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‘Letting it Breathe’: Writing and Performing the Words of Others

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Abstract

Since 2004, I have written three plays where the central focus has been on using the theatre as a platform to allow the personal narratives of real people to be heard. This article examines some of the challenges that arose when resituating these personal narratives in performance. For each play I conducted the interviews that source the plays’ content, wrote, and in some cases directed and performed in them. I discuss in particular challenges I encountered during the periods of writing, rehearsal and performance of each play regarding issues of representation and responsibility. My findings are based on my participation in and observation of the challenges, and specifically on the ramifications following performance of testimony in the absence of the testifiers. The article draws on formal and informal interviews with the actors in order further to illuminate these issues.

Keywords:

Narrative

Representation

Responsibility

Testimony

Theatre

Verbatim

Making the Private Public

How can we not feel anxious about making *private* words *public*, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals? True, everyone we talked to agreed to let us use their statements as we saw fit. But no contract carries as many unspoken conditions as one based on trust. In the first place, we had to protect the people who confided in us, in particular, by changing the names of places and individuals to prevent identification. Above all, we had to protect them from the dangers of misinterpretation (Bourdieu 2000: 1).

Bourdieu's question about the inevitable anxieties one feels when faced with the responsibility of 'making *private* words *public*' has particular relevance to theatre practitioners who stage the words of real people. Here in Britain, this type of theatre, a manifestation of documentary theatre is more commonly referred to as 'verbatim' theatre, a term first introduced in the academy by Derek Paget who described it as:

a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping of and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place. (1987: 317)

More recently Hammond and Steward while acknowledging that the term verbatim 'refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play' (2008: 9) have referred to it as a technique rather than a form. Whether one sees 'verbatim' as a technique or a form of theatre, the fact that these plays use the words of real people and transfer them from the private to the public signifies the presence of certain responsibilities and demands that are not central to more conventional plays. As theatre scholar, Helen Nicholson points out '[t]he process of editing and adapting [such] material into theatre form present[s] particular challenges' and Bourdieu's concerns can be felt in the following questions she raises about such work –

'How are conversations interpreted? Whose stories are chosen for development in drama? Who controls the texts? Do the actors have the

authority to fictionalise the stories? How are the narratives shaped? How is the work presented and received? (2006: 89)

In this article I want to discuss some of the demands and challenges that I encountered when writing three plays which incorporated the words of real people. My process which has involved interviewing, transcribing, writing, directing and sometimes performing in these plays gives me a rich opportunity to answer some of the questions outlined above by commenting on some of the challenges I faced when attempting to transfer these conversations from the private arena of the interview to the public one of the theatre. These challenges of resituating personal narratives in performance are examined here from the reflective perspective of the playwright/director. Accordingly, the focus of this article draws on my experience in creating and delivering performances of these three plays examining the questions that arise when personal narratives connect and collide with the demands and challenges of the theatre. It discusses in particular some of the challenges that I encountered during the writing period, rehearsals and performance stages of each play particularly around issues of re-presentation and responsibility.

Other than Bella Merlin's writings on her role as an actor in *The Permanent Way*ⁱ, there is little scholarship addressing the actual challenges actors face when working with this type of textⁱⁱ. The latter half of the article addresses these challenges. My findings are based on my participation and observation of these challenges, specifically those caused by the ramifications of the performance of testimony in the absence of those who have testified. This has particular significance in these plays as the actor is faced with the task of testifying directly to the audience in the first person having not met with the real person. Each of the three plays I have written has presented this challenge in a unique and particular way (discussed in more detail below). In order to set the work in context I begin by explaining

how and why I began making this type of theatre before offering a brief description of the genesis of each play.

Context

My introduction to the incorporation of firsthand accounts of real people's narratives into a script came through my involvement with *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) by Eve Ensler - a series of monologues based on over 200 interviews with women from all over the world on the subject of their vaginas. The production was part of the V-day Ireland 2002ⁱⁱⁱ project, which was set up to stage a number of benefit performances of the play to raise awareness and money for Irish organisations dedicated to ending violence against women. In my capacity as both co-producer and performer, I began to consider how theatre could raise awareness and bring about new understanding through the theatrical presentation of personal narratives. Soon after when studying for a Masters degree in Drama & Theatre Studies at the University of Cork, my curiosity about how theatre could be something more than 'pure entertainment' was piqued again by David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2002). Hare's play focuses on four major rail disasters that occurred since the privatisation of the British rail service, and includes the narratives of some who survived the crashes, and some of the relatives of those who did not.

I was interested in two key questions: firstly, how could theatre raise awareness and bring about new understanding through the presentation of personal narratives; secondly, how could such narratives be re-presented theatrically. More specifically I became interested in exploring how the documentary theatre form and how it might prove a useful platform on which to share ordinary people's experiences of issues that were of both social and political consequence in Ireland. During the time I was beginning to explore documentary theatre, cancer became a significant topic for discussion in Irish society. According to the then Irish Minister for Health and Children, Micheál Martin, cancer was a reality that would eventually

touch every individual in Ireland. People's experiences of cancer seemed like an important area for investigation and communication (2003).^{iv} Examining a number of models of contemporary documentary theatre where the use of found speech was prominent I was inspired by the testimony plays of American documentary theatre maker Emily Mann's particularly, *Annulla: An Autobiography* (1977) and *Still Life* (1980).^v Mann herself was inspired by the work of the late South African theatre director Barney Simon who, according to Mann, called documentary work in his country 'theatre of testimony'. This was because the plays 'were constructed from the words of real people, people telling us what they know, often having no other way to bear witness and be heard, than on the stage' (Mann in Bossler 2003). I became interested in this idea of presenting the testimony of people who had firsthand experience of cancer in the theatre.

The Plays

My first play, *Less Than A Year* was written as part of my MA dissertation and the text comes from the transcript of an interview that I conducted with an Irish couple two years after their daughter had died from a rare form of cancer called Ewing's Sarcoma. The play consists of two characters 'Mother' and 'Father' who, directly addressing the audience, recall their experience from the time of their daughter's diagnosis to her death. My second play *Walking Away* is about domestic violence and was created using the transcripts of interviews that I conducted with a number of women who were participating in a programme called *Breaking The Silence*. The programme is run by ADAPT Services Ltd, an organisation established in Limerick, Ireland in 1974 which is dedicated to raising awareness and ending violence against women^{vi}. I was invited into the refuge to document these particular women's experiences with the specific aim of making a piece of theatre that would raise awareness and contribute to the breaking of the silence that surrounds domestic abuse in Ireland. The play consists of six women speaking directly to the audience about their personal experiences of

domestic violence. Two further characters 'Bride' and 'Groom' interact directly with each other bringing to life some of the scenes that are described by the women. My third play *Under Pressure* deals with the theme of road safety. The play formed the core of an interactive Theatre-in-Education programme that was a joint initiative by Exstream Theatre Company and Devon County Council's Road Safety Unit. The aim of the programme was to educate potential young drivers about the consequences of their driving behaviour. The play consists of three male characters 'Jack', whose son Simon was killed in a road traffic collision, 'Nick', who was sitting in the back seat next to Simon when the car crashed and 'David' a retired paramedic. All three characters directly address the audience. 'Jack' and 'Nick' recall their memory of the night Simon was killed while 'Dave' speaks about the impact attending road traffic collisions had on his life.

Rewriting the personal narrative for theatre

Performance scholar Kristin Langellier (1999: 130) advises that when resituating personal narratives in performance 'we must interrogate not just what experience means, or by what strategies of narrative, but also who and what matters: who speaks to whom for whom under what conditions and with what consequences?' My primary intention when writing these plays was to provide audience members with the opportunity to bear witness to the experiences of real people (albeit through the medium of an actor) in the hope that they could learn something from it. Therefore when resituating these narratives in performance my aim was to retain as much as the original person's narrative as possible. Emily Mann in the production notes that accompany *Still Life* claims that '[t]he characters speak directly to the audience so that the audience can hear what [she] heard, experience what [she] experienced' (1997: 34). When a person recounts their narrative of a firsthand experience before a listener, they are in essence testifying. 'Testimony', according to Coady 'puts us in touch with the perceptions, memories, and inferences of others' (1994: 78). If, as Paul

Ricoeur asserts (in Dooley & Kearney 1998: 16), that when someone testifies they are in effect saying ‘Listen to me, I was there, this happened to me, I am a part of this story’ and that in the act of actually recounting their story (what Ricoeur terms a ‘living presentation’) they are ‘deploy[ing] the capacity of the imagination to place the events before our eyes, as if we were there’ then it makes sense to attend to testimony. American sociolinguist William Labov (who has undertaken much work on the oral narrative of personal experience) also maintains, that when a speaker is testifying to their experience he/she is ‘[n]ot only reporting but also verbally displaying in a state of affairs, inviting his[/her] addressee(s) to join him[/her] in contemplating it, evaluating it, and responding to it’ (in Carlson, 2008: 68). He further suggests that the speaker’s aim is ‘to produce in his hearers not only belief but also an imaginative and affective involvement in the state of affairs he is representing’ which in turn enables the hearer to make ‘an evaluative stance towards it’ (2008: 68). Therefore my aim when resituating these narratives in the script is to retain as much of that narrative as possible in order to retain this essence of the testimonies that I had gathered and to allow an audience to experience something similar to what I experienced. To ‘rewrite’ the testimony is to fail to recognise its particular significance and relevance.

The people who shared their stories with me did so, not just because they had a story to tell, but because they felt – and I felt – that sharing the details of their experience with a community of listeners might prevent someone else from finding themselves in a similar predicament. Performance scholar Kristin Langellier (1999: 210) writes ‘rather than seeing personal narrative as simply one person’s story, we should look more closely in an attempt to see the political in the personal – “the social, cultural, historical construction of difference” that personal narrative performances can illuminate’. Similarly Lisa Kron in reference to her autobiographical performance work argues that ‘[t]he goal of autobiographical work should not be to tell stories about yourself, but instead, to use the details of your own life to

illuminate or explore something more universal (2001 p. xi) Therefore, when writing these plays my intention was not just to retell these autobiographical stories but to use them to explore what I believed was their more universal significance. For each of the plays therefore my challenge lay in creating the appropriate theatrical framework that would 'hold' the testimonies. My task was to create a play that would let them breathe so that they could reveal their greater significance.

Letting It Breathe – Part One – Creating a theatrical framework

Janelle Reinelt points out in her article 'The Promise of Documentary' that documents are often selected because they 'have something significant to offer' rather than for their ability to provide unmediated access to the truth (2008: 9). When approaching the writing of these plays my focus was not about getting to the truth of these particular stories or events, rather I was more interested in what I felt these stories had to offer. Theatre scholar Christopher Bigsby writing about Emily Mann's testimony plays maintains that when working with real people's words, 'the theatrical challenge, [...] is in a sense no different from that confronting any other playwright' (1999: 134). According to Bigsby the documentary playwright still has 'to give shape and form to the material, to develop character through language and action, to find a way to bridge the gap between the subjectivity of the character and the subjectivities of the audience' (134). However, as Linda Park-Fuller (2000: 24), referring in particular to autobiographical performance maintains, '[o]ften a major purpose for this kind of theatre experience,...is to help break silence and censorship about talking – talking about these scandals – these unmentionables - in our society. She further argues that the 'conflict or drama in this type of theatre is not only the struggle disclosed (the narrated event), but also the struggle *to tell* (the narrative act)' (24, original emphasis). I extend Park-Fuller's argument to include theatre of testimony under the umbrella of autobiographical performance as it is concerned with people telling their own stories (even if

in the actual performance actors are performing the telling of the stories). Park-Fuller also claims that '[a]s a political act, the autobiographical narrative not only claims an absent past but also evokes an absent future' further arguing that as 'a performative speech act, narrative testimony is in fact an act of intervention that has the capacity to influence the future. It is a backwards and forwards looking act' (29). Therefore in each of the three plays the characters for the most part directly address the audience speaking words which have been spoken by a real person for a specific reason. In *Less Than A Year* a mother and father narrate to the audience their experience of their daughter's losing battle with cancer, in *Walking Away* six women seated at tables with audience members speak directly to them about their experiences of domestic violence, and in *Under Pressure* three men recall to the audience the manner in which they were affected personally by road traffic collisions.

The Problem of Representing Others

When words are spoken to a playwright during the course of an interview, not only are the interviewees communicating with the playwright, they are also communicating with future audiences. In her article on performing personal narratives, D. Soyini Madison (1998: 283) cautions that 'our "representing" most often carries with it political ramifications far beyond the reach of the performance'. Similarly in *Digging Up Stories: Applied Theatre, Performance and War*, James Thompson (2005: 25-26) warns that 'theatre projects that dig up narratives, experiences and remembrances' must be treated with extreme care as they can 'blame, enact revenge, and foster animosity as much as they can develop dialogue, respect or comfort'. The possibility that who is being represented in the testimony and for what purpose, can have significance beyond the realm of performance is something that I was mindful of throughout my process.

As it transpired a significant number of concerns, ranging from legal to personal, particularly in relation to third parties implicated in the testimonies presented themselves

during the process of writing these three plays. In *Less Than A Year*, one of the key issues that I faced regarding third party representation, was the negative manner in which individuals who worked for the Irish Health Services were referred to in the parent's testimony. During my meeting with them, the parents relayed to me that they felt, for a variety of reasons, that their daughter had been murdered by the Irish medical authorities. After her death, the mother had commissioned a doctor in the United Kingdom to compile a report assessing the treatment that her daughter had received. The report, however, found that the daughter had received the necessary care and the parents decided not to pursue the case any further. Nevertheless when I met with them they were still very angry about how they had been treated by the Irish medical authorities; something which came across quite strongly in their recollection of events. In the following example the father recalls how the consultant replied when they asked him what a particular term meant in relation to their daughter's illness:

Father He said, "it's like this
your either pregnant or your not pregnant".
That's what it means,
just shouting at me across the desk...
"that's what it means" he said.
"It's good
but you either have it or you don't
and that's it".
And he said, "I'm telling you", he says,
"and I want you to tell your wife
that your daughter is dying
and have no doubt about it".
...This is shouting at me...
"Have no doubt about it
that your daughter is goin to die.
Now get that through your head".

And in this example the mother recalls the consultant's response when she asked about any other treatment options that might be available:

Mother: 'Is there anywhere we could get her help,
anywhere we could go?'

He said, “No, I am the best doctor in the world.
And he said, “I am in awe of my own genius.
I’m the best doctor in the world
and this is the best hospital in the world.
She’s not goin to get any better treatment
anywhere in the world...”

The parent’s recollection of those months leading up to their daughter’s death however revealed a lot more than just how they were treated by the medical profession. Cancer affects many families in Ireland and my hope was that by placing this story in the public domain it might ‘develop dialogue, respect or [provide] comfort’ to audiences. I was concerned therefore that if this script was to be made public the potential for blame and animosity that it could foster might outweigh some of the benefits of sharing the story. I did not want the play to be seen as an attempt to negate the excellent care and service provided by many individuals within the Irish Health Services.

Walking Away, had similar issues concerning third party representations, only in this instance the concern was one of privacy. The women I interviewed were participants in a programme called ‘Breaking the Silence’^{vii}. The play was an attempt to literally break the silence surrounding domestic violence while simultaneously raising awareness and showing that it was possible for women to leave violent relationships. For the women, there was a concern for privacy because of the potential ramifications from speaking out, partially driven by their desire not to cause pain to those implicated in their testimony. They particularly voiced concern about how other people, mainly their children and other family members, might be affected. This was paramount from the outset of the process. Furthermore, there was still an element of concern about what people might think which was fuelled by a sense of shame that they were somehow to blame for the abuse to which they had been subjected. In addition, not everyone knew about the abuse that they had suffered, and in some cases those that did were not aware of its extent. This influenced my decision to have six anonymous

women recall their experiences of domestic abuse. In the script they are simply listed as ‘Woman 1’ – ‘6’. All of the original women who spoke were given a copy of the script to read prior to performance so that they could change any details they felt uncomfortable with.

The implications of third-party representation were also of concern when attempting to write the script for *Under Pressure*. The story that I had been told by both father and friend included details of a controversial court case that occurred in the aftermath of the collision. Both the father and the friend had spoken to me about how they felt the truth concerning certain details of the collision had been ignored. They were very angry that not only had no charges been brought against the driver, but also that he never showed remorse in court nor did he make any attempt to contact ‘Simon’s’ family afterwards. Furthermore, he and his girlfriend had even suggested that ‘Nick’ had been the one driving. As such the driver of the car and his girlfriend who were travelling in the car were both implicated in the real father and friend’s testimonies. I considered interviewing the driver and his girlfriend to get their side of the story but in the end decided not to as I felt the case details would overshadow the purpose behind and significance of why I wanted to use this father and the friend’s testimony. The aim of the project was to educate teenagers about how the choices that they make when driving or travelling as passengers in cars may have devastating and even fatal consequences. Both the father and Simon’s friend’s recollections of the events leading up to the collision provided a clear example of how a decision made under the influence of alcohol resulted in death and also showed the personal impact of the consequences of losing a loved one in such a manner.

Letting It Breathe – Part two: Performing Testimonies

In my attempt to transfer this material onto the page in such a way that it can be spoken accurately in performance my writing process begins with a nuanced and careful transcription of the interviews that I have conducted. In the attempt to retain a sense of the

Other I listen carefully to the words the person speaks paying particular attention to their punctuation. I treat the punctuation like a form of musical notation in order to indicate on paper to the actors a sense of the rhythm of the person's speech. In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin maintains that 'the use of words in live speech communication is always individual and contextual in nature' and claims that words exist in the following three aspects:

as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an other's word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance; and finally as my word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. (1986: 88)

This often requires my listening to the recordings several times in order to determine how best I can illustrate this rhythm on paper. This is a lengthy and arduous task, which I do in order to provide the actor with a more accurate sense of what the person was talking about.

In his introduction to *Acting (Re)Considered*, Phillip Zarrilli maintains that 'the psychologically whole "character" is no longer central to many types of contemporary theatre' (2002: 22). However, he insists that, regardless of whatever actions and tasks the actor must perform, 'the "material" conditions of his or her work' still 'include capturing the audience's attention and engaging their awareness as well as emotional and aesthetic sensibilities'. Similarly, Robert Gordon, in *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective*, maintains that the actor's body must be capable of expressing itself in varied and subtle forms regardless of whatever tasks he is faced with (2006: 2). However, Gordon argues that how this is negotiated is dependent on what is being represented and why such a representation is being made. In the case of all three of my plays the actor's task was to represent the telling of a story. These stories were being told for very specific reasons, and often the telling was as important as the details contained within the story.

During rehearsals it became apparent that working with these texts was placing different demands on the actors from those they had previously faced when working with more conventional texts. These included mastering another's speech patterns, the fear of misrepresenting the real person who had told the story in the first place and directly addressing the audience. In these particular plays the actor was faced with the challenge of embodying material sourced from real people who for various reasons were not able, or did not wish, to speak themselves before an audience. Although the actors had not embodied the actual experiences that were being testified to, they were nevertheless implicated in the act of testifying in the first person before a very present audience. The actors therefore were faced, not just with re-presenting the testimony in an authentic manner and inhabiting the world of the testifier during the performance, but also the responsibility of speaking for that person.

Thus rather than focusing on being the 'psychologically whole' character, which most of the actors were used to, their primary task was to embody the words previously spoken by real people so that they could speak them in performance without losing their original significance and intent. It became clear that the actor needed to avoid over-emotionalising the text so that the testimony could find the space to breathe. This required surrendering to the words and trusting that they contained the 'echoes of the other's utterance'. Observing her fellow actors in *The Permanent Way*¹, Bella Merlin noted 'that the more simple the acting style and the less cluttered the physical vocabulary or the vocal colouring, the more deeply moving the performances could be' (2007: 48). This was something I also observed during rehearsals of these plays.

In order to help the actor get out of the way and let the testimonies breathe I asked them to pay particular attention to the punctuation. Each piece of punctuation is as a result of a choice that I have made and one that is informed by a very careful listening to what I hear.

¹ Merlin is referring in particular to Kika Markham when playing a children's writer who survived the fourth, Potter's Bar crash and Miles Anderson when playing the Squadron Leader who rescued her from the carnage.

I try to notate it as I hear it without actually interpreting what the person says. The punctuation is intended to assist the actors in telling the story as accurately as possible. In turn as a director I ask the actors to adhere strictly to the punctuation as I believe this can help the actor to unlock both the tempo and the rhythm of the way the original person spoke. Working with the punctuation was like working with a musical score which the actor had to pay as much attention to as the words.

The responsibility of speaking for the Other and the problems associated with this have been well argued in Linda Alcoff's *The Problem of Speaking for Others* (1991-92 – see especially 5-32). Alcoff's primary concern is how, in the very act of speaking for the Other, one may not only misrepresent that Other but also, in the very act of attempting to give them a voice, one may contribute further to their silence. As a result she maintains: 'Speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says' (26). When working on these plays, both accountability and responsibility were foremost in our minds throughout the process. The actors in all three plays expressed a fear of misrepresenting those on whose behalf they were speaking. They were afraid that any such misrepresentation might cause insult. Ian Hodder, in his article 'The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture (2000: 705),' warns '[o]nce words are transformed into a written text, the gap between "author" and the "reader" widens and the possibility of multiple interpretations increases'. In theatre, this gap is further widened when directors and actors become involved and these words are re-interpreted again in performance. The potential impact on the original person who told the story became very clear after the initial performance, which took place at the Friar's Gate Theatre, Killmallock, Co. Limerick on 6 December 2006 when I spoke to one of the women whose testimony I had included in the play. Most of the women whose stories were featured in the play came to that reading, and when I went to meet with them a few months later it became clear that each woman was

affected differently by seeing and hearing how we had interpreted, and in turn represented, her life on the stage. For example I had read Woman 4's story and the director had encouraged me to engage with the humorous manner in which she recalled elements of her story. This directorial decision had unexpected repercussions.

The director of the reading, Ciarda Tobin, had worked with the women for nearly three years as a drama tutor on the Breaking the Silence project and was conscious that these women would not just be looked on as victims of domestic violence but as women in their own right with individual and unique personalities. I knew from having interviewed this woman and observed her relationship with the other women that she had a particularly humorous side to her and so allowed this to inform my approach to telling her story. Her response, though, to the performance when I met her a few months later reminded me of the implications of what we were doing. In our interview she explained:

The part that you played of me, we'll say, am, was almost humorous. It was humorous really. It would appear to be humorous. I must have covered up a lot with humour. No, I did...yes, I did and it kind of came back to me on the night that I covered up a lot of my life and the pain in my life with humour...Coz it really was there...Maybe in a way...now I'll be honest with you, Helena, I mean that night it was/ I did feel in a way that maybe there was in a way/ that the humour was coming too much to the fore because it was far more serious and, you know, I felt like in a way that, you know, and I sometimes feel it that maybe because I put humour, I cover up with humour then I'm not taken seriously. I want to be taken seriously. I DO NOT want to be the clown all my life covering up things with humour and even sometimes here (referring to the refuge), on an ordinary day someone might say to me... Mary* we missed you,

you've a great sense of humour. I can't sometimes live up to that, I can't do it.

And I won't anymore, not now. (Woman 4, 2008)

Here I am reminded of what Paget (1987: 324) refers to as 'an awareness of theatricality that is ultimately informing the whole operation'. When working with the testimony of real people I am constantly aware that the issue of interpretation has implications beyond the realm of the performance.

Conclusion – what the actors say

To conclude I offer a selection of short testimonies given by some of the actors that worked on these plays. Their comments reflect testimonial theatre-maker Anna Deavere Smith's interest in how an 'interview text works as a *physical, audible, performable* vehicle' and that '[w]ords are not an end in themselves' but rather 'are a means to evolving the character of the person who spoke them' (Smith 1994: xxiii, original emphasis). I have purposefully offered these testimonies here with very little interpretation in order to let them breathe.

Seamus Moran, who played Father in *Less Than A Year*, speaking of how his role on Ireland's soap *Fair City* was useful to him when approaching this role:

It probably helps having done some television acting because as you say it, the characters are very, very real but, having said that I still found it extraordinarily different and it's been a fascinating process because people don't, their speech patterns are totally erratic. That's been very difficult to master and to learn and no writer could write the way these people speak and everybody, everybody's speech patterns are unique to themselves...erm...so that's been challenging, but then once, once you've grasped that and you've got that in you as it were, it's amazing how the words, the way they are phrased makes you do things physically and feel things physically without

having to go through any sort of an intellectual process if you like. So I suppose it becomes very intuitive and you really do get the feeling of kind of allowing these people, coz you're very conscious that they are real people and you have a huge responsibility to them and to their story and you kind of get the feeling that they...you've just got to let them live through you if that doesn't sound, it's probably going to sound pretentious, but that's what it feels like when you are up there.

Joan Sheehy, who played the part of Mother, while describing it as 'one of the toughest...if not the toughest challenge [she has] faced as an actor in over twenty years' also acknowledged the importance of trusting the language:

I found a huge difference working on this text....in terms of language, interpretation and performance. The language gives you everything you need to tell the story and find the character...the rhythms of speech, the repetition, the oddness of expression is so rich and particular that you have to immerse yourself in that and run with it and not impose a character or style of performance. More than anything I've ever done I had to trust the language and kill my instincts to embellish or act or strive for significant or emotional moments.

Karen Fitzgibbon, who took part in the initial rehearsed reading of *Walking Away*, telling Woman Six's story, also told Woman One's story in a later production. She notes how the different way in which the two women spoke affected her physicality during performance:

First I told Woman 6's story. She was very to the point, no extra detail unless it related to story, you could tell she was still very much in recovery and a little bit down. Your physicality changed automatically becoming quite defensive. Woman 1 however was a little bit of a dreamer at times, getting

carried away with details of her story. You could tell she was cautious of making the interviewer upset, physically you became open and not as guarded as Woman 6. Does this make sense?

Following her experience of performing in the production of *Walking Away*, at the Belltable Unfringed Festival in February 2007, Judith Ryan (who played Woman Six) referred to the importance of the words:

I also found the vernacular of the woman whose story I told very difficult at first but as rehearsals went on it was this in fact that allowed me to understand her essence and hopefully helped me tell her story as she told it. In the end though I had to treat it as just words in order to learn it.

John Palmer who played the role of David the paramedic in *Under Pressure* commented on how he saw his role:

to represent, as accurately as I could, the character which emerged to me from the words I was given rather than to try to make the part compelling or amusing for the audience which can often, quite justifiably, be the motivation when interpreting more conventional scripts.

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ⁱ See Merlin's chapter 'Acting Hare' in the 2007 *Cambridge Companion to David Hare* and her article 'The Permanent Way and the Impermanent Muse' in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 'The Changing Body' edition, eds. Phillip B. Zarrilli & Bella Merlin, 17, 1, 2007, pp. 41-9.

ⁱⁱ Actresses Chipso Chung and Diane Fletcher refer to their roles in *Talking to Terrorists* and *Called Into Account* respectively in Cantrell, Tom and Mary Luckhurst (eds). *Playing for Real: Actors on Playing Real People*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ VDAY Ireland 2002 was set up, as part of the global movement VDAY. The project, which produced four productions of *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) – one in Limerick, Galway, Cork and Dublin - raised close to €50,000 for charity and was seen by approximately 2,000 people. Further information on VDAY can be found at www.vday.org

^{iv} At the publication of the report, *An Evaluation of Cancer Services in Ireland: A National Strategy 1996* 4 December 2003, the Minister for Health's opening words were: 'When we talk about cancer, we're talking about a reality that touches each and every individual in this country, sooner or later. It's the most frequent cause of premature death in Ireland. One in three of us will develop cancer. One in three. And, because we have an aging population, we can expect as many as 8,000 new cases of cancer by 2015.'

^v Mann is the author of *Annulla: An Autobiography*, *Still Life*, *The Execution of Justice*, *Greensboro: A Requiem* and *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, the scripts for the first four can be found in her book *Testimonies*.

^{vi} Each year, approximately 500 women seek support from Adapt because of domestic violence, by availing of their outreach and/or refuge based services.

^{vii} The *Breaking the Silence* project focuses on empowering women who have been in abusive relationships to address their needs and the needs of others who have been abused. Drawing on the participants' experience and using a range of community arts and other media (particularly art, drama and creative writing), the programme focuses on developing awareness of domestic abuse among community-based personnel and the public. It is particularly concerned with devising and disseminating information and resource materials of relevance to women survivors and those working with them.