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VERBATIM THEATRE AND SOCIAL RESEARCH: TURNING TOWARDS  
THE STORIES OF OTHERS

This paper analyses the convergence of ethnographic research and Verbatim theatre in both the context of an urban secondary school drama classroom and in two professional theatres in the city of Toronto. This four-year international, digital, collaborative ethnography focuses on performance and its relationship to youth engagement. As part of the larger project, this paper analyses data gathered in the school research site that charted youth reactions to a Verbatim theatre workshop and performance of *The Middle Place*, a powerful Verbatim play about shelter youth, created by the socially committed theatre company, Project: Humanity. Additional digital data included the subsequent video-taped youth-created Verbatim monologues. The research team also followed Project: Humanity into two professional theatres in Toronto (Theatre Passe Muraille and Canadian Stage) where youth and adult audiences, fresh from seeing *The Middle Place*, were interviewed about the play, cultural representations of youth, and theatre as a form of social intervention. The third data set occurred back in the classroom of our school research site, where the *The Middle Place* filtered back into student drama work in surprising ways. To analyse these data, we bring performance theory, Brechtian theory, relational art theory and Foucault's concept of 'parrhesia' to address the ethics of representing trauma and the possibility of 'fearless speech'. In responding theatrically, these youth offered our research valuable glimpses into the subcultures of urban youth and their theatre-making practices.

*Cet article s'intéresse à la convergence de la recherche ethnographique et du Verbatim Theatre sur deux sites : dans une classe de théâtre d'une école secondaire en milieu urbain et dans deux théâtres professionnels de Toronto. Le projet international de recherche ethnographique auquel ont participé les auteurs, d'une durée de quatre ans, s'appuie sur un support numérique et s'intéresse aux rapports qu'entretient le jeu avec l'engagement des jeunes. Dans le contexte de ce projet, les auteurs proposent une analyse de données recueillies en milieu scolaire sur les réactions des jeunes à un atelier du Verbatim Theatre et à une performance de la pièce, The Middle*

Place, un spectacle sur les jeunes dans un refuge créé par une troupe très engagée sur le plan social, *Project: Humanity*. D'autres données recueillies par l'équipe de recherche incluent un enregistrement vidéo de monologues de jeunes créés suite à la représentation. L'équipe de recherche a suivi *Project: Humanity* lors de prestations dans deux théâtres professionnels de Toronto (*Theatre Passe Muraille* et *Canadian Stage*) et interviewé des membres du public, composé tant de jeunes que d'adultes, suite à la présentation de *The Middle Place*; les questions portaient sur la pièce, les représentations culturelles de la jeunesse et le théâtre en tant que forme d'intervention sociale. Une troisième série de données a été recueillie en salle de classe, où l'influence de *The Middle Place* s'est fait ressentir de manière étonnante dans le travail des jeunes élèves. Dans leur analyse de ces données, les auteurs font appel à la théorie de la performance, aux écrits théoriques de Brecht, aux théories de l'art relationnel et au concept foucauldien de « parrhésie » pour étudier les questions éthiques reliées à la représentation du traumatisme et à la « prise de parole sans peur ». Les réponses que les jeunes ont offertes aux participants par le truchement du théâtre ont ouvert de précieuses pistes de recherche sur les sous-cultures des jeunes en milieu urbain et leurs pratiques de création théâtrale.



## Introduction

Part story-telling, part composite, part-mimicry, part invention, verbatim theatre invites critical discussion about the skills, the social value, and the creative impulses connected to this way of working. Of the genre, David Hare writes,

Particular objection is made to the use of other people's dialogue. No sooner had a genre called verbatim drama been identified than sceptics appeared arguing that it was somehow unacceptable to copy dialogue down, rather than to make it up. People who did this, it was said, are called journalists, not artists. But anyone who gives verbatim theatre a moment's thought—or rather, a dog's chance—will conclude that the matter is not as simple as it first looks.

David Hare's reflections on verbatim theatre helped us to understand better why some recent work with *Project: Humanity*, creators of *The Middle Place*, had been such a powerful empirical, pedagogical, and artistic experience in the course of our ethno-

graphic research.<sup>1</sup> And further, why this verbatim play about a homeless youth shelter and its residents had a palpable impact on large groups of high school students. The following paper offers an account of an ethnography in which the research became caught up in a theatre-making process, taking a methodological turn that cast new light on the strength of performance as a method of investigating urban social life.

Ethnography that takes art as its subject makes meaning differently. Barry Freeman suggests that postmodern ethnographers in the theatre “explore the messy and conflicted in the social discourse of theatre—whether that be in a play-text, on-stage, or in a rehearsal room—from the perspective of an implicated participant and at specific moments” (65). We would like to build on his description by adding the social discourses of theatre that take place in the spaces of theatre lobbies, urban drama classrooms, and high school auditoriums. To approach ethnographic knowledge construction about youth, we analyse their experiences of spectating and theatre-making. We will draw upon post-performance interview data as well as our own reflexive responses as implicated participants to the theatre event on stage, the programming in the theatre before and after the play, and the subsequent theatre work created in an urban secondary school drama class by youth who had been affected by their viewing of *The Middle Place*.

At the centre of our argument here is the understanding that *The Middle Place* audience was invited to *turn towards*, and be open to, the play; the youth participants of our study took that invitation very seriously. The metaphor of turning, so powerfully embedded in the choreography of the play and in the public pedagogy of the production, provoked a cultural response in the youth that heightened their awareness of the issues explored in the play and formed their subsequent theatrical experimentation as they shaped the material of their own lives. In *The Middle Place*, the actors turned into a scene to begin it and turned out of the scene to end it; they turned towards one another and away from one other both seeking and shunning contact, and we, as spectators, felt the turns of their lives. Pedagogically, Project: Humanity shaped the conditions for a turning towards the community of shelter youth it represented, by extending the programming around the play and opening avenues for spectator-to-spectator dialogue. Sensitized by Project: Humanity’s public pedagogy, we, as researchers, experienced a turning towards their theatre work by drawing upon theories of relational art as well as interrogating

theatre's potential for re-traumatization. We use this idea of turning towards, throughout, as a central conceptual tool to understand the multiple social discourses of theatre that we witnessed ethnographically in the production of *The Middle Place* and the youth-created theatre it inspired.

The larger research project upon which the paper is based is a four-year ethnographic study (currently in year four) titled *Urban School Performances: The interplay, through live and digital drama, of local-global knowledge about student engagement* (USP). The project studies youth and their teachers in drama contexts and schools traditionally labelled 'disadvantaged' in the cities of Toronto (Canada), Taipei (Taiwan), Lucknow (India), and Boston (USA). One school in each of Lucknow, Taipei, and Boston, and two schools in Toronto constitute the study sites. Researchers in all four sites engage in ethnographic work in each school, working collaboratively with classroom teachers, students and visiting artists who contribute to the drama curriculum.<sup>2</sup> The curricular expectations, and the way drama is positioned in the larger school, remain different in each site, as is the kind of drama pedagogy experienced by the students. The work in each site is shared with other international researchers via digital video uploading to blog sites. On-line collaborative questions and analysis of the digital performance data engage the researchers across sites in a sustained dialogue about the differences and similarities we note in the classroom cultures, the student (dis)engagement, the drama pedagogies, and the theatre-making practices.

The above description of the multi-site ethnography provides important context, but this paper is focused especially on one of our Toronto schools and its relationship with *The Middle Place*. First, we will describe how the theatre workshops facilitated by the artists prepared students for their own theatre creations. Next, we will recount how our ethnography then moved into the theatre, a shift that compelled us to examine how research into the social happened differently once the researchers moved into the theatre space for two productions of *The Middle Place* at Theatre Passe Muraille (October 2010) and Canadian Stage (February 2011). Finally, our paper will reflect on what happened artistically and pedagogically back in the drama classroom once the students began their own verbatim theatre creation and how this process of theatre-making brought to light the complexities of sharing personal and sometimes traumatic experiences. We illustrate in this paper that the turning towards and opening up that the students did—first in response to the verbatim play, *The*

*Middle Place*, and then with each other—was a challenging but ultimately rich experience.

### Turning Towards

Verbatim theatre uses the actual words of people, often in direct first-person address or testimonial style, to raise issues relevant to a particular community and to activate broader social engagement.<sup>3</sup> The verbatim theatre produced by Project: Humanity had a similar social vision. As a call to its audiences, the creators hoped that the voices of disenfranchised, though resilient, homeless youth would set in motion a communal response to the circumstances of poverty enveloping their lives, what Jan Cohen-Cruz in her new book *Engaging Performance* is calling “social call, cultural response” (68). We theorize here Cohen-Cruz’s notion of “social call, cultural response” as a kind of *turning towards*. This *turning towards* clearly has larger implications for the socio-political projects of theatre, but also interestingly reflects the multiple, choreographed turnings evident in Alan Dilworth’s direction of the play.

From the choreography of the *The Middle Place*, we highlight the recurrent turning gesture of the piece and connect it to our theorizing of the play, its broader public pedagogy, and the student monologues that were created in response to the play. The set designed for the production consisted of a raked oval of light. As actors moved in and out of that oval, they would raise their hand and wait to be buzzed in or out (alluding to the buzzer of the youth shelter where the piece is set). Upon hearing the buzz, the actor would turn and step into a new scene as a new character. In addition, the actors adopted particular stylized turns to signal their moves between the multiple characters they played. What began as a rehearsal technique became ultimately a significant part of the direction of the play and its overall aesthetic. A play of multiple turnings, characters turning towards each other and the audience, illustrated clearly the broader social and pedagogical commitments of the play.

Although one might associate the genre of verbatim with ideas and theatre practices of the 1960s and 1970s, its impulses can be traced back much further. Our intention here, however, is not to trace the genealogy of verbatim theatre, nor to account for its alleged resurgence of interest.<sup>4</sup> Neither is it our aim to engage in the contested debate about its value or status as a documentary genre in the wider field of theatre studies. For our purposes, we focus instead on how Project: Humanity used verbatim theatre to

engage in a wider pedagogical project of consciousness-raising and community engagement and how, in turn, a group of youth responded, artistically, and personally to their provocation.

Brecht's desire for social engagement through theatre, as well as his aesthetic and political interest in gesture as representational, has particular relevance in our exploration of Project: Humanity's political and educational efforts, as well as their artistic choices. Brecht's term, *Gestus*, does not mean merely "gesture," but encompasses "the whole range of the outward signs of social relationships, including 'deportment, intonation, facial expression' (Brecht 119)" (Esslin 140-141). Esslin further describes *Gestus* as follows:

The arrangement and grouping of the actors, their manner of speaking and moving, must be made to convey all the implications of this basic *Gestus* with the greatest possible expressiveness, elegance, and economy of means. It is entirely irrelevant what the scene concerned might have looked like in real life, the director is concerned only with bringing out its social content and significance. [*sic*] (142)

Despite being a documentary form of theatre focused on 'the real,' it was, as Esslin explains, the social significance of the gestures of turning in the play that mattered more than any replication of reality. The characters depicted by the actors had, first, to turn towards the interviewer in the play, Andrew Kushnir playing himself,<sup>5</sup> then to each other, and also to the audience. The audience opened up to the play and illustrated the ways in which they turned towards its ideas and its aesthetic in lively talk-back sessions. And importantly for our research, the youth who saw the play took that experience back to their classrooms and responded artistically to the call issued by the play, by using the experiences of their own lives to open up a conversation with each other about their challenges and victories as youth in complicated socio-economically disadvantaged contexts.

### **The Back Story: Artists Visit the School Research Site**

The year before *The Middle Place* was presented at Theatre Passe Muraille and Canadian Stage, the artists completed a tour of Toronto schools. Complementing the performance were workshops that the company offered to students to prepare them for their own theatre-making. Two of the company members from Project: Humanity, Andrew Kushnir (playwright *The Middle*

Place) and Antonio Cayonne (actor *The Middle Place*) spent a few days working physically with the youth in our research site, sharing their own process of working with transcripts, and finding physical expression for punctuation and syntax, something they call “a punctuation walk,” an experimental process aimed at exploring the essence of those they interviewed in order to distill characters from the internal grammar of these real people, to find their “internal rhythm,” as they described it (Kushnir and Cayonne).<sup>6</sup>

At the end of this period of experimentation, watching plays, working with visiting artists, the students created their own verbatim monologues and performed them. It was a very significant day of learning in the classroom as we watched weeks of work unfold as the students transformed the real words and reflections of their peers into characters. Unlike *The Middle Place* actors, who had never seen the actual people whose words they were interpreting, our students knew their subjects well. Some seemed to be mimicking, some struggled with the move from dialogue (their raw interview data) to monologue, to create a living, embodied person. Some felt their interview data had not been rich and therefore gave them little to work with artistically.

Turning to the following year of the research, when the drama students at our school research site had the opportunity to see a production of *The Middle Place* in a professional theatre and experience the full theatre event—the “Urban Youth Experience”—curated and facilitated by Project: Humanity, what came obviously to the foreground was the way in which a conception of turning towards, embedded in the pedagogy and the choreography of *The Middle Place*, opened up a difficult conversation about social marginalization for the students and also opened onto a set of practices in a drama classroom that had youth using theatre to reveal themselves and turn towards one another in brave but not uncomplicated ways.

### **Audience Engagement and the “Urban Youth Experience”: Relational Art, Public Pedagogy and Parrhesia**

Of the ‘educational turn’ in curating, Iris Rogoff comments:

In a “turn,” we shift *away* from something or *towards* or *around* something, and it is *we* who are in movement rather than *it*. Something is activated in us, perhaps even actualized, as we move. And so I am tempted to turn away from the various emulations of an aesthetics of pedagogy that have taken place

in so many forums and platforms around us in recent years, and towards the very drive to *turn*.

In the theatres, Project: Humanity turned towards their audiences by crafting two spaces for public and aesthetic pedagogy. One was the stage on which the minimal set for the play (designed by Jung Kye Kim) was placed. The second comprised the lobbies and stairways of both theatres that Project: Humanity curated with “orbit” programming, “orbit” here referencing the pedagogical and artistic efforts surrounding the production, what they eventually came to call the “Urban Youth Experience.” The curated spaces included a photo installation with enlarged photographs of the particular shelter where Project: Humanity had run theatre workshops and conducted the verbatim interviews, a display of art works created by shelter youth, and an audio installation of the out-takes of verbatim interviews that were not included in the final script. The company designed and made available to the audience a brochure mapping city resources for the homeless, and at Theatre Passe Muraille they opened the post-show stage to other community groups engaging issues of homelessness through theatre. Another significant aspect of the orbit programming was the company’s crafted post-show talk-back sessions with their audience.

With the intention to disrupt regular theatre-going habits and expectations, Project: Humanity created these multiple forms of broad public pedagogy to extend the experience of the play. Playwright Kushnir wanted “to have the audience sit in the play a little bit past the curtain call. And that was the concept behind everything” (Personal interview). Our participation in this programming enabled us to explore our fascination with the ways that performance engages youth, by conducting interviews with young and older audience members just after they had seen the play. We occupied the stairs, any available chairs, and even the hallway to the bathrooms where we recorded conversations about the production’s depictions of youth and the genre of verbatim theatre. We witnessed some arresting moments of audience response, as some interviewees were familiar with the shelter system, while for others the play opened a social world about which they knew little.

Towards the end of the run at Theatre Passe Muraille, our team interviewed members of the company asking them about their efforts to ‘curate’ the play. By their own assessment, they had made a start, but had fallen short of their ideal. The company may



have been disappointed, but if Bourriaud's ideas about relational art practices are used to frame this work, it opens other ways to consider Project: Humanity's orbit programming as dialogic public pedagogy. In writing about art as encounter, Bourriaud focuses on the potential of art to create dialogue and "inter-human negotiation" (41). He suggests that art is valuable if it is able to stimulate conversation and collective thinking, "so there is a question we are entitled to ask in front of any aesthetic production: 'does this work permit me to enter into dialogue?'" (109). Seen as a form of relational art, this contextual and curated programming around *The Middle Place* offered multiple ways to enter into dialogue with others about collectively witnessing and listening to the words of shelter youth, verbatim.

But relational art has also been critiqued for the emptiness of some of the dialogue it has spawned. Irit Rogoff writes,

and so the art world became the site of extensive talking—talking emerged as a practice, as a mode of gathering, as a way of getting access to some knowledge and to some questions, as networking and organizing and articulating some necessary questions. But did we put any value on what was actually being said?

One means of assessing the quality of dialogue is to make use of Rogoff's description of Foucault's practice of "fearless speech" or "parrhesia." Attributing the coining of this practice to Euripides in the fifth century BC, Foucault states, "my intention was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth telling as an activity... who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relations to power?" (5). We argue that Project: Humanity enabled practices of "parrhesia" by constructing the play, their "orbit," and offering their audience the opportunity to speak frankly (Foucault 11). But fearless speech, or theatre as social call, cultural response, as Cohen-Cruz has framed it, like other forms of pedagogy, does not always proceed smoothly.

For example, one student, at the end of a student matinee, was visibly angered by what she had witnessed and broke off her post-show interview. It took us a little time to realize that it was not the play that had angered her but some of the audience members whom she perceived had been laughing at the youth depicted by the actors in the play:

It's not the play. They are retarded, cuz it's really... it's someone's life and you're cracking jokes. Every fucking head in that play deserves to go to hell. What's the point of coming to this play? They [the audience] don't even know what it's for. The people in the audience are extremely immature. They are cracking jokes that weren't appropriate. I don't even want to talk anymore. I'm sorry. (Theatre Passe Muraille, Youth. Post-performance Interview. 3 Nov. 2010)<sup>7</sup>

Project: Humanity had distributed discount tickets at their weekly workshops at local shelters and this interview, with one of the shelter youth, describes her unanticipated experience of coming to Theatre Passe Muraille:

Honestly, I'm really happy that something like this... I'm really happy that they actually went out and took the time for free. They didn't have to do it. They did it and they took their time to learn about people like us, because we get shut down all the time. If you walk by CH [name of shelter], someone in a suit walks by and you say, "hi," they don't look at you. They won't even look at your face. You are like, "hi and have a good day." I say that to everybody. I just like that. I say, "have a good day, sir." He won't even turn around. Nothing. He won't even step towards me. It's because I'm a shelter kid. No matter how nice I look, they know I still live there. (Theatre Passe Muraille, Youth. Post-performance Interview. 29 Oct. 2010)

In her interview, she expressed her enthusiasm for the content of the play, believing that it had challenged those who make her feel invisible by turning away. However, she also expressed the pain associated with witnessing characters on stage who voiced trauma that resembled her own. Stephenson suggests that in these moments, trauma and living unite, "the telling of past trauma allows the event to come into being. Telling and living coincide" (102). In this shelter youth's interview, she said she was crying, as she relived her own abuse and that she almost left the theatre, but the scene changed just in time. Mid-interview, we had to ask this youth whether the interview itself might have unintentionally traumatized her again:

It doesn't bother me at all. I'd rather talk about it than keep it. I know it's something useful. It's going to research... There's a lot of problems in the shelters that no one knows about. Like

people come in and give you money. They are like, “God bless you. God still loves you.” I’m like, “you don’t even know anything about me. Don’t tell me that God still loves me. You don’t know anything. You don’t know anything about us so don’t be like, ‘God, don’t give up. Blah, blah, blah.’” What the fuck are we giving up on? Nobody says we are giving up on anything. “What do you mean? Why? Because we live here? Does it mean we are gonna screw things up?” I hate that.

We have found the work of Dominique Lacapra and Cathy Caruth on the notion of re-visiting trauma helpful here. In *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory and Trauma*, Lacapra builds on Freud’s work on trauma, and more specifically Freud’s notion of “working-through,” and explains that “the numbingly traumatic event does not register at the time of its occurrence” (174). Lacapra argues that revisiting/“working through” (in Freud’s terms) trauma brings the opportunity to think and reflect on the traumatic event. Cathy Caruth, similarly, builds on Freud’s groundbreaking work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and discusses Freud’s writings in the context of two different traumatic events: i) veterans of World War One who repeatedly dream scenes of war and death, and ii) a child re-enacting the departure and return of his mother by repeatedly throwing a wooden spool on a string into his cot, uttering the sound ‘ooo’ (meaning *fort/gone*) and then retrieving it, uttering ‘aaa’ (meaning *da/here*; Caruth 8). She explains that both the repetition of the child’s game (first the incomprehensible and painful moment of the mother’s act of leaving and then the mother’s pleasurable return) and the veterans’ dreams (the trauma of the nightmare of war and then the surprise of waking) represent not only the repetition of missed encounter with death or loss, but the act of surviving/waking into life/“the drive for life” (18). Therefore Caruth argues for extending the theory of trauma “beyond the insight of the death drive, into the insight enigmatically passed on in the notion of the drive to life” (21). Our youth audience member’s enthusiasm for the content of the play despite its painful association with her own previous trauma, her willingness to be interviewed, and her summation “I’d rather talk about it than keep it,” we read as a *turning towards* life, her desire to attend to her trauma and claim her “drive for life.” We need to make clear, however, that we are not looking to the theatre simplistically as a venue for healing trauma but as a place to ‘look to life’ while acknowledging how trauma can linger as unfinished and unfinishable suffering in the spectator.<sup>8</sup>

The last aspect of the public pedagogy to be addressed is the talk-backs that were offered regularly through the runs at both theatres. To understand the incident that follows it is important to describe one of the moments in the play. Just before the final tableau that ends *The Middle Place*, the character Neveah describes the collage posted on the wall of her shelter room, made of magazine pictures of places in Europe that she dreams of visiting. In one post-show talk-back session at Canadian Stage, Neveah's and the other shelter youths' dreams were judged as "unrealistic" by an adult audience member who was skeptical about the youths' ability to realize them, and pronounced that "no way would [they] ever get there." Kushnir (playwright) responded by saying that "by virtue of them being homeless we can endow—there is a despair due to no support—but beautiful that they have dreams—young people dreaming."<sup>9</sup> In our view, Kushnir's response invited the audience member to leave the comfortable distancing of his judgments and to turn towards the intimacy and the imaginary of the play.

As our ethnographic study moved into the theatre spaces, we have concluded that Project: Humanity's verbatim play, the extended programming, and continuing commitment to youth in the shelter system constitute acts of urban political action that both depict and engage Toronto's marginalized youth. Through these practices, Project: Humanity engaged their audience in dialogue that explored our shared complicity in a system that silences young voices among us. But, significantly, they also invited us to consider what it might mean to turn towards rather than turn away.

### **The Aesthetic and the Social: Verbatim Theatre Creation as Classroom Practice**

Using our data from ethnographic field notes, focus group interviews, teacher interviews, student monologues, and drama performances, this final section of the paper describes how the experience of seeing the verbatim theatre piece spilled back into a high school drama classroom, impacted classroom pedagogy, and informed students' performances. The students in the drama class at Middleview (school and student names are pseudonyms) saw the play at Theatre Passe Muraille and they seemed quite affected by the content of the play and the stories of youth like themselves. In response to seeing the play, they decided to create and perform their own monologues based on their real life experiences. Recalling the symbolic gesture of turning, in the creation of their

monologue performances, students first turned towards one another to begin difficult conversations about narratives of social marginalization. Then, by turning towards a larger school audience, they opened the possibility of a broader “response to a call.”

As ethnographers watching their pedagogical space, we observed that the drama teacher constantly moved between the aesthetic and the social. Her drama class was a space where students’ personal stories mattered. When we asked the students why they chose to share such personal stories, they talked about the powerful experience of seeing *The Middle Place*, as well as the inviting pedagogical space created by the teacher after seeing the play.

A perennial focus in our research has been on this always-shifting relationship between the aesthetic and the social.<sup>10</sup> In order to illustrate how the social and the aesthetic are intricately linked in students’ work in this drama classroom, we focus specifically on the monologues and the performances of two students: Asad and Shashaq. Asad (male, African, straight, speaker of Swahili, English, and basic knowledge of Arabic) and Shashaq (female, Jamaican/Indian, straight, Christian, speaker of Patois, born in Jamaica) both explained that seeing the verbatim play, *The Middle Place*, and hearing the words of youth like themselves was inspiring. Shashaq’s monologue was a poem. She explained in an interview that the play gave her the power to write poems and to share her personal story:<sup>11</sup>

Yeah that’s [seeing *The Middle Place*] what pushed me to do it [to write]. And then, from that day, I started to write poems. Poems about what you go through as a teenager especially in Toronto... The part of my poem [monologue] that really touched me is when I say “I stand behind the closed doors in my room hoping and praying all these pains will just pass by.” I am used to going to my room and cry but when I went there [to the shelter], I couldn’t do that because I have no privacy. I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t smile... I had thieves in my room, everything was so unbearable so that’s all summarized in *The Middle Place*. So I was like “Wow, they are actually talking about what I am going through.”

(Middleview, Shashaq. Personal interview. 12 Jan. 2011)

In another interview, Asad explained that he decided to share the actual text of his refugee claim with his classmates, as his monologue. He felt comfortable sharing because everybody else

had been open about their personal stories and difficult life experiences:

Um my monologue, I never wrote the monologue 'cause I wrote it also to present about my case [as a refugee claimant], so it's like reflecting on my image back... explain about where I came from, it's like a disaster place where I came from... and it's like inside my body—so it's like I have decided to give it out. At first I didn't want to give it out to school, but... everyone [in this class] ... shares... I decided let me share my, in my heart, to the school to share what people go through... so... sure, my monologue it's about my entire life, through ups and down to Canada.

(Middleview, Asad. Personal interview. 11 Jan. 2011)

There are important questions that theatre and performance scholars Rea Dennis and Julie Salverson raise in relation to aesthetics and accountability generally, and particularly in 'playing back' refugee/asylum stories. Salverson questions the practice of enacting "performances that reduce representation to mimesis as reproduction, as 'mirror reality'" ("Change" 124). Like Salverson, Dennis also criticizes the literal representation of these narratives by others as "reductive and potentially re-violating" (214). Rea Dennis discusses the tension between aesthetics and accountability with reference to a playback theatre piece about the personal testimony of a woman from Afghanistan. In the case of her playback theatre, someone from the audience comes to the stage and tells a personal story and chooses an actor to represent herself. Then the ensemble of actors immediately presents an improvised interpretation of the story while the teller watches. Dennis explains that instead of one interpretation, new meanings can emerge from the interplay of the aesthetic and the symbolic when actors work as an ensemble. She writes that "in the act of animation the story is transformed as the performers take artistic responsibility for translating the literal/verbal telling into theatrical language" (212).

The issues of representation and potential exploitation or re-traumatisation that Dennis and Salverson raise are important for this research and for our examination of these two students' monologues that dealt with refugee experiences and shelter life. The classroom performances of these monologues resembled playback theatre in the sense that the students did not perform them as solo pieces, rather, students in groups improvised in

response to each other's monologues. However, unlike playback theatre, the student who wrote the monologue did not simply watch others perform her/his story. Instead, the student who wrote the story directed its performance and either took the role of narrator or performed among the others as her/himself.

The teacher's choice to include other students who would act as an ensemble for the monologues helped to avoid the naturalistic re-creation of trauma. As well, the students used stylized gestures—recalling Brecht's *Gestus*—to communicate the story, taking distance from the naturalism about which Salverson warns ("Transgressive Storytelling" 36). For example, in the performance of Asad's monologue, the students raised their hands as if celebrating their arrival in the safe city of Mombassa but then—turning directly to the audience, arms raised, eyes widened—their gesture took on new meaning as they were approached for money by opportunistic police.

In their interviews, Asad and Shashaque both explained that they wanted others to know their struggles in the hope that fewer people might encounter such problems. What was also compelling for these two students, in our view, was their desire to speak frankly and to expose the problems in their lives, in all their complexity, through a process that would ensure their "*visibility*,"<sup>12</sup> an outcome cited by others as significant in itself.

For both Asad and Shashaque, it was especially important to share their own difficult life experiences, which was something that neither thought possible prior to their theatre-making. Asad had never taken a drama class before and English is not his first language. He said that being able to perform his own monologue, as well as direct the performance, and then to receive encouraging feedback from peers and other audience members, allowed him to take great risks:

It made me realize that I can be someone in the arts. I realize that I have a potential and... even if it's hard for me to speak but I've been seeing myself and I can expand so much... so it's like given me a—what can I say about it... It gave me confidence on speaking... yeah, actually I got a lot in this drama class.

(Middleview, Asad. Personal interview. 11 Jan. 2011)

### **Final Thoughts**

We worry about drama as a space of re-traumatisation as others do, or a space that offers a false sense of security. We are well

aware of the dangers of personal sharing and even of the ease with which some youth lose their sense of boundaries, an experience they may later come to regret. But what we also saw in this classroom was how speaking a truth, a story, became a way to be seen and how the drama class became a place of relational art, fearless speech, public pedagogy. Cohen-Cruz has, usefully to us, characterized the public pedagogy of theatre as a kind of “social call, cultural response,” a turning towards others in the hope of an opening, a response. In the course of our research, we have witnessed the reverberations of theatre artists who call out to a public, and of youth who call out to each other, to their teacher, and to visiting researchers. And so it goes, with inherent risk at every turn, but risks worth taking, many of us ultimately decided.

As a retort to his detractors, David Hare wrote, “Journalism is life with the mystery taken out. Art is life with the mystery restored.” Our ethnographic process that closely followed the public pedagogy of a socially engaged theatre company and the pedagogy of a high school drama classroom verbatim theatre unit made less mundane our own formulaic thinking about youth, as we watched them respond unguardedly to theatre and then speak their truths using theatre. The social call issued by Project: Humanity compelled the youth to use their own ‘real stories’—respectfully accessed and ethically shared—as creative fodder for theatrical expressions of identity and hope, both on the stage and in the classroom. What this plunge into the artistic experiences and processes of youth also taught us was that qualitative research, at its collaborative best, greatly profits from the ambiguities and uncertainties of theatre-making processes and may have, in this case, got us closer to some of the stories that our youth participants were most interested in sharing.

The call was issued and the responses were rich. The unhampered aesthetic and the clear pedagogy of Project: Humanity’s *The Middle Place* provoked a *turning towards* the uncomfortable realities of our shared social context. From our ethnographic perspective, the play effectively initiated a social discourse about responsibility and representation, and incited an experience of theatre-making among youth that deepened the act of spectating. Project: Humanity’s work compelled their audience to “sit in the play,” as Kushnir had hoped, long past the curtain call. ❁



## NOTES

- 1 See Project: Humanity Website: <http://www.projecthumanity.ca>.
- 2 Student, teacher, and artist interviews have been conducted in each site. Students in each site have also completed on-line and in-class surveys seeking self-assessments of how they engage with, or disengage from, school in general and drama classes in particular. Classroom observations focus on how young people 'perform'—socially, academically, and artistically—in these 'disadvantaged' schools. To date, in Toronto, we have compiled 28 hours of video-taped classroom work and 29 interviews (17 individual interviews and 12 focus group interviews of 2-5 students each) with youth in our two school sites. In these conversations we have aimed to discuss with youth both the cultural and everyday performances (of student/school life) and the artistic performances created by them in the particular context of drama lessons. In the second phase of our study, as we moved into two Toronto theatres, we conducted a further 75 interviews (47 at Theatre Passe Muraille and 28 at Canadian Stage). These interviews focused on both youth and general audience members' perceptions of the play they saw, *The Middle Place*, as well as their reflections on theatre as a medium of social commentary and intervention.
- 3 Verbatim theatre is a form of documentary theatre in which plays are constructed from the precise words spoken by those interviewed about a given topic. Recent high profile examples of verbatim theatre include *The Permanent Way* (2003) by David Hare, *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) by Robin Soans, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, *Let Me Down Easy* (2008) by Anna Deavere Smith, and *Counted* (2010) by LookLeftLookright.
- 4 See Anderson and Wilkinson.
- 5 An unusual choice made by the playwright to include himself in the play, as interviewer, added an important element. Most verbatim plays are extracted through interviews but the interviewer character and interview questions are generally left out of the final product. In Kushnir's case, the effect of leaving himself in as interrogator of the homeless youth underscored the sense of outsider-ness that that audience is meant to feel. We could experience and even relate to the interviewer's discomfort at moments.
- 6 The students also worked with Oonagh Duncan, creator of another verbatim play called *Talk Thirty To Me*. With Oonagh, the youth explored verbatim techniques such as simultaneous performance: youth listened to monologues on audio with ear-buds and tried, simultaneously, to embody the words of the speaker. This method

resembles British theatre-maker Alecky Blythe's "recorded delivery" method, itself informed by the method of American theatre-maker Anna Deavere Smith. Another experience involved the school-touring company Roseneath Theatre, wherein students watched a chamber-style, partially verbatim play *Get Yourself Home* by Skylar James by Jordan Tannahill, in which the creator used a combination of verbatim transcripts from interviews as well as fictional development to explore the story of an American soldier who deserted the military because of homophobic persecution. In other words, there were several 'extra-curricular' theatre experiences that surrounded and ultimately informed the students' experiments with the genre.

- 7 This and the following quotations from youth audience members were collected at Theatre Passe Muraille during personal interviews, 29 Oct. and 3 Nov. 2010. We did not collect demographic data from audience members who participated in interviews at the theatres.
- 8 The connection of theatre to healing has been challenged by playwright Michael Redhill. In an interview about his play, *Goodness*, he states, "the play is not a healing gesture. If anything it gets its fingernails under the edges of a scab and the second act tears it off. The scab is the simplified and digestible form our stories about atrocity take" (qtd. in Goldman and Kyser 914).
- 9 Field notes, Canadian Stage, 23 February 2011.
- 10 See Gallagher, Freeman, and Wessels.
- 11 The following passages reflect actual speech produced during interviews, verbatim, including students' errors in grammar.
- 12 See Burn, Franks, and Nicholson 176

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