigeonholes it for them. I hated it when the police were calling him the perpetrator. Like, my God, please don't use that word. If you're using that word, he is going to go mental. Please don't use that word.

But he is a perpetrator, and he is an abuser. And you might think he's a ladies' man, he's wonderful and lovely but he can't control his temper.

**Goodbyes –**

*(holding each object in turn)*

*Megan:* Sorry, that was very long winded? But no, I think it's, um, I'm in a good place now. So, I am proud of myself. Have a lovely day. Take care of yourself. I was gonna say sorry.

*Fritha:* I could literally sit within 24 hours and tell you stuff. I won't do that. Right, thank you very much. You take care, bye.

*Gio:* I think sometimes this keeps the wound open longer. I don't know. Maybe.

*Rowan:* Yeah, no problem. Thanks.

*(she moves forward and starts the interviewer dialogue again before the soundscape begins to play again)*

**End.**

## **Backstage: process and creation**

The final production is presented in script form as a verbatim performance installation piece, separated into seven sections –‘interviewer’, ‘mannerisms’, ‘introductions’, ‘context’, ‘the attack’, ‘the aftermath’, and ‘goodbyes’. These are not explicit to the audience during performances but are to help structure the stories of the interviewees for the performer. These separate titles also clarify the purpose of each section for the performer, for example, the ‘mannerisms’ section is to establish each individual interviewee, using selected physical and vocal to help the audience and performer distinguish between them. The script contains some stage directions but leave room for a director and performer to devise and discover in the rehearsal room. In the final script the notes on direction state that,

The below script is a guideline only. The actor has free reign to alter the order of the text and have an honest emotional journey through each performance. The stage directions are merely suggestions on how and when to transition to each part of the text.

(Thomas, 2021:2)

The performance was staged at The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster with audiences of approximately 5 people per performance, and at The Source Collective in Carlisle for an audience of approximately 30 people. It was performed in an ‘end-on’ stage formation in a ‘black box’ style with minimal lighting changes (see appendix C). The audience’s demographics were broad in gender, age and ethnicity.

The process of creating this piece was the most challenging experience of my professional life, while also presenting some personal obstacles. The

rehearsal began with a collaborative examination of the interview transcripts as dramatic text with Bethany McNarney, who was the chosen performer for this production. We discussed the intention of the piece and the importance of creating an accurate, nuanced, and unapologetic depiction of the stories and the themes they contain. We both agreed that there was a socio-political element to telling these stories and that we were both working as activists as well as creatives in making this work. The agreed aims for the production were to give a platform to the interviewees, to challenge typical ideas about victimhood, and to ensure the emphasis was on the words being spoken. As each identity is a real person, we decided it was vital that the performer uses the right mannerism and speech patterns without performing an impression. We achieved this by watching the interview recordings and observing some key mannerisms and vocal patterns for McNarney to incorporate into their performance. The unforeseen circumstances that the interviews took place within, specifically Covid restrictions and the use of Zoom, meant we could closely examine the mannerisms and facial expressions. The ability to replay the interviews and view the interviewees in close detail was an unexpected advantage to the analytical stage of the process. Access to minute facial details and vocal inflections provided more options for creating the performance and lent more depth to the performance itself, aiding both the performer and audience in differentiating between individuals. This effect was also combined with lingering stops in delivery to give opportunities for reflection for both the performer and the audience.

We then began dissecting and analysing the transcripts more specifically, including finding patterns and repetition in the vocabulary used,

looking for motifs in the text, and sectioning the transcripts into a script format. There were several hours of interview transcript to examine, and we individually highlighted the sections of each interview that we had an instinctive reaction to. This reaction could be any at all, from disgust to finding something funny, or being instinctively drawn to the phrasing of a sentence. We then compared the sections we had chosen and found a great deal of commonality. Once these highlighted sections had been collated, we separated them into a script structure that we titled 'introductions, context, the attack, the aftermath, and the goodbyes.' The 'introductions' section presented the mannerisms and repeated phrases used by each interviewee to establish them before beginning their story. We agreed it was important to do so for the piece to have cohesion for the audience. It also alluded to the manner in which the interviews had taken place and presented the text as a real conversation.

The 'context' section of the script was created to give a background to each story and further establish the individual characteristics of each interviewee. The context section helped to show the similarities between each story such as the victim being vulnerable in some way before the abuse started (as noted in Smith & Jones (2022:22)), for example being homeless or under the influence of alcohol. The same section also shows the differences between the stories such as the interviewees' ages and economic background which were noticeably different in ages.

Once this had been established the script then moved on to the interviewees' description of the abuse they have experienced. For some interviewees this was a singular event and for others it was years of cyclical abuse, making the structure of this section more complicated to arrange. We

decided that we should not censor the more explicit descriptions of assault but to structure this section in a way that the audience could process without being overwhelmed. The structure meant using the more relaxed, conversational interviewees' sections at the right moment to relieve the tension but continue to reiterate the trauma that had been experienced.

The 'aftermath' section was formed to illustrate the on-going trauma experienced by victims due to police inaction and insensitivity, the structures of the legal system (such as plea deals offered to abusers), and the attitudes of immediate and broader society towards abuse. We wanted to highlight that the effects of these traumatic experiences are long-lasting and there is little chance of justice for victims. The final section, 'the goodbyes', gave a sense of closure to the piece and reiterated the context of the conversations. However, we decided to return to the opening lines of the piece spoken by the 'interviewer', 'and so just, just speak, just naturally, just, just, you know, don't worry too much about wording things in, in any sort of way' (Thomas, 2021:3). The aim in this decision was to symbolise how these experiences and stories are continuously happening, and that the issues surrounding assault and abuse are on-going within our society. This effect was enhanced by framing the piece with a soundscape that contained audio from recent relevant television news features was played. The soundscape was created by sound designer Paul Jefferson during pre-production after I specified the news articles he should use and that they should be overlapping one another building in intensity. The news articles chosen included news coverage of Sarah Everard's kidnapping, rape and murder, news coverage of the 2021

incel Plymouth shooting, Evan Rachael Wood's 2018 testimony to the US Congress reference, an interview with Laura Bates on incel culture reference, and a feature on Las Tesis' performance protests of *A Rapist in Your Path* (Cometa et al., 2019)<sup>29</sup>. By repeating this audio at the end of the piece, the soundscape expressed the continuation of these experiences on a daily basis.

## **On stage: aesthetic and stylistic choices**

From passive acceptance to deeply involved co-activation, an audience can be called upon to perform a wide variety of functions and roles. Given this, it follows that what passes between in the performer/audience dynamic will be subject to a wide variety of distinctions.

(Whalley and Miller, 2017:129)

When staging the piece, my choices were based on two factors – the desired effect on the audience and the manner in which these stories should be told. The role of the audience in any verbatim piece or trauma-based production can be exploitive or voyeuristic. In *Of Precariousness: vulnerabilities, responsibilities, communities in 21<sup>st</sup> century British drama and theatre* (2017), academic Mireia Aragay and Martin Middeke write, 'in the verbatim setting, spectators are bound to feel unsettled, or even threatened, when exposed to ideas that challenge or oppose ideologies and convictions, they had previously taken for granted' (2017:113). With this in consideration, I attempted to balance clarity with symbolism, deciding that the audience's coherence with

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<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that since the Amber Heard vs. Johnny Depp defamation case, that Evan Rachel Wood has become a similar target for online vitriol, as her abuser and rapist, Brian Warner (publicly known as singer-songwriter Marilyn Manson) has filed a similar defamation case as Depp.



the text was a priority. To achieve this, I decided on splitting the stage into five sections stage, one for each speaker in the text (see diagram below).



Each of the four interviewees were assigned a corner of the stage with an identifying object or objects to anchor McNarney to that person. The objects chosen had a direct, literal connection to the text but slowly became more figurative and symbolic throughout the show. One example is the interviewee started the interview saying, 'I've just got to make a coffee cause this isn't gonna go well without it' (Thomas, 2021:4) and was therefore assigned a coffee cup, teaspoon, and jar of instant coffee as their anchoring objects in the piece. The literal connection is evident in the text but began to become more demonstrative of the anxiety felt by the interviewee. This was explored by McNarney naturalistically adding a spoonful of coffee to the coffee cup in the first sections of this interviewee's story but, as the sections become more traumatic and upsetting, the coffee cup is filled quicker until it overflows. As these sections of the performance continue, we see the everyday act of

making a coffee become unnerving, unfamiliar, and a display of relentless anxiety and trauma. This symbolises the overwhelming nature of experiencing this trauma and how, beneath the interviewee's informal and often wry exterior, a great deal of anxiety and emotion is present. In her testimony to the US congress in 2018, Evan Rachel Wood analysed her recovering from rape and domestic abuse stating that she had received considerable therapy 'but others are not so fortunate, and because of this rape is often more than a few minutes of trauma, but slow death' (Wood, 2018). In using the act of making a coffee in this way, we aimed to represent Evan Rachel Wood's assertion, showing how trauma permeates everyday life and normal daily tasks. This utilisation of everyday objects also helped to show the different individual's mannerisms and characteristics. For example, the interviewee who was assigned the jar of coffee, teaspoon, and coffee mug, was more extrovert in her personality so the performance with the props was made more overt. In contrast, another interviewee was more introverted and reserved in her personality, so we made her interactions with her assigned objects subtle by comparison. These objects were a stuffed toy and a blanket, representing her younger age and replicating the bedroom environment she was interviewed in over Zoom. Throughout these sections of the performance McNarney made small, anxious movements such as moving the sides of the blanket or moving the toy in her hands. We discussed in rehearsal how the movements would vary in pace, intensity, and frequency during each section to demonstrate the differing levels of anxiety the interviewee felt, highlighting the more explicit aspects of her story. For example, during parts of this interview, the interviewee used clinical and direct vocabulary to explain her experiences in an in-depth, detailed manner. To

accentuate these sections, we tried making the mannerisms and movements exceedingly small or used stillness. Contrastingly, we also tried making the mannerisms/interaction with the props more exaggerated and rapid to find which was most effective. For the performances, the actor was permitted to alter this based on the audience's responses and the atmosphere in the performance space during each separate performance.

Another interviewee's story started with the mention of numerous boxes in the background of the Zoom call, stating 'So excuse the mess. I have boxes and bags everywhere' (Thomas, 2021:4). After trialling other objects, we decided that using four cardboard boxes would aid the telling of this story. The interviewee's mannerisms and vocal characteristics were faster and more emphatic than the others, and this was an energy we wanted to utilise to represent that individual accurately. The literal meaning of the boxes was presented to the audience in the text, with the interviewee mentioning them, but the figurative meaning behind them became apparent during the performance. The interviewee had remained in a domestic abuse situation for eight years and had explained how she had to moderate her own behaviour to avoid instances of violence, stating she 'how to learn to get on the right side of him and not to make him worse' (Thomas, 2021:11). In the rehearsal room we discussed and played with the idea of organising and reorganising the boxes in an attempt to cope with trauma and anxiety, moving the boxes with differing speed, emotion, and forcefulness to represent the interviewee's emotions. The last of the interviewee's story focused on communication, most notably a phone call making her aware that her daughter had been abused, with the

theme of talking or waiting for a phone call being repeated in the transcript of the interview. This interviewee's object was a mobile phone and during rehearsals this object quickly became the impetus for the performer to move back into that part of the stage. We used the anxiety the interviewee felt while waiting for a phone call or message with her story to push McNarney back into that story and return to that individual. The interactions with this object were the most subtle as we felt that this interviewee was the most rigid in movement and expression on the recordings, with a stilted, awkward vocality and mannerisms. The aim was to have the phone held slightly tighter or moved around in McNarney's hands to demonstrate the differing levels of hurt, anger, and worry the individual felt but to keep these gestures subtle. In contrasting more figurative actions (such as the coffee overflowing) with more naturalistic physical movements (such as the phone) the piece differentiates between the four interviewees and provides some visual variety for the audience.

In the middle of the stage was the interviewer's area that was established by a laptop, several appropriate theatre textbooks, a bottle of water and a folder of 'notes'. We decided that the way these experiences were collected, and the role of the interviewer (or researcher) was a key component of the project as it reminded the audience that these were real stories. It also gave context to how these stories were expressed as an interview creates a tension that the other available option of writing a letter may not, and we wanted the audience to feel that tension. As the performance progressed, the interviewees' objects ended up in the centre, mixed together with the interviewer's items. This was to symbolise the similarities and connections between the stories, and to

represent the solidarity between victims. It also symbolised the lasting effect on the interviewer that these stories had created.

The minimal style of the piece regarding set and props was to purposefully put the emphasis onto the words being spoken. We wanted to create a balance between the realness of the content without surrounding it in naturalistic theatricality, so the audience did not lose focus on the stories being told. The use of one actor was also a component in maintaining the audience's focus on the real-life nature of the piece. By presenting McNarney as a conduit for these stories to be told, the audience is reminded that these accounts of abuse are not fictional, allowing the audience to consider the challenges the performer faces in relaying them (the pauses to drink water or 'check notes' further enhancing this). The costume choices we made also symbolised how McNarney was a vessel for these women to tell their story as the costume consisted of an eclectic mix of items, each one recreating what the interviewees wore. By combining various items, McNarney's appearance was slightly jarring without being distracting, for example mixing pyjamas bottoms with a more formal blouse. This served as an unconscious reminder of the nature of the piece and McNarney's role within it. We also decided to make the piece short (around forty minutes) with two performances each evening to enhance accessibility, this being a tactic I have previously discussed in the verbatim chapter regarding my own practice. The shorter length of the piece meant the performance could make a bold statement with a high impact on the audience without being overwhelming. Before, in-between and after the two performances the previously mentioned soundscape of news articles was played, representing the cyclical nature of abuse through the cyclical nature of

the production. The decision to have this audio played before and after the performances was also to draw a contrast between the stories that receive media coverage and the stories of local, everyday women who have received no acknowledgement. The high-profile nature of the cases covered by the media can make these stories seem removed from day-to-day life and, by placing them next to the stories of local everyday women, it is symbolic of how these news stories reflect only a small amount of a very common problem. The Office for National Statistics' 2021 report on rape and sexual offences stated that in 2021 'rape accounted for 37% of all sexual offences recorded by the police. The number of rape offences in the year ending June 2021 was the highest ever recorded annual figure to date' (ONS, 2021). This statistic may be difficult for an audience member to comprehend and empathise with. Statistics can seem impersonal and detached from the human victims, but through the performance of individual stories the audience can relate the human experience of trauma to the enormous scale of this societal issue. The soundscape also assisted in preventing conventional applause from taking place, alongside instructions to the theatre staff to escort the audience out abruptly at the right moment. We both agreed that applause seemed inappropriate for the piece due to its content, as such a congratulatory gesture towards the theatre maker and performer removes focus from the interviewees. The option of applauding would also provide a comfortable ending for the audience. In his keynote address for the 2016 Theatre Symposium entitled, 'Whose space is it, anyway?', teatrologist Marvin Carlson discusses the conventional theatre space, describing it as 'set apart from the normal world of human activity, a space that serves as a site of imagination subject to certain

rules, a fundamental one being that the audience agrees to serve as spectators' (2016:9). By preventing any applause, the intention was to remove the typical audience role that theatre goers are accustomed to and the rules they must follow as spectators. As Carlson states, an audience knows inherently what their role is in a conventional theatre space such as when to applaud and when to leave the theatre. By removing these comfortable conventions, cathartic relief is less available for those who have watched the performance, reflecting the lack of relief for abuse and assault victims. While we did not want the audience to be distressed, we felt it was important for the audience to leave the theatre space unsatisfied theatrically rather than quickly move on from what they had heard.

Both performance venues (The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster and The Source Collective in Carlisle) were black box style spaces and audience capacity of around 20 – 30 people in the staging arrangements we had. The Carlisle performances was the better attended with 30 people watching both shows, while The Dukes Theatre performances had smaller audiences of 3–5 people in each show. It is notable that we received considerably more online marketing support from The Source Collective than The Dukes Theatre, and that the feedback we received was primarily from the Carlisle audiences. Both theatre spaces were chosen due to their intimate size and minimalist appearance, and smaller audience were expected for all performances. However, the lessened promotion from The Dukes Theatre and lack of attendance to those performances is due to the status of the piece as a part of the venue's research and development initiative. This makes the work

presented at The Dukes Theatre more of an opportunity to experiment, using the space as a theatre laboratory. The Source Collective is located in the area Safety Net works within and therefore has a readymade audience who want to see it. As Whalley and Miller state (2017:129), the audience's response to a theatrical piece, and the dynamic between them and the performer/s, can be intensely contrasting and disparate. This leads to the feedback we received from audience members, which was exceedingly encouraging and affirmed the methodological choices that had been made during the production process.

Reading and hearing these distressing stories continually for weeks was emotionally draining for both of us and we often decided on shorter rehearsals and one unplanned day off to allow suitable respite. Since beginning the research my positionality towards the piece had changed, having left a domestic abuse situation, and being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. This made the process difficult and emotionally charged, with the utilisation of my mental health training and support network becoming vital during and after the production. Bethany McNarney also experienced an anxiety attack an hour before the first performance at The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster where my mental health first aid became invaluable in calming them down and helping them manage their emotions. Discussions about cancelling the performance were held where I made it abundantly clear that the performer's well-being was the priority. However, McNarney insisted on performing and used the style of directing I had decided on to help them manage. The directing style was to give the actor free reign to alter the order of the text and have an honest emotional journey through each performance.



The stage directions we blocked in rehearsals were merely suggestions on how and when to transition to each part of the text. The performer had the option to pause and return to the middle of the stage to drink some water and reflect on what was being said at any point. This was to ensure the performance has a reactive and authentic quality, the intention being to make the audience unsettled. Those watching were forced by the actor's seeming uncertainty about their next action, to reflect on the reality of what they were hearing. By withdrawing from polished performance expectations and precise theatrical conventions, the audience could experience the tension felt by those who shared their stories and be reminded that the performer is not the interviewees. We decided that if telling their stories is difficult, listening to them should be too and that the stories deserve to be shown as an evolving, unsettled retelling rather than a polished theatrical production.

Nationally and internationally, Verbatim theatre is evolving significantly from its regional origins but its purpose – to connect with an audience emotionally and intellectually, to empathically inform and empower through authentic story – remains a constant.

(Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007:156)

When watching the performance, it was intriguing to see which parts of the piece made the audience respond more outwardly. The more explicit descriptions of abuse seemed to increase the tension in the room during every performance. This implies that the more neutral language surrounding abuse can hide the true horror of these events from the general public. Jo Birch commented on this, stating that 'people say 'assault' rather than 'rape' because 'rape' is too shocking and emotional, they want to make it palatable' (2021, personal communication November 11<sup>th</sup>). In their article 'Language,

gender and 'reality': Violence against women' (2012), academics Patricia Easteal, Lorana Bartels and Sally Bradford discuss the language used in relation to violence against women,

By prefixing violence with the word 'domestic', as a general category of offence, it becomes less criminal and neutralises the role of the perpetrator. For instance, to successfully argue self-defence, the battered woman defendant must show that she had a reasonable belief that her life was in danger. This can be problematic when judges use language that minimises histories of brutal assaults, such as 'spats'.

(Easteal et al, 2012:329)

The vocabulary used in daily discussions and in judicial terminology has both a cultural and legal impact on women who try to escape, report and/or seek justice for the violence they have experienced. It is also clear from the research undertaken by Easteal, Bartels and Bradford, that the language used to describe sexual assault can make these instances seem not only more palatable, but acceptable to the general public,

The ingrained myths about rape, along with the lack of terms in the English vocabulary to describe physical and sexual acts, create a situation which has judges, jurors and police officers alike inappropriately using the same words to describe sexual acts which are forced as those which are consensual.

(Easteal et al, 2012:331)

By keeping the more explicit, clinical descriptions of abuse in our piece, the audience cannot remove themselves from the trauma with neutered language or see them as acceptable. They are therefore confronted with the reality of these attacks.

The feedback received regarding the show was overwhelmingly positive and demonstrated that we had achieved our aims during the devising period. As Anderson and Wilkson state (2007:156) the genre of this piece strives to link with the viewer on an emotional and intellectual level, intending to evoke social change. Through this combination of thought and feeling we hoped to inspire the audience to reflect on their attitudes towards the topic and challenges other people's views when given the opportunity. When evaluating the feedback we received from the audience, it is implied this was achieved fully. There were multiple methods of obtaining feedback to increase accessibility and allow individuals to process their thoughts and emotions. The audience could leave feedback in a designated book, submit it online through a survey, or email their feedback to an email address created specifically for the show. I also received feedback from Jo Birch at Safety Net through a meeting following the last performance at The Source Collective in Carlisle.

The decision to use one performer to represent the interviewees was successful according to feedback as one audience member who saw the Carlisle performance stated, 'although it was one woman, felt very real and clearly four real people with very real experiences, with clear character personality differences' (2021, personal communication October 1<sup>st</sup>). The audience member also went on to highlight how the depiction of assault victims was well executed, stating,

It was empowering to see that the 'women', through Bethany, were not breaking down, but they were actually sometimes laughing. I feel that is empowering because from past experiences, I know people are scared to tell their story as they don't think people will believe them, unless they are crying or breaking down. This piece showed the difference in how people communicate their truth.

(2021, personal communication October 1<sup>st</sup>)

Another audience member shared their thoughts following the Carlisle performance writing, 'it sparked some of the most important conversations that I've ever had as an adult and tackled head-on the issues that women in today's society feel and face daily' (2021, personal communication October 1<sup>st</sup>). This feedback was encouraging as it demonstrated the impact of the production outside of the theatre space, indicating that we had achieved our aim regarding audience experience, creating a thought-provoking production that lingered in the viewer's mind. This was further demonstrated by feedback I received three months later from a male audience member who had seen one of the performances at The Dukes Theatre, who stated,

'I'm not gonna lie' is a powerful show that crept up on me slowly. It took time for me to form a sense of the various different 'characters' that were embodied in the verbatim text ... for these particular individuals to emerge from the fog of words. As they did so, the weight of their experience, the gravity of what they described, settled upon me. Watching and listening as a man I felt weighed down by the bitter cruelty and injustice described ... and a sense of shame. Shame for my gender. It was not easy to attend, but I'm glad of the impact it had upon me – which was, perhaps, made all the greater by the spare staging. Three months on it remains vivid to me.

(2021, personal communication January 10th )

This feedback was encouraging regarding the aesthetic and staging choices that had been made, confirming their effectiveness. It also reiterated the long-term impact on audience members following the performance and that the production lingered in the memory for those who viewed it. The audience member's comment about their gender reveals that the piece did not just elicit feelings of sympathy or horror towards the stories being shared, but also encouraged male audience members to reflect on personal responsibility. It is

important for the audience to see how male attitudes towards women and consent need to change, even if it is presented through seemingly harmless jokes or comments. For example, when meeting Jo Birch after the performance, she commented on the visible impact the show had on male audience members and on their remarks during the question-and answer session in Carlisle. These comments discussed the responsibility men have to prevent derogatory comments and behaviour towards women, with the male audience members voicing regret about times they could have done this but did not. This demonstrates that despite the performance focusing on four individual women, the broader societal issues that lead to sexual assault and abuse are also highlighted by the staging choices.

Jo Birch also gave feedback on behalf of the Safety Net team in Carlisle who found the process and outcome exceedingly positive, stating that the show was 'so powerful and so real' (2021, personal communication October 19<sup>th</sup>). The Safety Net team also commented on the opportunity offered to the Carlisle audience to speak to their staff members about the issues discussed in the show. Birch stated that 'the question-and-answer bit at the end was so powerful and gave people a platform to ask question when they normally might not' (2021, personal communication November 11<sup>th</sup>). This demonstrates that how the performance is followed, and the resources provided are an incredibly important part of successfully creating a show of this nature.

## **Responses and feedback: the performer**

Following the performance, I asked Bethany McNarney to give their feedback

on the project and what their experience was like as a performer. McNarney responded with the following,

This wasn't the easiest of projects to be involved with, the subject matter was terrifying in many ways but from start to finish I felt safe and was able to approach everything in a way that was respectful for everyone involved. It was great to be able to hear what the audience thought about the performance, especially on the final night with the Q&A/discussion afterwards. It felt like a safe and nurturing space for everyone. I've always enjoyed the creative process when working with Grace because we can bounce ideas back and forth and always try new things to keep the creativity flowing.

(2021, personal communication January 17<sup>th</sup>)

This statement did not mention the performances at The Dukes Theatre, implying the performance location and the audience in Carlisle was perhaps more comfortable for McNarney. The Source Collective venue in Carlisle is focused on more unconventional performances and encourages new writers of any form or genre to participate in their events. The building itself has a relaxed, bohemian aesthetic and atmosphere. In comparison, The Dukes Theatre has a considerable amount of youth theatre programs and opportunities for new artists available but is generally a more commercial theatre space in performance content and venue aesthetic. It is my evaluation that the challenging subject matter of the production was daunting for The Dukes Theatre and far more welcome at The Source Collective, and that the formality of the former contributed to the performer's anxiety before the first show. Therefore, the choice of venue is a key component in the success of a show of this nature, not just in consideration of the audience demographic a venue typically attracts but also in regard to the performer's well-being. The atmosphere within the theatre space and the overall community-led feel of the surroundings was a crucial factor in the performer feeling relaxed and able to

perform freely. However, it is encouraging to know that McNarney felt safe throughout the process and that the subject was well handled, implying my methodological considerations were successful and are worth duplicating in future productions. It is also worth noting that the question-and-answer session in Carlisle was useful for the performer as well as the audience, providing an opportunity for their hard work to be validated and discussed. After a particularly arduous and challenging production, it was beneficial to the performer and director to hear that our hard work and dedication to the piece was worthwhile, and our intentions had been realised.

## **Responses and feedback: the interviewee**

One audience member was also one of the interviewees. She commented on the choice to have one actor, stating, 'the style of the show was fantastic as it stripped away the mess of loads of actors on stage and made all of our stories heard for what they were instead of pinning them to a character. I thought this was effective due to the fact people forget that this happens, and it happens to people they know themselves' (2021, personal communication October 19<sup>th</sup>).

As an interviewee and an audience member, the individual had a unique positionality to the piece and her experience of being a participant in a verbatim piece was incredibly useful for forming a manifesto for future practice. The experience she had while watching the show was a positive one, stating 'hearing my own words said back to me was a surreal experience, however it helped me understand how strong I can be and how far I have come in my journey to recovery' (2021, personal communication October 19<sup>th</sup>). The

therapeutic nature of verbatim theatre is evident when it is planned and executed with suitable ethical considerations and appropriate preparation (such as mental health first aid training and research in this instance). She also commented on the effective nature of the interview process saying 'I look back to when we first spoke and how that was the first time, I had told my story. After talking to you I managed to get some sleep and it took a weight off of me' (2021, personal communication October 19<sup>th</sup>). Hearing this feedback from an interviewee was immensely gratifying as it confirmed that my theoretical ideas (such as having a single performer, minimalist blocking, and the use of props) and the practical execution of them have been successful and effective in the way I had aimed for.

## **Conclusion**

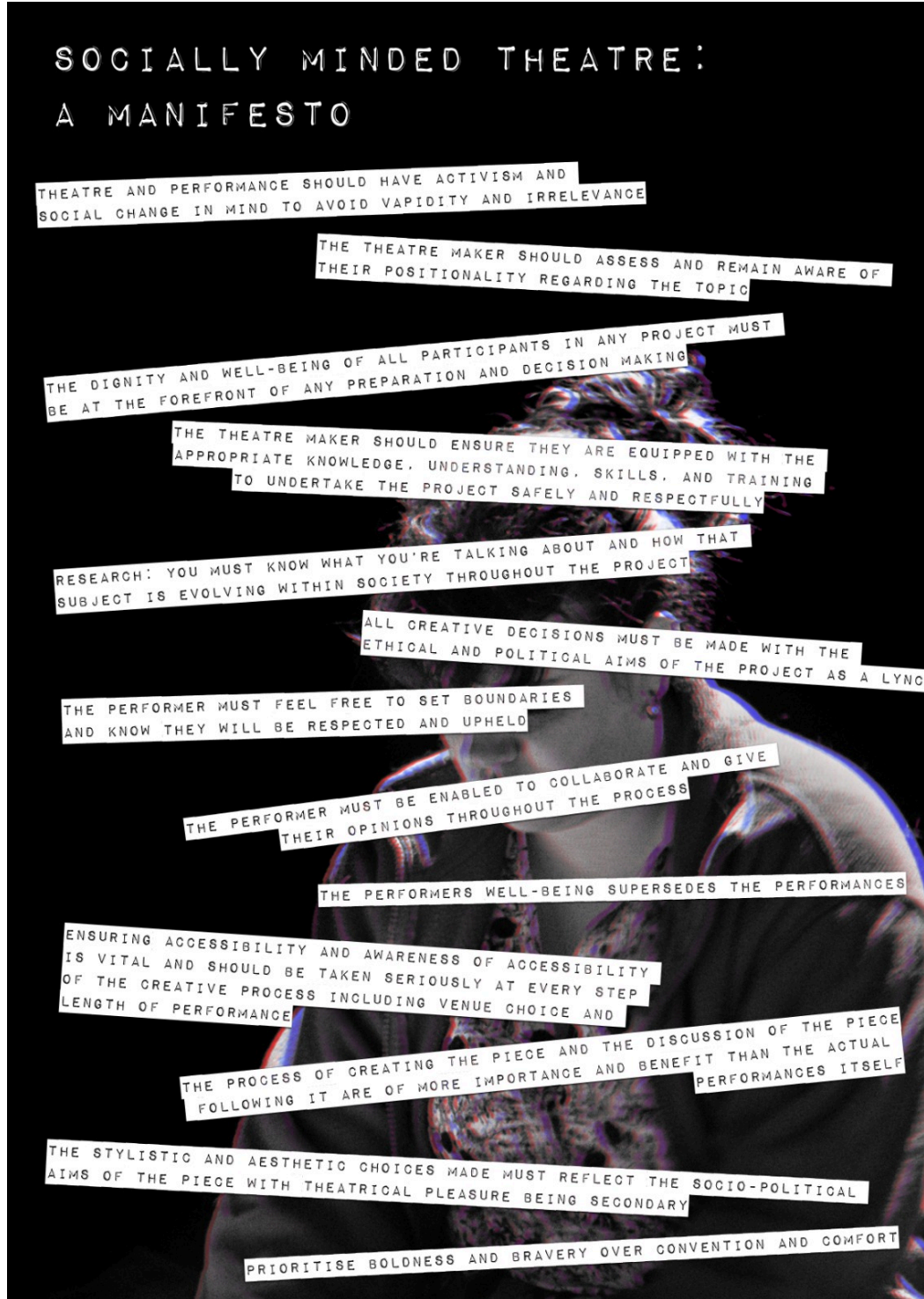
My own experience of watching this piece was a tense one. There was a great deal of responsibility in producing and directing a theatre piece about such a topic. I was constantly aware that an audience member might be upset, angry or have a mental health issue during the performances. I was also vigilantly attentive to the actor's emotional and physical needs, ensuring they were coping with the performance material and felt safe. This made it harder to remember my own well-being and my responsibility to ensure my own safety, physically and emotionally. In future productions this is something I would prepare for further before starting pre-production work and consider what specific support might aid those within a production. It is possible that a mental health specialist might be a useful asset to attach to a project of this nature such as the psychologist made available to the cast of the 2018 production of



Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne that I discussed in #MeToo in Theatre chapter.

When reflecting on the process and performances of this piece it is clear how important the theatre maker's preparation and skill set are to achieving an effective but ethical production – a Socially Minded Theatre piece. The production was an intensely challenging undertaking with the preparation and training I had completed prior to rehearsals, indicating that less pre-emptive planning could easily lead to unsuccessful productions. Given the content and genre of this piece, an unsuccessful production would mean potentially endangering participants, the audience, and the theatre maker/s. It confirms my assertion in my verbatim chapter that productions dealing with real life trauma must be approached with the utmost care, consideration, and be supported by relevant research and understanding into the topic. It is with this evaluation in mind that I affirm these assertions in my Socially Minded Theatre Manifesto. This manifesto is a declaration, urging theatre makers to ensure their practice methods are suitable before creating a theatre piece based on trauma. The manifesto insists on the inherent responsibility of the theatre maker and the need for safety for creators, interviewees, performers, and audience members. It will also assert the requirement for discussion of the subject following performance (such as a question-and-answer session) and to prioritise the social change the production could evoke. It will also affirm the obligations theatre makers have towards accessibility, collaboration, and activism in their work.

# Chapter 6: Manifesto



Below I will list and analyse some key assertions I have made in my manifesto, reflecting on how the process of creating *I'm not gonna lie* (Thomas, 2021) has formed the Socially Minded Theatre methodology.

**Theatre and performance should have activism and social change in mind to avoid vapidty and irrelevance.**

This assertion is a demand for theatre makers to consider and utilise the social impact that theatre can have. Through undertaking the research, my creative focus on societal issues has been strengthened and I would implore other theatre makers to pursue having a societal impact as an outcome of their work. My research into the #MeToo movement led me to discover how severely prevalent sexual assault and harassment towards women is in Western society, with statistics from the charity Rape Crisis stating that 1 in 35 women are assaulted each year (rapecrisis.org, 2022) This was, admittedly, worse than my initial assumptions when beginning the project. Learning how common violence (sexual and non-sexual) is towards women has increased my belief in theatre's social responsibility. When undertaking creative projects, the impact of the work must be considered even if the social issue or theme is discussed indirectly or is implied through motif or metaphor. While there is a place within the theatre industry for light-hearted entertainment and escapism, one could argue that to be considered as a work of substance, theatre must engage with social issues. Escapism could be seen as having a social purpose, through allowing audiences to recharge emotionally and share collective laughter and joy. However, I assert that relevancy and substance can only be

attained by a theatre maker when they engage with activism and social change as creative motivation.

**The theatre maker should assess and remain aware of their positionality regarding the topic.**

Throughout my research into recent #MeToo-related productions, a common discussion point has been who should be producing, directing, and scripting these dramatisations. It can be argued that including men into the discussions surrounding sexual assault and harassment towards women is valid and arguably key to changing attitudes towards women. However, given the low number of women theatre makers, directors, and writers, it is important that the creative voices of women are enabled and supported in discussing women-orientated issues. This also applies to the cultural and economic background of the theatre maker, as women of colour have even less opportunities and representation. By enabling women from all backgrounds and sexual orientations to create #MeToo- related theatre, the industry would encapsulate the intersectionality that is at the heart of the #MeToo movement. The changes in policy made by producing theatres, theatre companies and theatre training institutions (such as The Royal Court's new code of behaviour since 2017 and Canadian Actors' Equity Association's Not in OUR Space! principles since 2019) may lead to more diversity in creative theatre roles and lead to more investment into women-led theatre companies. The assertion in my manifesto regarding positionality relates to the individual theatre maker regarding each individual production, demanding for self-awareness and appropriate

response. In the wake of the #MeToo movement and the increase in 'woke' culture, the theatre maker needs to reflect on their own positionality towards their chosen topic, including gender, race, and other potential societal privileges they may have. The theatre maker must ask if they are the right person to present this story of stories. Verbatim theatre avoids some of the complications that individual positionality can present through its use of authentic real-life experiences but the creative decisions regarding structure, staging, casting, and how the audience interacts with the production will be affected by the theatre maker's socio-economic background. The ability to avoid personal bias is also enhanced by the use of collaborative devising methods, allowing more perspectives to be included in the decision-making process. While subconscious personal bias may be a problem that is impossible to avoid altogether, the manifesto asserts that the practitioner must do all they can to realise and counteract their biases.

**The dignity and well-being of all participants in any project must be at the forefront of any preparation and decision making**

It is vitally important to ensure the dignity of those who have offered their stories to your verbatim production. The theatre maker must repay the trust the interviewee has placed in them by taking care and diligence when staging verbatim stories. A useful reminder of the responsibility the theatre makers holds can be found in Dennis Kelly's 2007 verbatim play *Taking Care of Baby*. In Kelly's play, about a woman who has murdered her two infant children, one interviewee states, 'I have to confess that I am a little confused as to what you

are doing. If I understand it right it sounds like you are making an entertainment of the greatest tragedy of my life' (2007:28). This quote illustrates the emotional stakes when a verbatim production is created – something the theatre maker must not forget. It is also vital to support and protect your cast and production team, which requires the theatre maker to pre-emptively consider the potential risks and have provisions in place to, not only deal with an issue, but to prevent one from occurring. A key example of this is the 2018 production of *Blasted* (Kane, 1995) at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne, Australia. The support in place during that production, such as a psychologist, to help actors work on graphic and emotionally-fraught theatrical material is a clear illustration of how theatre productions can protect their cast if the right preparation is made. The theatre maker can also ensure the dignity and wellbeing of performers through ensuring their mobility needs are met in the performance and the rehearsals room, from adjusting staging to considering the accessibility of the rehearsal space. Through considering these aspects of the cast's emotional and physical health, the theatre maker opens up their production to a more diverse array of theatrical voices and perspectives. This diversity and inclusivity can only enrich creative projects and benefit all those involved.

**The theatre maker should ensure they are equipped with the appropriate knowledge, understanding, skills, and training to undertake the project safely and respectfully**

The practice research component of my study was extremely challenging and

exceeded my expectations regarding emotional distress for myself and my cast. I had undertaken training and research to prepare myself for the production and to attain the required skills relating to mental health but following the performance I would assert that more was needed. During my research there was a clear lack of guidance for theatre makers on protecting themselves and their cast when making theatre of this nature. When discussing this with Kylie Perry at The Paper, she admitted that there were no regulated systems in place during their productions, but more of a supportive general atmosphere was created (2020, personal communication July 20<sup>th</sup>). The argument for a Socially Minded Theatre approach, that requires theatre makers to ensure their practice is safe and responsible, is evident in the lack of definitive guidance available. There are multiple reasons why the theatre maker should ensure they have all the appropriate knowledge and skills to undertake such a project including ensuring the safety of their cast and, as well as themselves. There is also the consideration that, if dealing with their own emotions without suitable preparation, the theatre maker cannot meet their aims as effectively or meet their full creative potential. If a theatre maker is unprepared to avoid and/or manage moments of distress from themselves, their team, or their audience, then this disruption may become the main focus of the production in media articles, social media posts, or within theatre industry circles. Therefore, a safe and adequately prepared approach should be desirable for moral, creative and professional purposes.

**RESEARCH: you must know what you're talking about and how that subject is evolving within society throughout the project**

As stated in the Reflexive account of practice chapter, the Sarah Everard case was an influence on my final production with television news articles featuring in the audio track played at the start and end of each show. During the rehearsals for *I'm not gonna lie* (Thomas, 2021), Sarah Everard's murderer, Wayne Couzens, was being sentenced. During this period, more details about the case became known to the public such as how he had killed Everard by 'strangling her with his police belt' (BBC, 2021). The heightened relevancy of the case seemed to affect the atmosphere in the audience when the audio clips mentioning Everard or Couzens were played. The additional news coverage and increased disclosure of details to the public, affected how the production was formed. The fact that Wayne Couzens was a police officer, and that his conviction highlighted some of the issues of misogyny within the United Kingdom's police force, altered how the police were perceived in the piece. In a research report commissioned by The End Violence Against Women Coalition, it was found that 47% of women in the United Kingdom reported 'declining trust in the police following the case's publication surrounding the rape and murder of Sarah Everard' (endviolenceagainstwomen.org, 2021). With this shift in public trust of the police in mind, the parts of the interviewees' stories that involved the police had further context regarding women not being believed or not trusting the police. One interviewee for *I'm not gonna lie* (Thomas, 2021) described her negative experience with the police,

And a couple weeks after I appealed it, it was a male police officer that came which I wasn't expecting, I was expecting another female



officer. He was very abrupt. And he blamed me, he said it was my fault for not going to the police sooner.

(Thomas, 2021:16)

With the additional context given by the Couzens sentencing, the police were mentioned briefly in the stories, in a fairly dismissible tone. It is notable that none of the interviewees had a positive experience with the police following their abuse. Therefore, the dismissive attitude to police was something already present in the interviews but, in the translation to the stage, the dismissive and unimpressed feelings became emblematic of a broader problem with how the police deal with sexual assault claims. On October 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, the day after the Wayne Couzens trial completed and the final performance date for *I'm not gonna lie* (Thomas, 2021), iNews published statistics on sexual misconduct allegations about police officers in the United Kingdom. The newspaper found that there had been over 600 allegations of sexual misconduct since in 2018 alone (Walker, 2021). When women are asked why they failed to report their abuse to the police, the answer is already self-evident.

This is one example of why it is important to know the topic of your production thoroughly and to stay updated on changes that may occur during your creative process, including cultural shifts, new information, or other alterations to existing knowledge or attitudes. If, in the busy rehearsal schedule, I had not taken the time to stay updated on the Everard case, then I would have failed to acknowledge the different relationship the audience might have with the production and to suitably adjust the show as needed.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions

## Introduction

This chapter outlines my key findings in relation to aims and questions, analysing the success of my research and reviewing its limitations. I also propose opportunities for future research and recommendations for further exploration.

## Aims and findings

My study aimed to examine current theatre practices relating to #MeToo and #MeToo-related subject matter and to analyse how these subjects have currently been addressed on stage. From conducting my research, I have deduced that the impact of the movement has been substantial on society across the globe (although more impact can be evidenced in Western countries) and has considerably altered how the theatre industry approaches issues of harassment, abuse of power, and sexual assault. There has been acknowledgement of the movement by some of the most influential and well-known theatres, performers, and playwrights in the theatre industry such as David Mamet, The Royal Court Theatre, and Steven Berkoff. This acknowledgment has included theatrical productions, public events, initiatives to engage with their staff/audiences, and attempts to alter theatre practices behind the scenes. However, there are still instances where those who have been harassed and/or assaulted have not been listened to and those who have

been accused of harassment or abuse have not faced consequences, such as comedian Louis C.K. winning a Grammy award in 2022 despite numerous accusations of sexual harassment and misconduct (Wagmeister, E. 2022). These instances make the rhetoric around ‘cancel culture’ and the backlash against the #MeToo movement largely erroneous and an attempt to dismiss the experiences of those who speak up.

Another aim was to explore how verbatim theatre can provide a safe platform for sharing #MeToo experiences. The characteristics of verbatim mean that those who share their stories can do so with anonymity (if desired) and without the possibilities of online harassment and threats if using social media. The structure and ritual of the theatrical space provides a safe space for their experiences to be shared and received with respect. Using verbatim conventions means experiences are much less likely to be misrepresented in any way and individual emotions and beliefs can be presented with a heightened sense of authenticity. Verbatim theatre also protects the theatre maker from criticisms as any content or opinion voiced in a verbatim theatre piece is not fabricated by the playwright or deviser. By presenting the audience with ‘real life’ stories, the theatre makers’ handling of sensitive topics is less likely to be called into question than a fictionalised depiction of #MeToo-related issues such as Neilson’s *The Prudes* (2018). I aimed to use verbatim conventions to create a contemporary piece of theatre, using the verbatim interviews I had conducted. The final performances at The Dukes Theatre in Lancaster and The Source Collective in Carlisle from 29<sup>th</sup> September–1<sup>st</sup> October 2021, aligned with many of the tenets of verbatim I had previously

discussed such as minimalist staging, use of soundscapes, use of motif, and multi-roling. It is my belief that it was a successful piece of theatre in regard to displaying verbatim theatre conventions.

Following this I aimed to create a galvanising, advisory manifesto that can enhance future practice for theatre makers using verbatim theatre conventions to discuss trauma on stage. The manifesto can be useful for those doing specifically #MeToo-related topics or any potential traumatic topic such as mental health issues.

## **Contribution to knowledge**

The contributions made by this research include the theoretical and the practical elements, leading to new modes of considering verbatim theatre and in creating verbatim productions. The research has provided a manifesto that asserts ethical and creative demands on the verbatim theatre maker. These assertions are both philosophical and practical, relating the reflective declarations to practical decision making in the rehearsal room. Previously there has been a gap in how theatre makers are prepared and advised before making verbatim theatre, with correct but broad guidance, surmounting to Kit De Waal's admirable statement - 'do not dip your pen in somebody else's blood' (De Waal, 2018). It is important to remind theatre makers that they have an ethical responsibility in creating verbatim works but how this is accomplished in the rehearsal room and ultimately in performance has been somewhat vague. In establishing the Socially Minded Theatre methodology, there is more guidance on how the ethical theatre maker functions in the creative process.

The research will contribute to ongoing theatrical practice, aiding theatre makers in creating challenging and provocative works while maintaining an ethical consideration for the participants. I would also anticipate that the Socially Minded Theatre methodology is applicable to a variety of theatrical genres besides verbatim. The assertions regarding the dignity and wellbeing of a production's cast and crew can be applied to a fictional drama production, a musical theatre production, or dance production. In fact, it could be supposed that the manifesto's content could lead to new policy regarding theatre making in general. The research may lead to a revision of how theatres and theatre companies' approach their productions, especially productions that deal with emotionally challenging subject matter. The manifesto may also impress upon theatres and theatre companies to engage with diversity and inclusivity in practical terms, beyond diversity policy documents. In my own practice I would aim to apply the methodology to further verbatim productions and to existing texts, much like the 2018 production of *Blasted* (Kane, 1995) included a more wellbeing-orientated approach.

My primary hope is that those beginning to explore verbatim theatre making, from school students to amateur dramatic theatre groups, have the tools and knowledge to create a theatrical piece about a topic they care about in the best possible manner.

## Defining a #MeToo production

When reflecting on my practice research, it is important to question if I successfully created a #MeToo production. It is still unclear how such a #MeToo production could be defined or if it is a broader term for any theatre that attempts to discuss sexual assault, harassment, and abuse towards women. It is arguable that a #MeToo production should discuss the movement specifically, perhaps exploring its origins, its impact, and/or the backlash to it. If this is how a #MeToo performance is defined, then my production did not meet those criteria and could better be described as #MeToo adjacent. When interviewing those who participated in the project, the topic of #MeToo was mentioned but was not discussed in a comparatively great amount of detail, and these parts of the conversations were not used for the production. While listening to the interviews in the rehearsal room, it seemed inappropriate to take the focus away from the experiences the interviewees were sharing to discuss the movement. I would instead view the production as providing access to the #MeToo movement for the interviewees, with a focus on giving an opportunity to be heard (this notion being a fundamental tenet that the movement was based on). My production allowed women who had been unable to share their stories to speak out, when previously they have been inhibited by legal proceedings, fear of retaliation, or shame and embarrassment. This enablement is also indicative of another reason why verbatim theatre and the movement are well suited to one another – both want to give a platform to those who have been unheard.

Within my research it is evident that theatre is still grappling with the best way of discussing the #MeToo movement and the issues it has brought worldwide attention to. It is still unclear how best to dramatise the stories of those who have experienced abuse and harassment. The genre conventions, aesthetics, and production choices have been various ranging from Broadway-style musical theatre to multimedia performance art. Productions have been led by theatre makers who are male, female, or a team that includes a combination of genders, with varying levels of success. I have already discussed the benefits and negatives of various creative choices but how the theatre industry's output is affected by the movement long term is still yet to be determined. This leads me to my next section, detailing the limitations of my research and what areas could have been improved.

## **Future plans**

Despite the fact that political theatre tends to be couched in terms of decline and failure, as a practitioner in these contexts I have found that it is possible to make work that is not only popular but that is explicitly political and acts as an effective tool for community organising.

(Hillman, 2015:380)

As academic and research Rebecca Hillman states, a theatre practitioner can engage with politics and social issues while still making theatrical experiences that are well received by an audience. A theatre maker does not need to compromise their creativity or the entertainment value of their work to make ethical art, politically-engaged art, or art that galvanises audiences into action.

My aim in creating a Socially Minded Theatre methodology was to enable a creative process that held both prioritises in tandem, and my aim is to further utilise these methods to create more theatrical experiences. However, the project was not without its limitations or areas that could be expanded on/developed.

The main potentially limiting obstacle during the project was the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns put in place in 2020. The pandemic changed how I conducted my interviews and, while there are benefits to conducting interviews over Zoom (as discussed in my methodology chapter), it does limit who can participate as an interviewee as they must have a computer, the internet, and access to Zoom for an interview to take place.

As I described in my introduction chapter, my positionality to the project includes being a survivor of domestic abuse. My status as a domestic abuse survivor occurred during the research and, as an unforeseen change in my circumstances, definitely impacted my ability to undertake the practice research component of the project. Since receiving a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis in February 2021, the content of the interviews became more challenging to work with as dramatic text as their content now held new parallels to my own experiences. As my own traumatic experiences, diagnosis, and treatment occurred during the project, it was difficult to prepare for how the production may be affected by my new positionality or how the production may affect me. This is a difficult problem to solve or prevent as it is impossible to predict what personal events may happen to a researcher or theatre maker during a long project. If I chose to pursue a tour of this production or a new



production on similar topics, I could better prepare for the challenges it would present to my personal well-being, as well as counteracting how my stress disorder may affect my creative process. However, the personal experience of the topic arguably enriched my approach to the piece, increasing my knowledge on the subject matter and my ability to empathise with interviewees. It also increased my sensitivity towards the audience and contributed to my pre-emptive considerations regarding emotional distress during performances.

Another limitation to the project was the small number of interviewees involved. The production benefitted from having a smaller number of interviews to dramatise, as four interviews provided hours of material to analyse and edit. However, in representing the experience of women, the production was clearly limited. Despite the themes of the production being universal, further projects that interview different women from a variety of cultural backgrounds would provide a broader and more detailed overview of the topic. It is arguable that a series of productions could be created and performed in a repertory theatre manner, giving the audience more insight and variety of experiences. However, to explore the interviews with enough detail and consideration, it would be unrealistic to include a higher number of interviewees in one production. It would instead be beneficial to create more productions on the topic, exploring different intersecting demographics. Through engaging with women of colour, transwomen, and women from different economic backgrounds, a series of short performances could provide a detailed exploration of the subject.

The practice research was also limited by the venue and cast availability, meaning a longer research and development process was not possible. It is

arguable that a longer process would be arduous and potentially damaging to myself and the cast, but the opportunity to explore without time constraints could lead to more insight and discovery on the topic. Overall, the rehearsal process was of an appropriate length to create a production that received universally positive feedback. While there were challenges and limitations in the process, the achievements of the production imply that the process was a successful one.

In conclusion, the research achieved its aims and objectives while providing opportunities for further exploration. The contributions made by the research are possibly consequential for verbatim practitioners and, if they receive suitable attention, for the theatre industry in general. The manifesto has successfully encompassed the theoretical research I have undertaken and integrated the practical experience I have gained in my practice research. It is my hope that the research has a positive impact on current and future theatre makers, as well as the individuals and communities that are chosen as inspiration or subject matter.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Information sheet

### Socially Minded Theatre - Information Sheet for Interviewees

Thank you for agreeing to being interviewed for the Socially Minded Theatre Research Project.

What is verbatim theatre?

Verbatim theatre is a type of performance that uses real life experiences to communicate with an audience. Rather than creating characters and writing dialogue, the theatre makers use interviews from real people and actors perform these interviews word-for-word. The hope is to highlight the truth behind social issues and educate the audience. In this project we are taking interviews from those impacted by sexual violence to build awareness, help other victims speak out and to empower those are affected.

Who is running the project?

This project is to be conducted by Grace Ryder (Edge Hill University) and will be in partnership with Safety Net. As a participant in the project, you will engage in an in-depth conversation (semi-structured interview) and/or write a letter (testimonial) about your experiences as someone affected by rape and/or sexual abuse.

What is the aim of the project?

The project aims to give a platform for your experience, to raise awareness of the individual impact of such experiences, and to press for more readily available support and prevention resources. The project aims to be cathartic, empowering and creating solidarity between individuals and broader societal groups. The project also hopes to measure the impact of the #MeToo movement in our local area and to advance the movement's call for 'empowerment through empathy'.

How will my interview be used?

The information you give might be used in a theatre performance piece where you will remain anonymous. This information will also be referred to in a final PhD thesis that Grace Ryder will write following the completion of the theatre performance piece, again giving you complete anonymity.

What if I have second thoughts?

You may decide you don't want to be interviewed and would rather write a response or decide not to answer certain questions. You will be given access to the audio and transcribed versions of your interview. You will be able to withdraw from the project up to 28 days after the interview.

What will I be asked?

Our semi-structured interview will address these topics and questions and should be completed in under 2 hours via an online video conversation:

*Your experience:* What are you willing to share with us about your assault/s regarding who, when, where?

*Your identity:* How do you feel these experiences have formed and/or altered your view of yourself?

*Your relationships:* How do you feel these experiences have influenced and/or changed our relationships with family, friends, romantic partners?

*Your message:* What do you wish people knew about living with these experiences and their impact?

*#MeToo:* Do you believe the #MeToo movement has had an impact on how sexual assault is viewed?

If you chose to write a written response instead, these are the questions that you will be asked to address, if comfortable to do so. If you choose this option, you will also be sent a support sheet, created by Mind, to help counteract any distress undertaking the written response may cause. Those running the project will also be available for a required support.

### **What are the risks and how can they be avoided?**

The identified risks in this research project are emotional well-being for the interviewees and the researcher. The interviews will be carried with the supervision of Safety Net staff and, in preparation for this project, the researcher has carried out full Mental Health First Aid Training. Interviewees will be able to skip any questions which they wish not to answer. None of the questions are intentionally posed as invasive or capable of provoking emotional distress.

### **How will my information be stored and for how long?**

If you undertake an interview, it will be recorded on a digital voice recorder and a written transcript made. These will be stored on an encrypted USB drive. Written responses and consent forms will be scans and saved as PDFs, also stored on the USB drive. All physical copies will be destroyed. On completion of the project all files will be destroyed.

Who will see the final theatre performance?

With the current need for social distancing measures, it may be difficult to create live performance to large audiences in person for some time. Hopefully,



by the end of the project, this can occur but if this is not the case, we have alternatives. We will record performances and live stream them on a variety of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. You are welcome to a recording of the final performance and to share it online as you wish.

What if I have concerns about the project?

If you have concerns about the project, you can raise them with Professor Matthew Pateman who is the Head of Department of Media at Edge Hill University. His email is [matthew.pateman@edgehill.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.pateman@edgehill.ac.uk)

Thank you

Grace Ryder

[ryderg@edgehill.ac.uk](mailto:ryderg@edgehill.ac.uk)

**Appendix B: Consent form**

**Consent Form** for **Socially Minded Theatre** research project. Please tick the following:

1) I consent to participate in the Socially Minded Theatre research project, led by Grace Ryder (Edge Hill University) with the supervision of Safety Net.

- 2. 2) I have been provided with the Information Sheet and been able to ask questions about it.
- 3. 3) I understand my words will be quoted in the performance and the PhD thesis, but my identity will be kept anonymous.
- 4. 4) I understand how my information will be stored, used and destroyed.
- 5. 5) I understand I can withdraw from the project up to 28 days after completing

the interview/sending my written response

6) I am happy for the final performance to be recorded and live streamed on online social media platforms

7) I am aware who to voice concerns about the project to and have the appropriate contact details for this.

8) I would like to complete the virtual interview/written option (delete as appropriate)

Signed: ..... Print Name: .....

Date: .....

**Appendix C: Show recording**

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/648526773>

Password: PHD