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New Documentarism on Stage:
Documentary Theatre in New Times

Abstract: In this essay I outline the historical provenance and recent development of Documentary Theatre produced in Britain during the millennial period (1990-2007). Specifically, the essay takes account of “Verbatim” and “Tribunal” Theatre productions at the National and Royal Court and Tricycle Theatres. I define both forms and describe some of the distinctive theatrical characteristics of each. The essay traces the evolution of these documentary forms from British and German pre- and post-war practices involving non-naturalistic modes of theatre. I argue that the new forms have developed in order to represent, and to oppose, a new, privatised, political culture in which collectives have been sidelined and individuals placed centre stage. The rhetorics of courts and confessionalists have become central to theatrical representation of crucial current social and political issues such as racism and international conflict. I argue that individual “bearing witness” (in the first person singular) has overtaken political analysis (conducted in the third person plural) in the new theatrical conjuncture, and that audiences too are implicated in acts of witness.

1. Introduction

While the “New Documentarism” in Britain has retained aspects of previous Documentary Theatre practices, it has moved in contrasting directions in terms of production methodologies and audience address. In diverging from previous forms, the New Documentarism on stage responds to changed social and political contexts in which modes of communication themselves have acquired new significances. The “Age of the Media” in which we live relies, after all, on a relatively sophisticated, a “media savvy,” audience. This audience is something of a paradox: on the one hand it has been conditioned to be sceptical about the media; on the other hand the media’s promise of information is fundamental if democratic debate is to continue in societies. Documentary Theatre in twenty-first century Britain has

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1 For developments outside the UK, a forthcoming book – Get Real, edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (2008) – should provide a good resource. It will contain, for example, material on the cognate theatrical work of the American actor Anna Deveare Smith. My contribution in this volume will cover some of the same ground in the present essay. The resurgence of Documentary Theatre has also led to a recent special edition of TDR: The Drama Review on “Documentary Theatre” (50.3 [T191], Fall 2006).
thrived on this paradox, and as a result has been the locus of a key political debate about how informed a democratic polis can and should be.

In Western nations, while the actual theatre audience is and always has been relatively small, its power can never be discounted. The British theatre audience has both economic and political power in its capacity to influence opinion and topics for debate. Documentary theatre in Britain has provided a platform in which accounts of public events alternative to official ones are registered in language that mostly escapes the “official” media of newspaper, radio and television, subject as they all are to “spin” – that ubiquitous term describing the active manipulation of information by which all institutions (especially those under pressure) attempt to “manage communications.” In this reconstituted theatrical arena, private citizens have increasingly been given a public platform (literally “a stage”) from which they (or their actor representatives) can dispute official accounts of events. These factors have been most evident in two kinds of recent Documentary Theatre. Both are claimed as “new,” but both should be seen within a theatre history often guilty of forgetting its antecedents.2

The “new” forms are “Verbatim Theatre” and “Tribunal Theatre.” Both can be readily defined as documentary, given the closeness of actual documents to the surface of their texts. Both are new, not so much in the fact of their scripts being based on interviews, transcripts, and records of legal proceedings, as in the fact that the methodologies they employ in performance are marked by the new political culture. Verbatim Theatre originates in interviews, and its scripts utilise in greater or lesser ways recordings of actual words real people have spoken.3 The key recent productions in this tradition are The Permanent Way (2003 – superficially about the crisis in the British rail system, but see below), Stuff Happens (2004 – about the circumstances of the “allied” invasion of Iraq), Talking to Terrorists (2005 – about the motivations behind, and the effects on victims of, terrorism), and Fallujah (2007 – about the atrocities committed during the 2003-4 American intervention in that Iraqi city). All these plays, as my content summaries show, dramatised recent political and social issues. Although current Verbatim Theatre has some connections with previous manifestations of the form (see below), the new plays tend to work with a larger political canvas. The Permanent Way, in real sense, led the way and I refer to this production again below.

London’s Tricycle Theatre, meanwhile, has been the source of a series of dramatisations based on court proceedings and official inquiries. Productions such as Half the Picture (1994 – based on the Scott Inquiry into the “Arms for Iraq”

\[2\] The paradox of Stourac and McCreery’s oxymoronic phrase “broken tradition” (1986, xiii) sums this up: where certain theatre forms are concerned, they are apparently always condemned to being forgotten then “rediscovered” in another conjuncture. This is particularly true of Documentary Theatre.

\[3\] “Recording” here is used in contradistinction to “reporting.” “Recording” suggests that evidence is electronically registered, but this is not necessarily the case – transcripts too are records. Recording modes suggest transparency of information. “Reporting,” on the other hand, acknowledges that information is agency-orientated – i.e. that a “reporter” is involved with a resultant admission of “angle of vision.”
scandal), 1999’s *The Colour of Justice* (a play about the death of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent Macpherson Inquiry – a case that quintessentialised the problem of racism in the UK), *Justifying War* (2003 – about the Bush and Blair governments’ attempt to do just that in relation to current conflicts), *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (2005 – see below), and *Called to Account* (2007 – the least “tribunal” of the plays, given that its premise is a fictional War Crimes Trial arraigning ex-Premier Blair) exemplify this mode. \(^4\) The Tricycle Theatre has an honourable record with plays based on fact that investigate aspects of contemporary social and political life. This record goes back over twenty years, an early example being the 1986 play *Who Killed Hilda Murrell?*. \(^5\) The Tricycle has also produced verbatim plays (like the 2004 *Guantanamo*), but its main output is better labelled “Tribunal Theatre.”

2. Regional Roots and Ordinary Speech

Verbatim Theatre in the British theatre has roots, largely unacknowledged, in 1980s regional theatre. In 1987 I published an article in the British theatre research journal *New Theatre Quarterly* that reviewed productions going back as far as 1977 (see my list: 1987, 323). I traced the emergence of the form from Peter Cheeseman’s 1960s local documentary productions at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent. \(^6\) Cheeseman drew his methodology for documentary plays based on local history and social affairs from two principal sources: from theatrical models such as those of Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop; and from the practices of Charles Parker’s “Radio Ballads.” Parker’s models in particular featured ordinary people’s speech, recorded in interviews on tape machines borrowed initially from the BBC, as a means of dramatising “history from below.” \(^7\) Verbatim material, argued Parker and Cheeseman, told you things that tended to escape official discourse, and articulated them in language a dramatist might try to copy, but could not hope to sustain. When I interviewed directors and writer/editors of 1980s Verbatim, like David

\(^4\) All the Tribunal Play texts mentioned have been published in the Oberon Modern Plays series.

\(^5\) This play is a fascinating example of the kind of shift in culture I refer to above. Hilda Murrell’s death in 1984 followed a break-in at her home. It seemed to be connected to a variety of anti-establishment protests, and a case was built up that she had been murdered by the British security services. This case was prominent in Tricycle’s play about the event. By 1994, it became clear that she had, in fact, probably been the victim of a bungled operation by operatives at some remove from, but not unconnected with, MI5. Judith Cook – a journalist who knew the case very well – describes her as ‘a victim of the times’ (1994, 31). Her apparent membership of the Thatcher government’s great *bête noire* ‘the enemy within’ (or those subversives opposed to their policies) led, however indirectly, to her death.

\(^6\) The first of these productions was *The Jolly Potters* (1964), a play about the Staffordshire pottery industry of the nineteenth century.

\(^7\) The “Radio Ballads” produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Charles Parker and created by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger were especially influential. In my essay in Müller 1993, I outlined the methodology and significance of the “Radio Ballads” (see especially 119-20). The Victoria Theatre was a theatre-in-the-round, hence the attraction of documentary material carried aurally via taped sound.
Thacker and Rony Robinson, I found widespread endorsement of this view (Paget 1987).

Twenty years later, exponents of the form find just this attraction in the sinewy language that often emerges from testimony. Robin Soans, writer of recent key works, says: “Verbatim work gives you a richness of script and image that I don’t think any writer, however brilliant, could come up with” (qtd. in Rosenthal 2004, 18). David Hare, again a significant exponent, noted in 2000:

many London plays are working on a narrower and narrower psychological focus [...] so many playwrights are denying themselves the simple pleasure of discovering that the external universe may be richer and more suggestive than the inside of their own heads. (my emphasis)

Having by 2004 written his own verbatim play, he told Richard Boon in 2004:

For the First Bereaved Mother [in The Permanent Way], we had a tape recording and when I looked at the transcript [...] You didn’t have to change a single word, it’s just the most extraordinary evocation of a moment [parents waiting for news of their son, who died in a 1997 rail crash].

Almost identical words were used to me by director David Thacker, again about a bereaved mother’s testimony in his 1985 production Enemies Within (Paget 1987, 330).

I do not claim ownership of the phrase “Verbatim Theatre,” but my description of the form was the earliest of which I am aware, so I think it is worth repeating. Verbatim Theatre, I contended, works through:

the taping 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 [...] such plays are then fed back into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance in those communities. (Paget 1987, 317 – original emphases)

Note the emphasis here on performer-collectors and on the word “community.”

I first heard the phrase “Verbatim Theatre” in 1985, in conversation with NTQ’s distinguished co-editor, the late Clive Barker. Ten years earlier we had been co-workers in, and profoundly affected by, the work of the Theatre Workshop company and its director Joan Littlewood. Academics by the 1980s, we retained the Workshop’s collectivist view of the business of theatre-making. The pluralist theatrical methodologies employed by the prime movers of this group tended to confirm the realisation, derived from practice not theory, that theatre’s innovations are almost always the result of collective effort. This is so even if individuals get (and take) credit. Verbatim Theatre – both the practice and the term – was invented by no single individual, it was the result ultimately of a seeking undertaken by groups of theatre makers, all of them in pursuit (as were other meaning-makers in other media at the time) of the Authentic.8

8 Clive Barker worked for Theatre Workshop on many more productions than I did. He was an actor with the company on and off for a decade. In my case, I was a stage manager for a couple
The truly distinctive thing about Theatre Workshop was its embrace of European theatrical ideas, unusual for a British theatre group of the time (1950s/1960s). Its avowedly left-wing sense of the collective was partly drawn from the connection with Europe. Its attitude to the methods developed during the theatre revolution of the period between the two World Wars, a revolution often associated with the name of Brecht, was (as I have argued elsewhere) against the general flow of British theatre history. The delayed impact on British theatre of Soviet Russian and Weimar German theatrical methodologies in particular arose from a number of factors. There was (and still is) a traditional tendency on the part of the dominant classes in Britain to be suspicious of left-wing ideologies (preferring a gradually shifting social status quo to anything that smacks of “revolution”), of ideas in general (being generally hostile to intellectuals), and of Europe itself (believing it to be the hotbed of both of the former). In the theatre this tended to manifest itself in a formally conservative attitude to writing, acting and production up to (and beyond) the mid-1950s. This meant that when the Berliner Ensemble eventually came to Britain in 1956 many of their twenty-year old ideas appeared new (see Willett 1977, 222). Theatre Workshop’s methods were crucial to the development of “Fringe” theatre in the late 1960s. A key production was Theatre Workshop’s 1963 play *Oh What a Lovely War*, a collectively devised documentary play about the Great War.

*Lovely War* drew audiences in through a provocative mix of the realistic and the non-realistic in style, the documented and the imagined in content. Its actors were part of a modernist theatre machine, sometimes serving, sometimes being served by, technology that would now seem primitive but which was then cutting-edge. The sight of human actors sharing a stage with slide and newspanel technology was somewhat rare in 1960s Britain. Like all documentary art the play combined documents with means by which they could be actively perceived by an audience. In so doing, and again like documentary art in general, it proposed a link between the collective memory of events inherent in documentation (which tends to move, as it were, in and out of focus) and the recreation in art of circumstances lost to time (which tends, inevitably, towards approximation). The acts of memory and of recreation are fused in documentary art. Or rather, its creators attempt a fusion that can only be ratified by audiences. If the work is so ratified, it acquires a distinctive power. There can be a special sharpness in theatre and film to the documentary drama, because the link between modes occurs in the real time of performance. In John Corner’s phrase, “modes of sensory engagement” are opened up that go

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of productions in the early 1970s – their significance lies in the fact that they were the final productions undertaken by Joan Littlewood. Other examples of people I would call “seekers of the authentic” are the makers of Direct Cinema documentary films of the time – directors such as Richard Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker.

9 I wrote in detail about this in Müller 1993. See also Paget 1995, where I introduced the idea of *Oh What a Lovely War* as a theatrical ‘Trojan Horse,’ bringing radical production methods into British theatre.
beyond both documentary and drama proper to propose emotional insights backed by facts.\textsuperscript{10}

Documentary Theatre was a key element in the practices of several Alternative theatre groups from the late 1960s onwards, foremost amongst them the English and Scottish 7:84 companies, led by John McGrath. The latter’s brilliant 1973 *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* was stand-out successor to *Lovery War* and again inspired many imitators. Documentary Theatre became a kind of legacy of Fringe/Alternative Theatre. The form re-emerged in British regional theatre in the 1980s with arguably the first manifestations of Verbatim Theatre. By this point, Alternative Theatre was going through hard times, with the Arts Council (as it is today) retrenching and cutting subsidies particularly to theatres outside London. But as a “mode of sensory engagement” Documentary Theatre has never entirely gone away in Britain.

3. New Times, New Methods

In the 1990s, there was always the brave and willing Tricycle, operating from its “Off-West End” base in Kilburn, London. Secondly, there was the work of Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court and with his companies “Joint Stock” and “Out of Stock”. In an interview (Hiley 1990), Stafford-Clark observed in reference to TV docudramas such as the then-recent *Who Bombed Birmingham*?: “Television has set standards that we in the theatre must aspire to.” That year the Royal Court had innovatively paired a documentary play from 1983, *Falkland Sound*, with a new semi-verbatim play *Gibraltar Strait*. The bill containing these two short plays compared and contrasted official fictions and eye-witness realities from the Falklands War of 1982 and the 1988 “Death on the Rock” incident in Gibraltar (when an IRA team were shot by British special forces). What is distinctive about these two incidents is their focus on a government’s proactive, but arguably undemocratic, policy of aggression and its tendency to cover its tracks. Moral stands against such aggression and such secrecy are predicated on a growing split between governors and (some of the) governed in sophisticated modern states.

The “verbatim” and the “tribunal” play have capitalised on the suspicion that the governed are never told the whole story by governors. In a 2005 comment (qtd. in the *Guardian* 2 “Briefing” column), Stafford-Clark called his approach on *Talking to Terrorists*:

> educative in the best sense of the word. There are a number of words we’re scared of in the theatre. We cherish the word ‘entertainment’ and we’re scared of the word ‘educate.’

He brings his kind of theatre very close here to television once again (I am thinking of the BBC’s historic pledge as a public communicator to “educate and entertain”). We come close here, too, to what I would argue is a post-Reagan/post-Thatcher

\textsuperscript{10} The phrase is from an email of 15/11/07.
privatisation of political culture in which the onus of dissent is increasingly on individuals in a society, aided and abetted by a media those individuals can never wholly trust. With political parties in Western democracies increasingly institutionalised, managed and separated from the now atomised publics they once could count on as collectives of various kinds, artists in general, and theatre in particular, began to function in a kind of samizdat culture. The products of this culture exist in parallel with, and opposed to, the “spin” of political parties.

Verbatim and Tribunal Theatre are both based on recorded utterance, but can be clearly distinguished from each other. The distinction needs to be preserved against two threats. The first is the tendency British Theatre has always had to forget its historical antecedents. The second is a journalistic tendency to call all plays “verbatim” that work from actual speech. The difference between the plays leads, not least, to important differences in production methodologies. “Tribunal plays” are different from “verbatim plays” in that they are edited transcripts (literally, “redactions”) of actual trials, tribunals and public inquiries whose proceedings have been officially recorded. This kind of play has a long and honourable theatrical history, law systems having been long regarded as inherently “dramatic” and “theatrical.” Twentieth-century theatre history contains many examples of Tribunal Plays, and I want to mention two key exemplars from the 1960s West German “Theatre of Fact” movement associated with Brecht’s contemporary and sometime collaborator Erwin Piscator.

Firstly, Heinar Kipphardt’s 1964 *In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer (In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer)* was based on transcripts of Oppenheimer’s actual US state security-clearance hearing. This play transcended its German national cultural barriers and was translated for productions in Britain and America precisely because of the importance of the issue of nuclear warfare to the post-World War Two world. Its reflective approach to a quintessential moral and ethical crux of the twentieth century – the participation of scientists in potentially world-destroying weapons research – assured its fascination for a theatre audience. Brecht had already visited this subject before with his *The Life of Galileo* (written 1937-39, but first produced in 1947), and his play did not lack research. But a comparison between the Brecht and the Kipphardt serves to highlight the difference between a history and a documentary play – Kipphardt’s work had that urgency which comes from the knowledge (a) that this is recent history, and (b) that the words spoken can be found in actual documentation.

Secondly, Peter Weiss’s 1966 *Die Ermittlung (The Investigation)* was based on the transcripts of the 1963-65 Frankfurt Trials of Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust. Weiss adopted a grim, sparse style and setting and focused on a kind of

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11 This is not helped by academics who fail to take due account of the history – see Innes 2007, where the writer attributes the invention of Verbatim Theatre to an important, but much later, exponent, Alecky Blythe. The problem with this essay is that Innes is over-reliant on the “Resource Material” section of Soans 2005 (101-13), which quotes (101-3) sections of Blythe’s company website (see “Works Cited”).

12 At the Young Vic in 2007, a new production of The Investigation specifically marked the play as relevant to all genocidal acts by using Rwandan actors.
blank verse treatment of some already stark court testimony from the victims and their guards. The play successfully crossed its national cultural barrier, and had worldwide impact in translation. The simple reason for its success was its, literal, investigation of the stain on the German national conscience that is the Holocaust. The play built on a post-war climate created by the Frankfurt and other actual Trials (for example, Nuremberg 1945-49 and the 1961 Eichmann Trial in Israel) to reflect, again on a quintessential twentieth-century historical and ethical crux. Emotionally, it mined both national and international heart-searching, and the associated notion of Bearing Witness that has trailed the issue of the Holocaust and challenged the act of representation ever since the camps were brought to public light in 1944. Like the Kipphardt, the words it used could be traced to documentation.

In 1975, American academic Herbert Lindenberger believed that you could generalise about documentary plays from such examples:

> Structurally, documentary plays tend to take the form of trials – either actual trials, as in the plays on Oppenheimer and the extermination-camp personnel, or symbolic trials in which the audience is expected to serve as judge of whatever villains and/or martyrs the author has set up. (1975, 21 – my emphasis)

This is actually not so (it is more a reflection of the theatrical material available at the time Lindenberger was writing). However it is true that the theatre audience is always at a kind of “hearing,” that both these ground-breaking plays were intertextual with literal “hearings”, and that the strong purpose associated with documentary art makes the “audience as judge” metaphor a useful one for all documentary plays. It also has meaning for participants in real events who, through their portrayal on stage by actors, hear themselves “talking back” to the official sources who have tried to sideline them. For Tribunal Plays the metaphor acquires an almost literal meaning. A wide variety of legal and quasi-legal public occasions trail after themselves often bulky and always official transcripts, digests, and reports of official hearings. These are essentially printed, literary materials and they constitute the basis for theatrical representation in Tribunal Theatre. Over time, the nature of a play based on official transcription has not changed fundamentally and nor, in many ways, have modes of representation by which companies present official discourse theatrically.

Its writer (or, more exactly, its editor/compiler) Richard Norton-Taylor described the material for Bloody Sunday, as follows: “about 14m words spoken by more than 900 witnesses in the biggest investigation in British legal history.” From this material, he continued, “I have distilled the latest ‘Tribunal Play’ at the Tricycle” (2005, 12 – my emphasis).13 “Distillation,” or editing in any other account, inevitably involves “editorialising” – as Clapp (2005) puts it: “editing is itself a form of authorship.” Like the dramatists, however, she notes in her review the sheer power of this material from the audience’s point of view, both in terms of its

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13 It is a sad fact that there is even more material now. Although the inquiry began in 1998 it has at the time of writing yet to publish its final report – now due late 2008.
words (which “are frequently incendiary”) and its theatricalisation. The words, she says, “burn the deeper for being so calmly staged, with witnesses talking of horrors, while, in the courtroom, people adjust their specs, sip water, make notes.” The paraphernalia of the courtroom, and the characteristic behaviours of the people for whom it is simply a workplace, underscore the action of Tribunal Plays. The clutter of the modern courtroom, with its technological additions to traditional furniture and fittings, makes the mise-en-scène of the Tribunal Play fascinating to behold. Tricycle director Nicolas Kent frequently uses slide screens to project blow-ups of the documentation involved. Brecht’s technological actor is an historical feature of Documentary Theatre that goes back to Piscator’s Weimar Germany productions. Technology can achieve the not-inconsiderable theatrical feat of (in semiotic terms) ostending documentation. Set within such a frame, the actors’ task in Tribunal Theatre is to achieve an almost filmic naturalism – an acting-that-conceals-acting. This comes close to impersonation – in her review Clapp specifically remarks of the post-play discussion (so often a feature itself of the Documentary Play), “[lawyer] Michael Mansfield proved how accurately he had been portrayed [by Jeremy Clyde].”

Where Tribunal Theatre is concerned, then, mise-en-scène and acting styles alike must be realist, and ‘authentic’ in that sense, but there are technological “production aids,” so to speak. The formal properties of verbatim plays are very different and have a closer connection with Documentary Theatre of the past in terms of a more fluid use of stage space and more flexible expectations of actors. Actors in Verbatim Theatre need to master direct address techniques, and also effect rapid transformations of time, place and character of the kind unknown and unnecessary to naturalistic theatre. Thus they must, for example, become a new character with a change of hat, or act as a “verbal placard” or intertext/caption (see Paget 1987). There is more variation, then in verbatim plays. The process still begins, as it did in the 1980s, with interviews with individuals, but the methodology favoured by Stafford-Clark is more nuanced. As described by actors involved in The Permanent Way and Talking to Terrorists, the methodology involves a kind of impression of the person interviewed by an actor, driven through rehearsal room presentation, for writer/compilers (like Soans or Hare) to work up into a script. Actors sometimes record, always take notes when interviewing. In the above cases, interviews were sometimes done by Soans and Stafford-Clark, with actors then working with material they prepared for the cast.

According to Bella Merlin, who researched and acted in the former production, and researched the second, Hare encouraged his actor/researchers to think of themselves as “hunter-gatherers,” to try to help them combat any feelings that

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14 This was especially evident in 2007’s Called to Account, where the establishment of a prima facie case for Blair’s arraignment on war crimes charges depended on the audience understanding complex international legislation.

15 This information was acquired through interviews conducted for the University of Reading/Arts and Humanities Research Council project “Acting with Facts” – this 3-year funded research, for which I am Principal Investigator, will run 2007-2010 and also examines performance in television docudrama.
they were exploiting their subjects. Aural testimony, rather than official transcription, remains the basis for theatrical representation, but a reconfiguring of the purposes of Verbatim Theatre has led to the kind of re-focusing of the material that can only occur when playwrights, rather than editors, are involved. David Hare’s work on *The Permanent Way* tended to lead rather than follow the verbatim, as it were. In conversation with Richard Boon in 2004, Hare first paid due respect to the verbatim material (“there is a clear moral obligation which is quite complex”), then acknowledges:

The area that a playwright operates in is always the difference between what people say and what they mean. So some of the speeches are direct reportage, if I felt that the direct reportage was very powerful. Others are speeches that effectively I have written but which I feel represent what the person wanted to say...I work like an artist, not like a journalist.16

4. The New Politics – Individuals Bearing Witness

In general, functional theatre-with-a-purpose, like Verbatim and Tribunal Theatre, has served political purposes broadly opposed to *status quos*. The Documentary Theatre form, always already there but seemingly fated perennially to be forgotten until needed, has been re-discovered and re-inflected in the current conjuncture. This has been due to a very different kind of political necessity from that of the 1930s and 1960s. The rediscovery of Left Theatre methods in the 1960s was a by-product of a post-war politics that drove the aspirations of some theatre workers towards a collectivity that in itself opposed the tendency of capitalism to divide and rule. That the Verbatim and Tribunal plays of the recent past also serve an oppositional politics in a time of upheaval and change is so obvious it hardly needs stating. But these are plays in the service of a distinctively new kind of privatised politics.

Politics domestically (even internationally after the collapse of the USSR and the end of Cold War negative certainties) has mutated into a depthless, programmeless form that has over time increasingly privileged the figure of the *witness* as the

16 If Hare’s method is a kind of negotiation with verbatim material, taped interviews have been used in highly innovative and very direct ways that cut out transcription altogether by others. Alecky Blythe, artistic director of the “Recorded Delivery” company describes her methodology thus:

I create plays from recorded interviews which are edited but not transcribed. Rather than learning a text, the actors copy the speech pattern and physicality of the interviewee. The show is rehearsed and performed with the actors wearing earphones through which they hear the edited interview playing and they copy exactly what they hear, including every cough, stutter and hesitation.

Blythe’s company’s debut verbatim production was *Come Out Eli* (2003 – a play about the longest gun siege in British criminal history). Other exponents of Tribunal Theatre include America’s “Famous Trials Theatre,” of Flemington, NJ. In addition to “Recorded Delivery,” Verbatim Theatre companies include London’s “Verb Theatre” and New York’s “The Civilians.”
last best hope of oppositional information. And increasingly this witness testifies to the failures of institutions charged with duties of care that seek to mask their failures through discourses of management that extend to information. David Hare (2004) observed that the failures of the British rail system were metonymic of the kind of systemic failure in many areas of British life. This is what drew him to an, on the face of it, unpromising subject. *The Permanent Way*, he remarked, “to me is about honour and dishonour” in a society “where management culture has replaced expertise culture.” The very first stage direction in the published play reflects Hare’s contempt for the new managerialism that has taken over the railways: “Nine people, once passengers, now customers, come on” (2003, 3 – my emphasis).

Documentary forms throughout the representational media – in art, photography, theatre, film and television – in the present time have risen to prominence partly because the participant in a live event and the witness of events have special claims to being trusted by audiences whose “default position” (Hill 2005) is sceptical. In television, “intergeneric hybridisation” has led, incidentally, to widespread use of *docudramatic* techniques in a variety of hybrid television forms that bring documentary ever closer to drama (Corner 2002). This hybridisation is a response to changed political and social circumstances at home and abroad, ratcheted up by growing distrust of politicians, disaffection with political process, and an associated lack of trust in agencies formerly supposed to honour social duties of care (the health service, the police, the law, the teaching profession). The proliferation of documentary modes in a variety of media can be regarded as part of a cultural response to changed circumstances nationally and globally.

Thus writers and artists have turned more and more to witnesses to authenticate their take on truth. Documentary Theatre in the New Documentary Dispensation is primarily a theatre in which the *rhetoric of witness* dominates. The most recent manifestations of Documentary Theatre hinge upon a post-modern political conjuncture in which it is increasingly difficult to feel that dissent challenges power in any meaningful way. In any challenge involved in dissenting from received views, the collective now seems an absent presence. The material and the methods through which the new Documentary Theatre seeks to impact its audience have certainly attenuated somewhat from the rich variety of potential sources suggested by German playwright Peter Weiss in the 1960s.

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17 See also Corner 2007 for his account of the interfaces with art, photography and documentary.
18 I shall be addressing the changes in film and television docudrama evident over the past ten years in the second edition of my 1998 book *No Other Way To Tell It* (forthcoming 2009).
19 ‘Theatre of testimony’ is, significantly, American performer Emily Mann’s preferred term (Dawson 1999: xiv) and Ian Johns, reviewing *The Permanent Way* in 2004, suggested ‘testimonial theatre’ as a suitable designation.
5. Conclusion – Seekers After Truth

Testimony and witness have increased in importance as former certainties – and faith in facts as understood by the likes of Weiss – have drained away from “post-documentary” cultures in mediatised societies. Documents have become vulnerable to post-modern doubt and information-management (a.k.a. “spin”). The witness’s claim to authenticity can still warrant a credible perspective because the legalistic component in Western notions of witness is powerfully accompanied by a spiritual one that derives from religious tradition. These twin components charge the theatrical experience of Tribunal and Verbatim Theatres. The Witness is cursed (or blessed) with first order experience that may or may not be easy to recount. This will depend on the degree of trauma involved. When the task of the playwright(s) is to tease out the testimony of a Witness in order to dramatise it, a different level of commitment from all parts of the theatrical enterprise is required. Seeker and sought, performer and audience, enact in their encounter the complexities of this.

Theatrical team and audience for the work are Seekers After Truth, who derive second order expression and experience through workshop and rehearsal (actors) and performance (actors and audience). I want to call the preparatory phase (which might include taping, transcribing, editing, rehearsing) the Recording of Witness. Performance becomes a Transmission of Witness; the actors who work in Verbatim and Tribunal Theatre seem to feel that this is what they do. Their audience are Bearing Witness in a live event. Theatre’s ancient connection with religion, its occasionally profound moment of encounter can add a charge to live performance difficult to replicate in film and television. Like a religious congregation, the audience will in many cases have gone out seeking this “presence.” Thus theatre continues to have purchase, but perhaps only in cultural and political situations where guerrilla tactics are required against regimes repressive in wholly new ways. Documentary Theatre continues to be, as it has always been, a weapon in such circumstances.

Works Cited

New Documentarism on Stage


