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**Proceedings of the conference:  
(Part II)**

**DIALOGUE AND EXCHANGE:  
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE IN THE  
HUMANITIES**

24-26 OCTOBER 2020

CAIRO/ EGYPT



**BUC**  
BADR UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO  
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**Transcultural Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences (TJHSS)** is a journal committed to disseminate a new range of interdisciplinary and transcultural topics in Humanities and social sciences. It is an open access, peer reviewed and refereed journal, published by Badr University in Cairo, BUC, to provide original and updated knowledge platform of international scholars interested in multi-inter disciplinary researches in all languages and from the widest range of world cultures. It's an online academic journal that offers print on demand services.

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## Literary Verbatim Theatre between Actuality and Creativity: Reading of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005)

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### Abstract

It is historically known that many dramatists were sort of adaptors. Playwrights have often used myths, poems, historical events or even earlier stories as their source material but with literary verbatim theatre (the most text-based of all verbatim subcategories), the audience deals with facts found in the original words of a real figure who wrote privately and not for publication. Consequently, some have accused verbatim theatre growing in popularity of lacking creativity claiming that it is not even produced by a playwright while others have disagreed since it undergoes a selective editing process indicating that it is ultimately a creative process. This way the play is filtered by a playwright who goes by the name of an “editor”. Selecting the archives and arranging the given material, is a very subjective process that owes as much to an artist's predilections as to any rule of dramaturgy. Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner's *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) was developed from one hundred eighty-four pages of a young American activist's unpublished writings, including diaries and e-mails, that were given with her parent's permission. The twenty-three year old American was killed in the Gaza Strip by an Israeli defense bulldozer as she attempted to prevent destruction of a Palestinian family's home. The play with its unresolved conflict over Palestine in addition to its cancelled production in the United States a number of times has made it a true controversial literary verbatim play. My paper aims at expounding the abovementioned points of view shedding the light over where they meet leading to the understanding of what John Grierson defined as “the creative treatment of actuality”.

**Keywords:** Literary, Verbatim, America, Palestine, Drama, Rachel, Corrie, Actuality, Creativity, Israel, Alan, Rickman, Zola, Reality, Documentary, Theater, Brecht, Epic, Weiss, Subjectivity, Theatricality, American, Activist, Criticism

Rachel, I am very concerned for you. But I know most of this is not about you, but about the people, the families you are building solidarity with. I have worried a little, because it seems to me that it could be easy to be manipulated by one faction or another. For myself, ... Palestinians have been invisible to me, but you are changing that (Corrie 26).

### 1. The Way to Verbatim Theatre

#### Introduction to Reality Theatre

A dramatic and literary obsession with reality emerged in the late 19th century with experiments in Realism and Naturalism in drama. European writers, specifically Émile Zola, were offended by “the falsity of the theatre” and set out to produce works that resembled, as closely as possible, an interpretation of ordinary life (Braun 24). Zola believed that in order to

inspire actors to produce more truthful performances, playwrights had the responsibility to create more realistic dialogues in their plays (367). He adds concerning diction:

The trouble lies in the claim that these critics make that the theatre has a language of its own. Their theory is that one should not speak on stage as one actually does in everyday life ... there is absolutely no such thing as a language of the theatre (365).

Thus, one could argue that contemporary documentary theatre is an extension of Zola's desire to present language as realistically as possible on stage. Documentary theatre transcends the goal of mere entertainment that was highly prized as the ultimate objective of art since it places the reader/spectator in a position of having to respond to an equal level of reality. It states problems/ events clearly without offering solutions. Thus, there is no dénouement or resolution in its dramatic structure. Regular audiences are not at ease with these situations since they prefer to watch the acceptable opinion of the play on the given subject rather than be in a place where they have to make individual choices. They want to be taken on an uncritical emotional ride, crying when the main character cries, laughing when he/she laughs: identifying with him/her even when the character has nothing in common with them.

Spectators find it easier to form an opinion over an issue that has been solved however: the tackled play in this paper - *My Name is Rachel Corrie* - with its unresolved conflict over the Israeli Occupation of Palestine as seen by a twenty-three year old American has proved to be a challenging choice for both scholars and spectators. The play's cancelled production in the United States a number of times has made it a controversial play that deals with an unresolved socio-political issue.

## 1.2 From “Epic Theatre” to the “Theatre of Fact”

Brecht laid the foundations of documentary theatre by proposing his “Epic Theatre” (33): a form of entertainment, propelled by reason and critical thinking rather than emotion. In the Epic Theatre, the spectator becomes an observer and is forced to take decision instead of being spoon-fed information (37). His theatre addressed the intelligent reflective audience. He used what he called the alienation<sup>i</sup> effect known as the V-effekt: a non-linear structure that favored montage, collage, and discontinuity (Moore 15) to remind its audience every now and then that it is a play and they should not take what they see for granted. Peter Weiss<sup>ii</sup>, drawing on Brecht's ideology as his inspiration, created a documentary theatre called “Theatre of Fact”. He also named it the “theatre of reportage” since it uses source material that can be available in journalism (Moore 18). It is committed to exposing various sides of an argument through the exclusive use of transcripts for its dialogue. His intention was to avoid any form of theatricality.

Historically speaking, many dramatists were sort of adaptors who based their works on earlier sources (some of them were even written and published). Books like *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* by Kenneth Muir and *Shakespearean Intertextuality* by Stephen J. Lynch tackle in detail how Shakespeare, though being one of the greatest dramatists of all times, was not entirely original: he borrowed plots<sup>iii</sup>, reworked materials and sometimes even used the same names found in earlier published works. Shakespeare is not the only playwright who did this. Playwrights have often used myths, poems, historical events or even earlier stories as their source material but this is different from Documentary Theatre.

## 1.3 Verbatim Theatre<sup>iv</sup>

Documentary Theatre that depends on documented materials dealing with socio-political crisis can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greek playwright Phrynicus, who produced *The*

*Capture of Miletus*, which is a play about the Persian War in 429 BC. However, Modern Documentary theatre was developed due to the invention of devices like the radio, television, and later on the internet, to cope with the needs of the new era. Modern recording techniques have enabled the exact words (originally spoken by real-life subjects) to be recorded and then utilized in a dramatic context. The Modern/ Contemporary Documentary Theatre paved the way to the appearance of the newly developed genre “Verbatim Theatre” which came out of the ‘Theatre of Fact’ in Germany to take place on the British stage and become a strong form of political theatre (El Desouqi 262 and Radosavljevic 127). Later, it took its rise in the United States of America as well. Robin Belfield<sup>v</sup> explains in his online article “Authenticity Guaranteed”:

By giving actors only the *actual words of real people*, verbatim theatre is the closest that theatre can get to objective truth – no dramatic license required. It is neither imagined nor invented; its authenticity is guaranteed because it presents the testimony of those with first-hand experience.

Derek Paget was the first to use the term ‘verbatim’ in his paper<sup>vi</sup> on documentary drama, which involves recorded material from real-life transcripts of real characters and events. According to him, this newly developed genre has gradually grown to be the “leading genre to chronicle and depict the recent thorny political events for people on the stage faithfully and accurately” (Moore 262). Moore defines a verbatim play as one which includes a dialogue that can be traced back to an archival transcript whether personal or public (4). Belfield writes in his book *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theatre* (2018) that it is mainly constructed with words that were actually spoken by real people (2). Most famous verbatim plays are inspired by disastrous events as narrated by eyewitnesses. They deal with current events rather than historical events which make them stand from Historical plays.

“Verbatim Theatre” acquired the power to deal with the critical issues of the age and especially the socio-political issues. The emergence of Verbatim Theatre to discuss current socio-political issues - like the occupation of Iraq or Palestine for example – made it compete against Mass Media since it involves investigation and collecting data. In fact, verbatim research and representation in drama has the same power of misrepresenting people as mass media but not the bad record of doing so (Hammond and Steward 102). It offers an alternative way of reflecting on narratives and debating them (Radosavljevic 131). In an interview with Mark Brown that is recorded in his article “Blair in the dock”, Norton Taylor director of the verbatim play *Called to Account* argues:

Theatre is a great medium for presenting contemporary issues that aren't, perhaps cannot be, adequately or properly articulated in newspapers, television or radio ... If the "liveness" of theatre creates a sense of tension and public debate which television can't achieve, perhaps that suggests that the theatre is closer to the courtroom than people might think (2)

Playwright David Hare found the verbatim technique an attractive means of exploring the political nature of what led up to the war in Iraq in his play *Stuff Happens*. It allows recorded media footage to be shown and broadcast on stage along with the acting process of the characters during the play (El Desouqi 277). It also allows characters to comment on broadcasted scenes watched by actors and spectators as a way of modern interactive storytelling. Therefore, one can say that “Verbatim Theatre” is a more inclusive form that includes using Media coverage – without taking it for granted - to give it credibility.

With Literary Verbatim, (the most text-based of all verbatim categories<sup>vii</sup>) the audience deals with facts found in the original words of a real figure who wrote privately and not for

publication. Stephen Bottoms<sup>viii</sup> notes that in such theatre “we can be given unmediated access to the words of the original speaker, and by extension to that speaker’s authentic, uncensored thoughts and feelings” (59). Thus, the documented or written words in his/her diary or letters have no hidden agenda or intention to manipulate others.

## **2. Literary Verbatim Theatre between Actuality and Creativity**

### **2.1 The Debate<sup>ix</sup>**

With Verbatim theatre, - and specially Literary Verbatim - questions of truth, integrity, reality and fiction rise to the surface (Hammond and Steward 6). As a result of using the exact same words of the subjects, some have accused verbatim theatre of lacking creativity: claiming that it is not even produced by a playwright but by an editor. Some critics believe it is not even proper drama (22). Others have disagreed with this claim arguing that since verbatim theatre undergoes a selective editing process then it is ultimately a creative process. This way the play is filtered by a playwright who goes by the name of an editor because selecting the archives and arranging the given material, is a very subjective process that owes as much to an artist's predilections as to any rule of dramaturgy. Remaining faithful to the spirit of the deceased figure and his journey becomes at the discretion of the playwright. This playwright needs to remember that characters in documentary plays are either historical figures or ordinary people who were caught up in the turmoil of a significant moment in human history (El Lozy 113).

### **2.2 What the Audience Expects**

While some playwrights insist that every word spoken onstage should originate in written material, others use a combination of verbatim and self-authored material. In their book *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, Hammond and Steward explain that it all has to do with what the audience expects:

One of the main differences between 'created' and 'verbatim' plays lies in the expectations of the audience. The audience for a verbatim play will expect the play to be political; they will be willing to accept an unconventional format; they will probably expect the material to be contentious and to challenge their opinions. At least they will expect to be surprised by some of the revelations on offer ... the audience for a verbatim play will enter the theatre with the understanding that they're not going to be lied to. They may be unsettled by the unusual way the play is constructed, but they will be compensated for the lack of convention by the assumption that what they are looking at and listening to is revelatory and truthful (11).

The editors’ claim to veracity in a verbatim play encourages the audience to approach the play as an accurate source of information. However, the word “assumption” used by Hammond and Steward in the abovementioned excerpt implies that what the audience beholds by visiting/reading verbatim theatre is not necessarily one hundred percent true but it is what the audience expects to see or read by visiting such genre. Factually speaking, sometimes editors face problems like having limited archives and/or no possibility of re-interviewing the dead person to fill in the gaps yet, a context has to be created. There is no doubt that adding the slightest invented inserts into verbatim lines is problematic for those concerned with absolute truth. However, scholars such as Nels P. Highberg<sup>x</sup> have argued that “a core value of documentary theatre in general . . . is the extent to which it encourages audiences to recognize the damaging effects of singular impositions of truth in society” (167). If one rejects binary interpretations of truth, perceiving truth instead as a spectrum encompassing multiple

perspectives, then a playwright's "organization of material into a script" and/or filling in the gaps to create a context can become an alternative perspective of truth (171). Playwright David Hare argues, the fact that the people in his plays actually exist and the words in his plays were actually spoken by them in no way undermines his role as a dramatist. Befield explains:

It would be naïve to think ... that verbatim theatre is completely free of a 'filter'. With this kind of theatre, the playwright usually serves as researcher, editor and dramaturge all at once; and in all three roles they are required to make active choices. As researcher, they are often responsible for gathering the material, choosing who to interview and what questions to ask. As editor, they make selections, choosing what to keep in and what to leave out. And as dramaturge, they give the material its shape, choosing what form to present it in, what story to tell. The verbatim theatre practitioner is mouthpiece and censor ("Authenticity Guaranteed").

Bella Merlin<sup>xi</sup> claims in her book *Konstantin Stanislavsky* (Routledge Performance Practitioners) that there are three versions of truth: first, 'the make-believe truth', second, 'the actual fact', and third, 'the scenic truth' or the "distillation of reality into something aesthetically appropriate and artistically constructed". When a two-hour interview is covered in no more than minutes on stage, it is not diminishment of truth but rather condensation of it into a more artistic and aesthetically accepted form that fits the new medium (42). So what happens is a process of distilling the "actual fact" into "scenic truth".

Juxtaposition is an essential dramaturgical device to documentary theatre (Moore 18) and since every verbatim play is a documentary play by default (but not every documentary play is verbatim) then by necessity Verbatim theatre does not only explore truth, but encourages criticism about its claims to truth. Weiss writes "the spectator can be put into the place of the accused or of the accuser; he can become a member of a committee of enquiry; he can contribute to the understanding of a complex situation or provoke opposition" (43).

### **2.3 *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005): A Typical Example of Literary Verbatim**

*My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) is usually considered a typical example of literary verbatim theatre since it uses Rachel's diaries, journals and emails that she wrote from Gaza as its main source material. Editors Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner's play was developed from one hundred and eighty-four pages of American activist Rachel Corrie's unpublished writing, including diaries and e-mails that were given with her parent's permission. Both Rickman and Viner credit themselves not as authors of this text, but editors. The play focuses on an individual who left a mark posthumously: Corrie was killed in the Gaza Strip by an Israeli defense bulldozer, as she attempted to prevent destruction of a Palestinian family's home. The effectiveness of Literary verbatim is heightened by the physical absence of the author since the subject is presented posthumously. This is perhaps why Paget states that *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is a "true verbatim play" ("The Broken Tradition" 233). The conversion of recorded history collected from different sources into theatrical performance was a challenge at the heart of the discussion of verbatim theatre techniques. Editors even referred to their sources and displayed them to their audience inside the drama itself. For example, in the tackled play, stage directions tell the readers on page 2 that Rachel "finds a journal and turns the page" then refers to a recorded phone message by Rachel to her mother on page 13. Chronologically dated events are taken directly from her own notebook as they appear on page 19 and 25. A number of exchanged emails between Rachel and her parents appear from page 26 to page 38. Even the part in which she was killed is shown on the television Rachel leaves in the form of a transcript of an

eyewitness account. The last page shows a video of ten-year old real Rachel during a Press Conference on World Hunger saying “We have got to understand that people in Third World countries think, care and smile and cry just like us ... we have to understand that they are us. We are them” (Corrie 40).

The audience is not emotionally manipulated here by theater technology or acting techniques. They know they are dealing with the real story of a person who did not intend to emotionally manipulate them to accept what he/she says for granted but at the same time, they need to remember that they are reading about Rachel through the filtered version of her editors: so it is a re-contextualizing process that depends on the playwrights’ ethical code to a great extent.

The material editors received from Rachels’ parents included poems about her cat, friends, ex-boyfriend, mother and grandmother but editors chose not to include these typical late-teens’ writings into their script. All material was published later in unpolished book entitled *Let Me Stand Alone: the Journals of Rachel Corrie* published posthumously in 2009. Comparing between the actual words found in her journal and the way they were used in the play show the editors’ dramatic license to create context by skipping lines or arranging material to bring certain focal points to the surface. Here are some examples:

Rachel wrote in her diary in 1990:

I want to be a lawyer, a dancer, an actress, a mother, a wife, a children’s author, a distance runner, a poet, a pianist, a pet store owner, an astronaut, an environmental and humanitarian activist, a psychiatrist, a ballet teacher, and the first woman president (*Let Me Stand Alone*, 9) to which editors shortened to “there was my five-paragraph manifesto on the million things I wanted to be, from a wandering poet to first woman president” (*My Name is Rachel Corrie* 9). Editors settled for only two of the list she originally mentioned which are “poet” and “first woman president” to keep the focus on her writing capabilities and aspiring political role since childhood. Rachel wrote about her wish to pass what she learnt from her mother to her children but editors did not to include that in order not to arouse the audience’s sympathy towards Rachel: who is more than just an ordinary girl killed at a young age and deprived of her down-to-earth dreams. They may have preferred to pick and choose due to the change of medium as well.

Corrie writes that “more Israelis have been killed in road accidents than in all the country’s wars put together ... the vast majority of Palestinians right now, as far as I can tell, are engaging in Gandhian non-violent resistance”. Editors preferred to skip the first line and keep only the second in order not enrage Americans or Israelis who may be watching and believe that it has been an equally balanced war.

One of the scenes that editors kept very much the same is Rachel’s death scene highlighting the fact that the driver saw Rachel and intentionally crushed her. Below is how an eye witness - originally - described her death:

With Rachel in its path, the bulldozer did not stop. The ISM activists screamed and waved frantically, but the machine continued ahead ... Rachel managed to climb up the mound to avoid being engulfed by it. They report she was high enough to see directly into the cab but as it continued to advance, she lost her footing and was pulled under the blade. The bulldozer continued forward until its cab was over Rachel, then backed up, revealing her crushed body (*Let Me Stand Alone* 3).

In the play, in the editors’ words, her death was described more or less the same.

It (the bulldozer) continued towards her at some pace with a mound of earth building up in front of her. And as the mound of earth reached Rachel she obviously felt that in order

to keep her balance to keep her footing, she had to climb on to this mound of earth ... when she did this it put her head and shoulders ... clearly in the view of the bulldozer driver, so he knew absolutely that she was there (*My Name is Rachel Corrie* 39).

The editors chose to end the play with one of Rachel's poems that in fact was written in 1989 and not even close to her death in 2003 to show both readers and spectators that Rachel knew her way and message long before her death. Rickman and Viner kept the poem as it is except for the fact that they delayed its appearance (*Let Me Stand Alone* 8) and (*My Name is Rachel Corrie* 40).

It is worth mentioning that the play's inaugural New York staging was "indefinitely postponed" (March 2006) despite its success when it first premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London (2005). Some accused it of being "anti-Semitic" although Rachel's father described it as generally "anti-violent" (Moore "Rachel Corrie: Staging a protest"). The opposition the play faced in the United States was basically due to the fact that Corrie was an American who aligned herself with Palestinian human rights which is an unusual choice that ironically called for censorship in the land of freedom of speech. Six months later, a different theatre agreed to present the play which drew Jewish protestors to the doors of the theatre. The actress playing Rachel was exposed to interruption and protests from the audience. The protesters argued that the Israeli deaths by Palestinians were not portrayed in the play.

### 3. In Conclusion

Verbatim theatre is a modish influential genre that allows its audience to discover the world with its authenticity through testimonies and first hand experiences. It brings the unheard voices of average people to the stage telling their surprising stories. It addresses an intelligent reflective spectator who takes part in the dramatic performance and becomes a key character in it.

Those who accuse Literal Verbatim plays of having nothing to offer their theatre goers (as they lack theatricality and are too text-based) often forget that Literary Verbatim Theatre's heavy dependence on the authenticity of the material is what gives it a certain power to reach audiences. Its growing popularity in tackling socio-political issues that have not been resolved along with its balance of reality and subjective edited reality is what the father of English Documentaries John Grierson calls, a creative work of non-fiction or 'the creative treatment of actuality' (Ekwuazi 12).

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This was because Brecht believed that empathy caused the “audience [to be] disempowered from analysing clearly the social and political forces at work in the fictional world of that character” (Eddershaw 16).

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Weiss stands out as one of the major post World War II playwrights who relied on documented sources in their creation of dramatic pieces.

<sup>iii</sup> To name a few examples, it is believed that Shakespeare based his tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* on Brooke’s 1562 poem entitled *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. Also, *Hamlet* is the anagram of Amleth found in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (or “Deeds of the Danes”) which chronicled Denmark’s Kings.

<sup>iv</sup> a new dramatic genre born out of documentary theatre necessitated by the need of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries for a new form that deals with real people’s suffering (El Desouqi 258).

<sup>v</sup> Robin Belfield is a theatre director and writer who has worked with major theatre companies including the National Theatre (where he has also taught verbatim-theatre techniques), the Royal Shakespeare Company, Nuffield Southampton Theatres, Bristol Old Vic, Watermill Theatre and Theatre Royal Bath.

<sup>vi</sup> published in the first issue of the original Theatre Quarterly (1971).

<sup>vii</sup> Tribunal, Literary, Expository, and Participatory verbatim theatres (Moore 23).

<sup>viii</sup> Stephen J. Bottoms is the Wole Soyinka Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Leeds. He is the author of Albee: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*.

<sup>ix</sup> “For every Fan of Verbatim, ... there is a critic” (Hammond and Steward 11)

<sup>x</sup> Associate Professor of English and Modern Languages at College of Arts and Sciences, University of Hartford.

<sup>xi</sup> Bella Merlin is a professional actor and a lecturer in Drama and Theatre Arts at Birmingham University.

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