



COVER SHEET

This is the author version of article published as:

Makeham, Paul B (2005) *Interview with Paul Makeham, original "Aftershocks" cast member*, in Stinson, Madonna and Wall, Debbie, Eds. *dramactive (Book 2)*, chapter 3, pages pp. 73-76. McGraw-Hill.

Published in 2005 McGraw Hill

Accessed from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au>

Interview with Paul Makeham, original cast member of *Aftershocks*

1. Were you in Newcastle on the day of the earthquake?

No. I lived in Newcastle, but I was at my parents' house in Armidale, NSW, for Christmas. (The earthquake struck at 10.27am on December 28th, 1989.)

2. What were your experiences of the earthquake?

My first experience was like most Australians' – seeing pictures of the earthquake on TV. There were pictures of buildings in Newcastle which had suffered extensive damage. Some locations, including the Workers' Club, had been destroyed. Nine people were reported dead at that stage. It was still possible to get to the city by rail, so I took the train back home the day after the earthquake. The city was still in shock, and the Army had been brought in to control access to different neighbourhoods. My house had cracks and broken plaster throughout, and a damaged chimney. A lot of things had been smashed.

3. Were you involved in the creative development process of *Aftershocks*?

Yes. I was one of eight researchers who were part of the Workers' Cultural Action Committee (WCAC), an arts and cultural organisation affiliated with Newcastle Workers' Club.

4. If so, what was your role in creative development process of *Aftershocks*?

Our job was to work with writer Paul Brown, and co-directors Brent McGregor and David Watt, to plan and carry out the creative development of the project. The particular type of documentary drama we decided to work with is called Verbatim Theatre. We recorded interviews with various people associated with the Workers' Club – employees, patrons, the Club Manager and others. All but one or two of these people had been in the Club when the earthquake struck. Once we tape-recorded our interviews, we transcribed each one. Paul Brown then edited the interviews, shaping them into a dramatic text designed for performance. His task was to 'sculpt' the language, but unlike a conventional playwright, not to write it. No dialogue was invented for *Aftershocks*.

The editing process is very interesting in itself, and worth investigating (e.g. Does this process impose 'meaning'? Given that editing is designed to create dramatic effect, is the authenticity of verbatim accounts compromised at all by this process?)

5. How were you cast for *Aftershocks*?

I had been working professionally for several years as an actor in Newcastle and Sydney. Once the script was complete and ready for rehearsal, I auditioned for the production, which was co-produced by WCAC and the Hunter Valley Theatre Company. I was the only one of the six cast members who had also been part of the research team.

6. What was the rehearsal process?

In most respects it was a conventional four-week theatre rehearsal. The cast worked each day with the co-directors and the writer, in a large open rehearsal space, using only six chairs as set items. Paul Brown was still making changes to the script, often in response to seeing how it looked ‘on its feet’ in rehearsal. In that respect, it was unusual (but very beneficial) to have the writer in rehearsal with us. The company experimented with things such as staging, spoken delivery, performance style, costuming, and so on. The main differences from a more traditional approach to rehearsal were: a) it was a brand new text of an unusual dramatic type, so we had few models to work from; and b) we were conscious that, eventually, the production would be seen by people we were portraying.

7. Did you have access to the interviewees or interviewers?

Paul Brown, David Watt and I had done many of the interviews, so we had first-hand knowledge of who the story-tellers were, what they looked and sounded like, and so on (not that we were trying to look or sound like them in performance). Some of the cast had known at least one or two of the interviewees prior to the earthquake anyway. We also had a number of preliminary showings before opening – ‘open rehearsals’ in which some of the story-tellers, Club personnel and others were invited to give their opinions about how the show was developing. This is a critical ingredient in the Verbatim Theatre process, as it ensures that key stakeholders have a say in how they’re being represented.

8. Who decided on the set and staging?

These choices were made collectively by the cast, the writer and the co-directors. We considered a number of different staging approaches, from large-scale elaborate sets, to the more restrained, minimalist solution we ended up with – and lots in between.

9. How were the six chairs used within the dramatic action?

The chairs were used in many ways, and although very simple, they turned out to be incredibly versatile and evocative. At their most basic, they served simply as chairs for the cast to sit on, either while watching the action as actors from the edges of the stage, or while speaking in character onstage. At other times, the chairs could be turned upside down to suggest things like furniture, or windows, or poker machines; they could also be scattered around to evoke rubble and debris. At one point, they became the ledge which one of the Club staff climbed along to escape from her demolished office.

In the final moments of our production, the chairs were stacked upside down, in three small groups around the space. This worked both to suggest memorial tributes at a remembrance ceremony, but also had that quality of chairs stacked on tables at closing time.

10. From the pictures available in the script of *Aftershocks* it appears that when you weren’t acting, you sat behind the action. Some of the photos in the published script show actors laughing in the background. Did you respond to the action ‘in character’ or as yourselves?

As ourselves, absolutely. The distinction between the character and the actor is very clear in this style of performance. We were keen to establish the convention that when you step onto the performance space, you’re in character; when you’re watching the action from the side, or from upstage, you’re an actor, watching the show, and responding to it along with the audience.

11. What were the performance demands on you as an actor?

There are key differences between the style of performance we adopted in our production of *Aftershocks*, and other more recognisable forms of naturalistic performance (including TV naturalism). Broadly speaking, the effect we were after could be called 'Brechtian'. That is, we were interested in showing these characters rather than being them – almost as if we were presenting them in quotation marks. We made no attempt to mimic the story-tellers – the actors' job here is more to demonstrate than to impersonate. This is why we did no work on learning the original story-tellers' vocal patterns or physical characteristics. In Verbatim Theatre, the words are the thing, not the virtuosity of the performer. As an actor, you need to let the text speak for itself, not to get in its way with elaborate displays of emotion or closely observed character detail.

This is different from the Stanislavskian tradition, in which the actor's own feelings are substituted for those of the character. Certainly, your first obligation is to engage your audience, so you have to play with depth and conviction, using your craft skills of speech and physicality as well as you can. In the end, though, you are a vehicle for the words, and you can trust them to do most of the work for you and the audience.

12. You played three characters, to what extent did you create three different characters?

The changes I made to distinguish one character from another were quite small, rather than major differences. For instance, I wore the same clothes for each (my own jeans and shirt, not a 'costume' as such). I made some basic choices about body and voice for each character, but mainly I let the characters' own words signal the character differences. It's really a very simple style of playing, only lightly sketching in each character rather than going for full-on characterisation.

13. What dramatic conventions were used that are particular to documentary drama?

Many of the conventions we used were typical of the documentary drama tradition which can be traced back through people like Joan Littlewood and Peter Cheeseman to Brecht, Piscator and Meyerhold. The main thing is that this is narrative rather than dramatic theatre. The text is mainly in the past tense, describing events that happened 'then', not ones that are happening 'now'. Sometimes, though, we enacted what was being described, so that visually we were making the past 'present'. Other conventions we used that are typical of this genre were having the actors onstage throughout, observing the action; and involving the audience through direct audience address – making eye contact with them, speaking directly to them. We also had the title of each scene painted in large letters along the back wall of the performance space, and sometimes, one of the actors would introduce a new scene by announcing its title. This works as a type of caption, a technique Brecht was fond of.

14. How was it different performing for audiences containing people whose stories were used in the play, compared to other audiences?

It was nerve-wracking, because in that situation you feel an extra sense of immediacy, and an obligation to get it right. These are real people with a strong sense of ownership over their own stories (which in many cases were painful stories), and you have temporary custody of those stories, which is a big responsibility. You definitely don't want to make these people seem like victims or losers; you want them to emerge with dignity and courage.

There was a really interesting phenomenon we noticed with these early audiences, and the way they responded to the play's language. This has something to do with the 'voice prints' inherent in everybody's speech. We weren't impersonating the real people, and in most cases we were hardly like them at all. But an individual's identity is so strongly grounded in the way they speak – their particular word choices, their turn of phrase and so on – that when an actor speaks their words, people who know that person seem to really hear them and see them, as if you really did look and sound just like them. People would say to us afterwards: 'You were just like so-and-so', even though we hadn't tried to mimic them at all.

15. What successful examples of documentary drama have you seen (or appeared in) since *Aftershocks*? What made them successful?

There was a film version of *Aftershocks*, made several years after the original stage production.

There have been several Verbatim Theatre productions at Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney over the last few years. Paul Brown continues to work using verbatim techniques. Theatre South in Wollongong commissioned a new verbatim work by Cameron Sharpe this year. Sharon Goodall at Griffith University has used this form of theatre in some of her performance work. A few years ago I directed a production for an organisation called ARAFMI (Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill), in which we devised a performance based on the verbatim accounts of family and friends of people suffering from mental illness.

The success of Verbatim Theatre, and of documentary drama more generally, lies in its authenticity. The fact that these are real people and real events makes this kind of drama much more immediate, and often much more powerful, than dramatic fiction. Verbatim text has a natural spontaneity that Rony Robinson describes as 'the strength, the boniness, the quirkiness, the oddity of the words'.¹ It is these qualities that audiences respond to, recognising the truth and natural poetry in the language.

For more information about documentary drama and Verbatim Theatre, see Derek Paget's article (1987) "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Theatre Techniques', *New Theatre Quarterly* 3:12, pp.317-336.

See also my chapter on 'Community stories: *Aftershocks* and verbatim theatre' in Veronica Kelly (ed.) (1998) *Our Australian theatre in the 1990s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi.), pp.168-181.

Dr Paul Makeham coordinates the Bachelor of Creative Industries program at Queensland University of Technology. He is President of ADSA, the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance. He continues to work in the areas of community cultural development and performance.

¹ Rony Robinson, in Derek Paget (1987) "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Theatre Techniques', *New Theatre Quarterly* 3:12, p.327.