Resident singing about gruesome neighbourhood murders, confessions of soldiers in a war zone, passionate fans' accounts of saving a rugby league team. ALANA VALENTINE discusses the possibilities of verbatim theatre.
If you think that verbatim theatre is simply actors standing on stage addressing the audience from interview transcripts you’d be right. But if you think that’s all it is you’re in for a mind-expanding surprise. Verbatim is one of the most malleable, diverse and surprising forms of contemporary theatre.

When I was in London recently I went to the National Theatre to see a verbatim musical. Some bright spark at the National thought it might be creatively inspiring to pair a variety of playwrights with a number of composers and see where the workshop process might lead them. Playwright Alecky Blythe, who works in a form of “recorded delivery” verbatim theatre, where actors actually wear headphones and perform exactly the rhythm and cadence of the playwright’s interview subjects, had spoken to residents living in a neighbourhood in Ipswich where a series of gruesome murders of sex workers had taken place. Composer Adam Cork set these interviews to music, using all the ums and ahs, hesitations, and repetitions of the interviewees.
The result, *London Road*, left me breathlessly excited about the possibilities of the form, and I wasn’t alone. The season sold out and attracted five star ratings from the critics. How do I communicate the thrill of seeing 11 people on stage singing in the raw beauty of verbatim speech? As in opera, the content of what they are singing is in many ways less important than the layering of emotion, the complicating and contradicting that happens when you speak to “real” subjects, the palpable danger of examining subject matter which has been unadulterated by time or distanced by geography. When one of the interviewees admitted that she would like to “shake his hand an’ say thank you” to the serial killer for getting the sex workers off her street there was an audible gasp of horrified recognition from the audience. They were being asked to simultaneously suspend their disbelief and participate in the artifice of the actors beautifully rendering “the tune of the spoken voice” (as Blythe describes it) and at the same time be confronted by the fact that the events, the subject, the humanity examined in the play happened literally just down the road. And that has to be the continuing appeal to me of this form of theatre. Not some slavish assertion that what happens in our own gutters and under our own bedspreads to the woman and man next door is any more relevant or more moving or more terrifying but the profoundly renewing wonder that there is, in local communities, all the barbarism and courage and generosity and evil and spiritual depth that we can also see in the result and acknowledging that you don’t write their story without some kind of interrelationship.

Verbatim work seeks to bring diverse communities of interest into the theatre themselves, to allow them that essential human right of being able to see yourself and your community conjured to the stage and thereby reflect on both the strengths and injustices of your world. Verbatim projects also often consider it obligatory to “give back” to the community from which they have drawn stories, to become in a very real way a continuing part of the life and narrative of the community represented. On the way out the door from *London Road* the actors were collecting for a charity that helps sex workers make the transition into other employment in Ipswich.

The editor has asked me to detail what I think are some of the pitfalls of working in the verbatim form. Well, you may be accused of having little more literary talent than an editor (present publication excepted), you may be patronisingly called an oral historian, some may joke “you didn’t really write it”. You may also be accused of being on a rather “worthy” jag, you may have the label “political” banded about but not in a good way since it will be followed with “polemical” and even that hoary-old-chestnut-of-the-imaginatively-bland “didactic”. The only way you can go around such dismissals is to for God’s sake not be didactic, worthy or merely illustrative. Use the verbatim form to be contradictory and provocative, to, of course, ask questions rather than provide answers, to examine premises

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dropping possibilities of this form. Imagine a dance work that uses the verbatim confessions of some group to elucidate their reality in movement and dance (the National Theatre of Scotland did it in *Black Watch* based on interviews with soldiers but imagine a verbatim dance work with steelworkers or bridge-builders). There are many Australian practitioners working in this form in sensationally innovative and extremely diverse ways. Version 1.0 with, frequently, materials on the public record; Kate Champion in dance; Roslyn Oades with headphone verbatim; Damien Miller and Campion Decent’s award-winning creations; Michael Gurr’s dabblings in this form; the Melbourne Workers Theatre under the inspired direction of Görkem Acaroglu and many others overseas too numerous to name but ranging from German collective Rimini Protokoll to Anna Deavere Smith, from Moisés Kaufman to Steven Soderbergh.

This column was not commissioned to provide any kind of definitive list only, I hope, to acquaint readers with the possibilities of verbatim as a dynamic and changing form, and to observe that to characterise verbatim practitioners as technological reapers merely collecting and collating is reductive nonsense. Our subject as playwrights is always human behaviour under pressure – verbatim is as much a process as a form, as much a verb as a noun. It is a practice which acknowledges that humans operate for better or worse in groups and often seeks to articulate to the stage the cultural and psychological pressures or assets of the group, without ever losing dramatic sight of the individual character within it. For that reason verbatim playwrights and other verbatim theatre makers are often more obsessed (if you like) with what a community can achieve or how it can destroy the individual, and that, in a culture persuaded by the importance of the self, may still be one of the biggest aesthetic and artistic challenges that verbatim-influenced theatre makes.

Alana Valentine’s plays *Paramour* and *Run Rabbit Run* are currently on the NSW HSC Drama Syllabus. Her most recent play *Heart Full of Love*, set at the world-renowned *Alice Springs Beanie Festival*, was performed in English and Pitjantjatjara at the 2010 Darwin Festival and then toured to Cairns and Alice Springs. The tour raised $10,000 from audience donations and beanie sales toward assisting Central Desert mob living with kidney disease. Alana is currently the recipient of a Literature Board Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts. Her next production will be the world premiere of *MP*, a play based on interviews with Australian female politicians, commissioned by the Street Theatre in Canberra and opening on September 30, 2011. She was recently in the UK interviewing astronomers studying the behaviour of neutron stars.