

Verbatim Theatre: Anguish and Theatrical Truths

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Abstract: In recent years, in the Romanian theater space, more and more productions have appeared that are based on verbatim plays and that successfully fit into this category. The verbatim technique works directly with the stories of ordinary people, people who are given a voice through art. More often than not, these voices tell haunting and unusual stories – stories full of anguish, social or political injustices, or painful and unknown truths. The responsibility of the verbatim creator is immense, in addition to presenting the story of his subject word for word, he must be careful not to alter the truths and authentic elements that underlie it. This theatrical technique assumes a huge responsibility on the part of the theater artist, and more than that, it has a specific and extremely rigorous methodology. For this reason, it is important to understand how this technique works, and especially, how a theater artist should relate to it.

Keywords: theater, dramaturgy, interview, dialogue, limits, responsibilities

Introduction

Understanding verbatim theater is fundamental for several reasons, as it provides a unique perspective on the human experience, challenges pre-defined notions of truth and stage performance, and, more than that, fosters empathy and the active participation of the viewer in the reception process. In addition to all this, verbatim theater stages real-life stories and events in a pure and unfiltered form. This authentic character of the verbatim gives the audience the ability to identify and almost inevitably approach the subject proposed by the artistic team, on a deeply emotional level. By analyzing the concept and modus operandi of verbatim theatre, we gain a better understanding of the value of authentic stories, and how they can be harnessed to create an artistic creation that has a major impact on the audience.

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The verbatim has the special ability to stimulate the audience's capacity for empathy and understanding authentically. By rendering complex social issues and allowing us to listen to the voices of real people, it encourages us to identify with them, if only for a few moments, and perceive reality through their lens. Thus, this can contribute to a greater understanding of the surrounding reality through the eyes of others and can lead to a more open, inclusive society.

But for all this to really happen, behind such an artistic product are creators who truly understand the methods, intentions, and purpose of this authentic technique. Precisely from this point of view, it is important to understand the roots of verbatim, its mode of operation, and its evolution in the Romanian space. In this work, I also propose a quantitative study to understand the relevance of this theatrical technique in the local space, and especially, its popularity among young artists.

Verbatim theatre: historical context

In Europe, the first forms of proletarian theater or political theater developed simultaneously, both in Germany, in Hungary, during the Hungarian Bolshevik revolution, and in the Soviet Union, between the 1920s and 1940s. Piscator was one of the most important theater makers who consolidated this type of theater-making, followed later by Brecht and his predecessors.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had a profound impact on theatre, both in Russia and around the world. The revolution marked a radical change in the political and social landscape, and theater artists quickly reacted to these changes through their art. Theater artists responded to political changes by creating performances that reflected the revolutionary spirit and were often politically engaged works accessible to the masses. So, we understand that the Russian Revolution of 1917 had a profound impact on the theater, inspiring a new generation of artists to get involved politically and socially through their art, artists who saw the theater as a tool for shaping and re-shaping society and promoting socio-political changes.

Starting from here, it is very clear that contemporary documentary theater also has its origins in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, when, immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917, a group of actors called the

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*Blue Blouse*¹ appeared in the Russian cultural space. These *Agitprop* theater troupes performed in public spaces, spaces such as cafes, bars, or markets, to spread Russian propaganda and influence people about their political choices by playing plays that were about recent political events. They were also nicknamed the vibrant newspaper, being *somehow a source* of information for the common people, disguised in an artistic form. In 1927, the Blue Blouse band organized an *international* tour in Berlin, where they stopped for a show at the theater then run by Piscator. The Blue Blouse troupe was to Piscator's liking *from the start*, he having been concerned, as previously mentioned, with documentary drama and documentary film since 1925.

Later, Piscator was also influenced by the Russian troupe, and vice versa, and continued to write and produce theater with a great interest in the documentary and social side of theater. Also in 1925, he brought out the play *Trotz Alledem*, known in English as *In Spite of Everything*, a dramatic creation derived entirely from political documents and often cited as the beginning of the first period of modern documentary theatre.² We observe, therefore, how the political and documentary theater gained momentum in the German and Russian space, in tandem, and how they influenced each other.

Later, in the 1930s, the documentary theater also spread to other European spaces, especially in North America. Documentary theater was adopted in the American space by Hallie Flanagan Davis (1890-1969) and Morris Watson (1901-1972), the founders of the *Living Newspapers*, a group that shared aims and methodologies with the *Blue Blouse*, being directly influenced by what was happening overseas, and which were part of a larger project called the *Federal Theater Project*, which was involved in the production of plays on social themes such as labor in America, agriculture, the social position of the American common man, etc.

In later years, Nola Chilton³, an Israeli theater teacher and director, introduced this type of theater-making to the Israeli and Middle Eastern theater space as well. Between the years 1940-1970, the documentary theater ends up spreading worldwide. In England, in the 1970s and 1980s, documentary

1 Frantisek Deák, *Blue Blouse (1923-28)*, The Drama Review, Vol. 17, Mar. 1973, Nr.1 Russian Edition, MIT. JSTOR, JSTOR, accessed online on 11.11 2022

2 Thomas Irmer, *A Search for New Realities: Documentary Theatre in Germany*, TDR (1988-) 50, n. 3 (2006), p. 16–28

3 Linda Ben-Zvi, *Staging the Other Israel: The Documentary Theatre of Nola Chilton*, TDR/The Drama Review 2006; 50: 3 (191), p. 42–55.

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theater gained more ground and interest from both practitioners and the general public.

The appearance of small portable recorders throughout Europe led to the creation of an original method, called *the Stoke Local Documentary Method*⁴, created by Peter Cheeseman (1932-2010). This method was based on the audio recordings that Peter Cheeseman made with certain subjects and based on which he later developed dramatic pieces. Among the first plays he wrote was *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1977). Ever since this play, Cheeseman has relied on the exact transcription of the interviews conducted and the faithful, word-for-word rendering of the interviews in the form of a dramatic text, seeking to render the truth and authenticity implied by what later came to be called the theater verbatim

One of the most vocal and important initiators of the verbatim technique in the world was Anna Deavere Smith (b. 1950). Smith, an actress and playwright of African descent, produced two theater performances that relied entirely on the verbatim technique. *Fires in the Mirror*⁵, made in 1992, and *Twilight: Los Angeles*, also made in the same year, were two shows based strictly on interviews conducted by the actress on immediate social issues, and above all, on two events in which she took part. Both dramatic texts arranged by the author were based on the testimonials of people who also took part in the events that were the subject of the plays.⁶

Anna Deavere Smith's endeavors, and her creations, are closely linked to the staging of the U.S. show in 1966 and the release of *Tell Me Lies* two years later by director Peter Brook (1925-2022).⁷ Both the film and Brook's performance were two of his controversial creations that generated extremely strong reactions from the general public but also from theater and film critics, and from the authorities of the time. The show, for example, discusses the Vietnam War and its social implications, and Brook argues for a staging of the clash of ideas, rather than a propaganda or political staging, and he aims to

4 Derek Paget, *The 'Broken Tradition' of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance, Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, edition by Alison Forsyth & Chris Megson, Ed. Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, p. 224-236

5 Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles*, Ed. Anchor, New York, 2004, p. 4-6.

6 Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft (Contributions in Drama & Theatre Studies)*, Ed. Praeger, New York, 1997, p. 249

7 Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles*, Ed. Anchor, New York, 2004, p. 4-6

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give the audience a moment of reflection on the present and especially on the future.⁸

Starting from this point, theater critics questioned whether current events, both political and social, should find a place in theater productions and art in general. As I mentioned before, Brook indirectly answered these questions by emphasizing the fact that his show is a show of reflection, and he advocated for a theater that wants to create contradictions and contrasts.

In this sense, also in Radu Apostol's book, we find a relevant fragment about the influences that this turning point in art had on the following creators of social, political, or documentary theater, including verbatim: "At the beginning of the 90s, Anna Deavere Smith followed in her creations the steps taken by Brook. We find the steps followed by Brook at the beginning of the 90s in the creations of Anna Deavere Smith, director *and founder of the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue*, New York City, whose name is associated with the affirmation of social theater, documentary theater. In making the performance *Twilight: Los Angeles*, 1992, Anna Deavere Smith interviewed many participants in the events that turned Los Angeles into a real battlefield, a civil war, for several weeks. [...] Based on the filmed interviews, Anna Deavere Smith structured a solo performance. The theatricality of this creation resulted from the fact that a single actor (Anna Deavere Smith) became the voice of the representatives of both camps involved in the conflict."⁹

In the 2000s, Moises Kaufman (b. 1963), a South American director, was one of those who took verbatim theater further in America and Europe, creating plays and performances of great importance, such as *The Laramie Project*, a play that talks about the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, in the city of Laramie, on grounds of homophobia and exclusion. The subject led Kaufman to conduct a series of interviews for the production of the play, which later enjoyed enormous success in theaters overseas.¹⁰

So, once we have understood the historical context and the turmoil that was the basis of the birth of political theater and documentary theater, we can

8 Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves, Albert Hunt, *Tell Me Lies: The Book of Royal Shakespeare Theatre Production/US/Vietnam*, Ed. Royal Shakespeare Company, Londra, 1968, p. 13

9 Radu Apostol, *Teatrul social: Perspective asupra rolului teatrului în raport cu societatea*, Ed. UNATC Press, București, 2018, p. 26

10 Moisés Kaufman, *The Laramie Project*, Ed. Vintage Books, New York, 2001, p. 8-13

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now turn our attention to verbatim theater and understand what are the elements that differentiate the latter, or rather, how the verbatim theater ended up being born separating from the documentary theater.

Truth and fiction

In order not to give a classic definition of what truth means, I chose to recall how Aristotle defined truth in *Metaphysics*. *He said* that the truth is a statement by which you say that what is *is* and what is not *is not*. He also defined the lack of truth, fiction if we want, just as simply, saying that stating that *what-is*, is not, or that *what-is-not*, is, constitutes a false sentence.¹¹ Truth wins over fiction when it comes to documentary theater and especially verbatim theater. As I have pointed out before, the function of truth is an essential one for this type of theatre. Telling the truth and informing the audience about some real facts that took place are the starting points in this theater. Selecting and editing material for a documentary or verbatim piece is a creative process not unlike creating a fictional drama. The only major difference is the lack of alteration of the truth for aesthetic or sensational purposes. So, the documentary genre offers a dramatic representation of the playwright's or author's highly subjective version of the truth underlying the play. Documentary theater investigates the truth and prompts reflection on one's own statements.

Although most makers of documentary theater want to bring the pure truth to the stage and strive to do so, I do not believe that there is a documentary or verbatim play or performance that brings the truth in its pure state to the stage, regardless of technique. When I say this, I mean particularly the kind of work a dramatist has or can have in this kind of work. As much as a playwright would like to remain objective, all material in the play passes through its subjective filter.

Whether we're discussing what kind of documents we select to write a documentary play, or we're discussing the selection of text from an eight-hour interview for a one-hour verbatim performance. All these interventions, whether we like it or not, change to some extent the kind of truth we tell on

¹¹ Aristotel, *Metafizica*, trad. by Andrei Cornea, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2007, p. 179

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stage and the way we do it. Of course, we do not alter the pure, basic truth, but we shape it according to our own subjectivities.

Also, the theater critic Iulia Popovici (b. 1979) states that: "Reality is in the eye of the beholder. The specific nature of the practices and techniques known as documentary theater is that they are fundamentally based on the idea of truth, to which theatrical experience gives direct access."¹²

Finally, we note the importance of truth in this way of creating theater. Finding the truth is the motivation with which creators set off from the very beginning of their creative and research endeavors. Keeping the truth is the goal in the process itself, and presenting it is the ultimate goal they have.

Verbatim Theater confirms that truth is often elusive and that individual accounts may vary. It may intentionally include conflicting perspectives or highlight gaps and uncertainties in the accounts it presents. The goal is not necessarily to present an objective truth, but rather to invite the audience to approach different points of view, question assumptions, and critically analyze the complexity of the subject. Ultimately, documentary theater, but especially verbatim theater, attempts to honestly and authentically portray real-life events and people but recognizes the inherent challenges and subjectivity involved in the pursuit of truth. Thus, the audience is encouraged to analyze the material objectively, make their own analyses, and examine the complexity of truth in relation to personal experiences and social contexts.

Of course, fiction is also present to some extent in this whole creative process, maybe at the level of costumes, at the level of scenography, if there is one, then at the aesthetic level - instead, at the level of the text, in the verbatim theater at least, the text is meant to be truly faithful to the discourse of the interviewed subject.

Verbatim Theatre: Methodology and Research

In the process of creating a verbatim performance, there are five clear stages of work that we must follow: the stage of research and study, the stage of gathering material, the process of editing the material, the process of rehearsal and working with actors and the construction stage of the show.¹³

12 Iulia Popovici, *Elefantul din camera. Ghid despre teatrul independent din Romania*, Ed. Idea, București, 2016, p. 91

13 Robin Belfield, *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theatre*, Ed. Nick Hern Books, Londra, 2018, p.80-125

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In the research and study stage, we must be concerned with choosing the theme/problem we want to address, identifying and finding the subjects we can interview for the next stage, and above all, reaching a kind of unanimity in choosing the theme, then when we work as a team. Choosing the theme and topic is not a simple process, because we have to think about the resources we have and be aware of all the technological or financial limitations we have.

Once these aspects are clarified, we can decide on a certain theme and we can start to identify the people who could become our subjects in the process of gathering the material. This is not easy either, once these people are identified, we must have their full consent to be filmed and recorded in order to build a dramatic text based on them, which will later turn into a theater performance. At the same time, it is important to explain to them that the characters that will be played on stage will be totally inspired by them.

The next stage is the gathering of the material. Once the subjects are chosen, we need to interview them and record both video and audio. Of course, some interviews may be video-only and others audio-only, but it is preferable to do both. Most of the time, from a video recording we can observe a certain movement, a gesture, a tone of voice accompanied by a grimace that totally changes our perception of our subject. Often, a movement makes us hear what cannot be heard and write what could not have been written. Interviews can be conducted either based on pre-written and thought-out questions or the basis of an impromptu interview. There is no clear rule about this, what is important instead is to touch on the subject we propose to discuss, in depth, through the discussion we have with our subject.

The next stage is the process of editing the material we have gathered. Once you have the raw material, everything has to be transcribed so it can be acted upon. Once you get all the material together, you already have an unfinished piece, a good base to start with. However, not all the collected material can be played on stage, there are cases where the recorded material can be over twenty hours long. So, it must be essentialized and polished carefully. Most likely, an hour-long conversation will end up being reduced to twenty minutes in the final text, which requires extra attention and fierce concentration. How do we manage to select only what is essential and important to us from dozens of hours of interviews? This is possible by calling on the sensitivity, empathy, and precision that you acquire through your presence at the interview, in the process of gathering the materials. This is the

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only way you can select what is important for your performance or text and outline your characters as truthfully as possible.

A method used by certain playwrights or directors is to have the actors essentialize, in the first phase, all the text transcribed from the interviews into five essential words and answer questions such as: What do we want to say? What is the word that best defines my subject? etc. Even if we have the power to reshape the words of our subjects to some extent, we must always keep the five essential words in mind and not forget the main purpose of the theater we practice: to preserve the truth. Of course, we may have the impression at this stage that the text we have in our hands is not the best or that it is not a sensational one that will keep the audience on their toes all the time. This is not the purpose of the verbatim text, as the British writer Alecky Blythe (b. 1973) points out, the audience wants to be stimulated and they want to be entertained, which means they want to be fascinated by an incident and a story that the texts pure verbatim, most of the time, I may not be able to provide it. And we have to understand this from the beginning.¹⁴

For the next process, that of rehearsal and working with the actors, we need incredible emotional openness and flexibility. Once you have the final form of the text, it's much easier to learn and you can juggle on an acting level with the text and its interpretation. So, it is preferable that once completed, the text is transcribed and distributed in print to the actors. In parallel with reading the text, in the first phase, an audition of each scene, of the original interview, can be done, in order to more easily induce the actor the typology of the character he has to play.

And again, we're talking about keeping the truth, about the fact that what the actor has to play is a living person, a subject he can study for hours, and the source of inspiration is always available. The actor must be precise in what he is doing and must not let his imagination take control of reality and clear evidence he must present to his audience through verbatim theater.

The last stage of work is the construction of the show. Although theater is, by definition, a staging, an imaginary world, and the possibilities are limitless, how can we stay as far from the fantastic as possible and tell our story as honestly and clearly as possible? Most verbatim creators call for simplicity

14 Alecky Blythe, Verbatim, *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, versiune editată de W. Hammond și D. Steward, Ed. Oberon Books, Londra, 2008, p. 101-102

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and sensitivity because what we do in verbatim is nothing more than an open discussion, on an important topic chosen by us, with the present audience. As the theater critic Tatiana Zhurcheva (b. 1953) points out, "reality becomes more important than the image, its interpretation and valorization"¹⁵. So, what matters most is the accuracy and sensitivity with which we say what we have to say, and not the form in which we say it. Always the content, not the form.

So we see the complexity that verbatim theater has when it comes to the creative process. All these stages of work are extremely important and must be fully respected in order to reach the desired artistic product. Throughout this long process, which can last from weeks to months or years, we must remain focused on the two important tangents of verbatim: truth and simplicity. Although verbatim may seem too fixed a form of work, too text-centric and rigorous, it is our duty to see the freedom we have in this type of work. For example, Alecky Blythe created his own method of doing verbatim, starting from the basic rules. She chose to focus more on voice recordings and the inflections of the actors' voices, developing a whole method in this regard. The freedom that an artist can discover in verbatim theater is a great one, although the early signs seem to contradict us. Blythe, too, has created a strong verbatim imprint, always using the original voices of interviewees in his performances.

Alecky Blythe was and is a prominent figure in the realm of verbatim theatre, known for his innovative approach of using recorded interviews and real-life dialogue as the basis for his plays, capturing the authenticity and nuances of everyday speech with remarkable accuracy. We thus observe that although verbatim seems to leave no room for developing anything beyond its basic rules, it has a whole world full of endless possibilities.

Approaching verbatim theater from the perspective of the actor

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, many questions arose about the function of the text in the theater. Since the end of the 19th century, it has been discussed that theater is not literature, but simply words. In the history of theater, we could observe several fluctuations and reports to the theater text and to the way a playwright is perceived.

15 Tatiana Zhurcheva, *Literature of Fact and Verbatim Drama: Attraction and Repulsion*, Ed. RITSA, collection Contemporary Russian Drama, Kazan, 2011, n. trad., p. 29

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Thus, we can observe that since then, but especially in recent years, the theater has gone through paradigm changes. Today's theater no longer considers the playwright as essential, nor the text as sacred, but the experimental and performative theater has been acclaimed and considered to be more alive and authentic, based on experimentation and the individual experiences of the actors. Precisely in this sense, even verbatim, which seems at first hand an extremely restrictive theater, is actually a theater of experiments and actors. Of course, we can see this fidelity to the real face as a kind of impediment in the actor's play and work, but it is not so. For example, an actor can discover a whole world of his subject, a world that we do not see at first sight on the recording camera.

Although Hans-Thies Lehmann (1944-2022) emphasizes a tendency of contemporary theater to oppose the text in favor of a live performance that does not depend on the pressure of the textual frame, verbatim things are totally different.¹⁶ Here, the text for the actor is extremely important and becomes, in addition to the body and emotions, the basic tool of his work.

The terms are verbatim and the documentary itself links this practice to the text-based theatre, as it is based on recorded words and written documents, but in its aim to capture the feelings, feelings and experiences of real people, it reflects a phenomenological focus on immediacy and vivacity, the now and the alive, which refers to Lehmann's *notion of post-dramatic theatre*. We see, therefore, that it is difficult to fit this hybrid form of theater into a clear category. However, for the actor, it remains hard work and full of hours of auditions and study to make such a performance. The actor has this duty to reproduce the life of a real person on the stage and to preserve truthfully the way this person speaks or moves, but nevertheless, he has the duty to look for the unsaid, the hidden things, and so he infuses his role with his own interpretation. Verbatim, the actor is the living proof of a testimony unheard until then, he is the voice and the body of the voiceless.

Among the acting techniques most often used in verbatim theater is the Meisner Technique or Viewpoints. The Meisner Technique was theorized and put into practice by the actor and teacher Sanford Meisner (1905-1997), and is based on three important elements: emotional preparation, drills and

¹⁶ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translation by Karen Jürs-Munby, Ed. Routledge, Londra, 2006, p. 46-48

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rehearsals, and improvisation. This technique is used most of the time to be able to get into the skin of the played character, to his depths and sensitivities/nuances. One of the most important aspects of this acting technique is living with sincerity. Meisner emphasized the importance of living honestly in imaginary circumstances, or rather, being real in the unreal.¹⁷ Actors were urged to let go of preconceived ideas and trust their instincts, allowing the character's feelings and reactions to emerge naturally from the circumstances of the situation on stage. This technique helps the actor to be aware of his character's emotional/inner journey, and more importantly, to help him contain it.

On the other hand, the Viewpoints technique is a postmodern dance improvisation technique born in the 70s, a technique theorized by the choreographer and teacher Mary Overlie (1946-2020), and later adopted by the director Anne Bogart (b. 1951), is a technique that focuses on the actor's physicality and awareness of space. It explores elements such as time, space, form, emotion, and movement to create a dynamic and expressive performance. In Mary Overlie's version, there was *emotion* among the 6 *viewpoints*, although Bogart abandons emotion and goes more towards physicality. An important element of this method is increased attention to gesture and kinesthetic response. Viewpoints place great importance on gesture and kinesthetic and instantaneous response to stimuli. Actors gain a heightened sensitivity to their own physical impulses and to the actions and reactions that result from interactions with others. This method helps actors to be aware of the physical/external course of the character they are playing, and more than that, it helps them to understand and shape their own stage course.¹⁸

So we see that these two techniques, which are used in verbatim theater, are two working methods that combine and develop the inner plane and the outer plane of the actor - mind-body. In this way, developing in tandem, they help the actor to outline his character as easily and realistically as possible - and this realism, this condition, and mission of being as faithful as possible to the subject played can only be achieved in this way - taking into account the complexity of your character. Throughout the process, actors often

17 Sanford Meisner, Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, Ed. Vintage, New York, 1987, p. 136

18 Anne Bogart, Tina Landau, *THE VIEWPOINTS BOOK. A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*, Ed. Theatre Communications Group, New York, 2005, p. 9-10

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specifically seek the balance between faithfully representing real people and discovering artistic freedom to create a powerful and challenging theatrical experience. Their work involves a deep commitment to documentation, empathy, and masterful interpretation to bring textual material to life on stage, and more than that, they aim to build a connection with the audience, drawing them both intellectually and emotionally into the world of the stories being told. Of course, these methods are perhaps among the most used for verbatim theater, but nevertheless, there are certainly other artists who work verbatim theater by combining other acting methods.

Approaching verbatim theater from the perspective of the playwright

Although it seems that the work of the verbatim dramatist is extremely limited and boring, it is not so. The playwright is, most of the time, the key to the final text that we end up presenting on stage. A dramatist, who is present at all the preliminary stages, has the ability to notice, edit, and keep only the essential things that end up being part of the final text. In addition to the fact that he can think of the interview questions, he can, through them or by leading the interview freely in a certain direction, influence the course and thread of the story he wants to tell.

On the other hand, he can also help the director in the staging of the play, he can suggest spaces, types of lighting, and much more. This is possible precisely because the type of work that verbatim implies is participatory and non-hierarchical.

For example, already in the editing part of the text, the playwright can suggest a space where the action can take place if the whole team decides that they want to put the characters in certain situations. And as it is already well known, "a space is the gateway to another universe."¹⁹

It is precisely this power that a playwright has in this creative process. In addition to the many hours of transcribing the raw text, further editing, and essentializing the text, he can suggest all these things and take part in the construction of the performance. The playwright does not only have the function of a verbatim playwright, he is the one who also takes care of the

19 Jules Horne, *Dramatic Techniques For Creative Writers: Turbo-Charge Your Writing*, Ed. Method Writing, Londra, 2018, n. trad, p.6

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research part and the one who proposes the general trajectory of the artistic project from the very beginning. In addition to his knowledge of dramaturgy, the playwright must also be a very good communicator. Through his hands, he passes every subject and every word that will be spoken on stage. The playwright may even act in the final performance, there are many examples of actor-playwrights who have taken on this dual role in their productions. Or, they may as well be playwright-directors and even take on the role of director in the project.

However, beyond the work the playwright may have in the latter stages of creation, he has an important role in the first two stages. Even though verbatim is a form of theater quite criticized for its originality, as it uses pre-existing transcripts and the writing seems to lack originality and therefore the production requires less effort or skill to create, things are not quite so. In this sense, the actor and documentary author Robin Soans (b. 1947) argues that: "The verbatim writer must be equally considered a creator, a dramatist, just like a conventional theater author. You could not say that a portrait painter who has a subject seated before him is less of an artist than a painter who invents a portrait from his imagination."²⁰

Regardless of all this, a playwright has an essential role in the creative process of verbatim. In addition to the work he puts in, as I mentioned before, he can completely change the trajectory of the project right from the beginning. It is his responsibility to oversee the truth in the work with the other artists and to maintain it at all costs. Just as the actor does not imitate the interviewees, but tries to reproduce their spirit on stage, so a playwright has the same mission, to capture the spirit of the subjects by keeping the essentials in the final text. Last but not least, in addition to all the previously mentioned, the playwright also has an ethical responsibility that he must fulfill. The dramatist of verbatim theater must be ethically responsible for what he presents in the performance text and on the stage. Verbatim pieces should be an accurate source of information, just like investigative journalism.

Essentially, the playwright's role in verbatim theater centers around the text, shaping the text, supporting the actors in finding truth and substance in the underlying material, and ensuring a coherent and impactful performance

20 Will Hammond, & Dan Steward, *Verbatim*, Ed. Oberon Books, Londra, 2012, *n. trad.*, p.36

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for both the creative team and the audience. The playwright cooperates with the director and actors to select and analyze the transcribed source material. Together they assess the quality, authenticity, and representativeness of the interviews, conversations, or testimonies used.

The playwright assists the actors in gaining a deep understanding of the real-life characters or subjects they are portraying. Thus, he provides historical-contextual information, presents perspectives and aspects of the past of the interviewees, and helps the actors understand the motivations, conflicts, and complexity of the characters they embody.

In this regard, playwrights have a responsibility to respect the integrity of the source of information, and the source material itself must be valued and presented on stage in its purest form. In this type of theater, preserving the truth and maintaining it throughout the creative process is extremely important, and the playwright has this responsibility for the first time and to the greatest extent.

Maintaining the truth: the shared mission

More often than not, the fact that verbatim pieces are closely related to an immediate reality or a truth of a socio-human context or personal truth/the truth of personal experiences turns out to be a crucial factor in the type of experience that the audience can have it when they come to a play of this kind.

For this reason, the writer and director might seek to control the audience's experience and reception of the play by adding special effects, text changes, or chronological rearrangement of events, and so on. These things are possible, we can change the order of the scenes, we can add specific gestures, small changes in interpretation, or move our characters to another setting, but nevertheless, we must always keep in mind that the mission of this type of theater is to bring the truth on stage.

So, the boundaries are there, but nevertheless, they can even be broken, as long as they help us in our shared mission to preserve at all costs the spirit, the aura, and the truth of our characters and the story we tell on stage. Keeping the truth as a primary mission on the part of the theater maker changes everything when it comes to the kind of work he has in the theater.

As mentioned before, there is this pressure and responsibility on the shoulders of all verbatim creators. The audience approaches the play with different expectations, with different thoughts than a classical play, because

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they come with the trust and expectation of not being lied to by the creators. In this sense, "theatre and journalism overlap here, and, like the journalist, the playwright must adhere to some kind of code of ethics if the work is to be taken seriously."²¹ Like the actor or the director, they all have a common goal and mission to which they must remain totally loyal. Beyond all this, we must understand that we, as creators of verbatim theater, cannot present through our artistic product the absolute truth, but a truth. Singular truth is the kind of truth we represent.

Most of the time, we have no way to collect thousands of testimonials and quantify our results into a common truth. We work with fragments of truth that can give us a hint of the total truth.

Last but not least, theater can be a qualitative and auspicious extension of journalism, precisely by presenting and commenting on certain problems, scandals, or contemporary social events, in a unique, contained, intellectually honest, and more chosen, life. The stories in the verbatim plays often talk about great injustices or problems to which the subjects in the play were subjected. A handful of actors on a stage can give a different meaning, a different interpretation of a social problem than words written in a newspaper or on a television screen can. The very experience of watching leads to an understanding that goes beyond the mere assimilation of information, and involves empathy, psychological consumption, and some leaning towards the drama of the people in the story.

In addition to all this, witnessing a true history, and seeing the events presented live, somehow forces the audience to identify the ethical or any kind of issues, the injustices that occur throughout the story and makes them recognize these injustices and can help them to act in turn, in real life, to prevent future injustices that may befall themselves or others.

Also, a practice that we meet more and more often in the European space and the Romanian one, is the post-show discussion, especially in the framework of documentary theater or verbatim theater shows. There is a common need, both on the part of the viewer and on the part of the creative team, to clarify and discuss the process of creation and documentation precisely so that the audience understands the dose of truth in the production and how the authors have relative to it. In this sense, Iulia Popovici states that:

21 Ibidem, p.10

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"This specific situation transforms the creative team and the producer not only into the main but also into the only provider of information regarding the documentary nature of their own production, shaping in a specific way the public's expectations, both through press releases, hall, etc., as well as through the post-show discussions. Unlike the typical post-event dialogues - occasional and focused on the person of the artist or the artistic process -, these discussions tend to become a constant accompanying element, a set of footnotes with the role of regulating the artistic approach, are incorporated in the offered spectator experience and aim to debate not so much the artistic but the social dimension of the show. In certain situations, these discussions help fill information gaps and clarify the documentation process."²²

We see, therefore, the impact that a verbatim piece can have on its audience. Just starting from here, we need to understand the responsibility we have as creators. Keeping our truth and honesty in the creative process can change the trajectory of the show and have a big and beneficial impact on the viewing public. In addition to all this, this event was born to accompany the performances, and the post-performance discussions, which are to some extent the continuation of the performance in the form of debate and clarification. All this ultimately serves to maintain truth and artistic honesty as a common and final mission in the artistic process of this kind.

Practicing verbatim theater in Romania

Documentary and verbatim theater has come to life in recent years throughout the Romanian space. Indeed, we cannot discuss a multitude of performances, as we see in the English or German space, instead, there are also authors and theaters in our country that approach such theatrical genres. In Romania, more and more creators began to appear who chose true stories, torn from the socio-political realities around us, as the subject of their pieces. These young people showed more and more interest in what documentary theater and verbatim theater mean. Among them are Mihaela Michailov, Adina Lazăr, Geanina Cărbunariu, David Schwartz, Bogdan Georgescu or Ioana Păun. Each of them has staged, written, or coordinated documentary

22 Iulia Popovici, Op. Cit, p. 93

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or verbatim type projects, or in some cases, performances based on the verbatim technique, but which do not really fit within the limits of what I previously defined as verbatim.

Most of the time, all young theater creators who want to experiment with new forms of theater or to mount plays centered on topics broken from immediate reality, difficult to digest, find their place in independent theater spaces. Unlike institutionalized theaters, these cultural spaces have always been open to the new, to experiment, and to the general public. Most of the plays staged in independent theaters in Romania are either based on real stories or deal with topics of great social interest.

However, in the state theaters too, in the last two years, things have started to move in this direction. In this sense, we can note that at the *National Theater* in Cluj-Napoca, in 2022, the production *Nu mai ține linia ocupată*²³ was staged, a performance directed by Adina Lazăr and whose dramaturgy was created by Alexandra Felseghi. This show is inspired by the *Caracal* case, where two teenage girls were kidnapped and killed. However, this story was only a starting point for the show's creative team, choosing to actually discuss the condition of women in Romania. Although the text starts from real, known cases, it goes towards fiction, and even the director states that: "We assumed that we would not do documentary theater. Alexandra started from the Caracal Case, but basically, the text and the show talk about an epidemic of aggression and murder. Alexandra Măceșanu's parents are and are not real in our show, because we also included some elements inspired by our family life. We started from reality, but it is wrong to say that it is a show about the Caracal Case. We realized that in the end, it's a show about Romanian women; it's a bit about empowerment, it's the story of the girl trafficked with the lover boy method, and I don't know which story is stronger."²⁴

Also Adina Lazăr, in the same interview, talking about another performance made together with Alexandra Felseghi, called *Verde Tăiat*, states that: "We made verbatim documentary theater until the moment *Green was cut*. Looking back, I can say that it was lucky that we could no longer do

23 <https://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/piesa-724/nu-mai-tine-linia-ocupata/>, accessed online on 04.01.2023

24 Oana Cristea Grigorescu, *Interviu cu Adina Lazăr*, Capital Cultural, 2022, <https://capitalcultural.ro/am-lansat-termenul-teatru-documentat-pentru-a-ne-distanta-un-pic-de-zona-pur-documentara/>, accessed online on 05.01.2023

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documentaries on the ground when the pandemic started in 2020, although this was part of the creative process that we enjoyed the most. Alexandra documented herself from articles, reports, and the case file of the murdered forester. We wondered how to process the information for the show text. There are still some norms and customs to be respected in the documentary theater, but under those conditions, we got an ostrich camel in which the widow delivered information and figures from *Verde Tăiat*. What is natural in politically assumed verbatim theater does not work in fiction. It didn't seem natural for a woman who lost her husband to tell us how many cubic meters are cut annually from the Romanian forests. Something was not working. We do not empathize with her. For Alexandra Felseghi, it was a liberating moment when we decided to make a show with a story. She came into her own as a playwright with *Verde Tăiat*, and I think she's been waiting for this moment. Finally, we ran out of interviews and transcripts to assemble into a DIY. It is true that we were challenged here and there, that this is not documentary theater, but we felt the need to distance ourselves. To the voices who noted that it is not documentary theater, I replied that it is documented theater. We assume that we do not want to sell the show under the label of documentary theater, and we launched this term to distance ourselves a bit from the purely documentary area. I used three cases from the press, and the fiction developed in the scene of the widow's dream. But the character Irinuca, the neighbor, the cameras on the house are real, the event with the bear is real, so the documentary part remains consistent in the performance."²⁵

We observe, therefore, how these hybrid forms of documentary and verbatim theater come to life even in state theaters in Romania. Although these performances do not necessarily fall into verbatim forms, they branch out into new forms, such as documented theater, which find their place in institutionalized spaces, spaces that seemed difficult to reach until recently, with such themes and performances. It is important to emphasize the fact that, although documentary, verbatim, or documented theater has been staged in independent spaces in Romania for thirty years, national theaters are also beginning to show their interest in them, this says a lot about the relevance that this type of theater has currently has in Romania.

²⁵ Idem.

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Returning to the documentary theater, we can mention a few relevant shows that left their mark in the Romanian space: *Baladele Memoriei* directed by Raul Coldea, *De vânzare/For sale* – collective creation based on the dramaturgy of Geanina Cărbunariu or *Afară!* – performance by David Schwartz and Mihaela Michailov. In addition to many other shows made in recent years in Romania, these shows managed to arouse people's interest in what documentary theater actually means, and managed to make us understand how it works.

For example, the show *For Sale* by Geanina Cărbunariu has an unusual civic sense. The show talks about the topic of land grabbing in Romania, about what the Romanian peasant looked like in 2014, and about the reasons why, in the vast majority of villages in Romania, peasants choose to sell or rent their land.

Although it seems like a topic that does not arouse much interest, Geanina Cărbunariu managed, through the 2014 production at the Odeon Theatre, to awaken an unprecedented civic spirit in the Bucharest public and brought before the general public stories that had not been heard before. About the way in which Geanina Cărbunariu writes and composes performances of this kind, the theater critic Oltița Cîntec says: "Geanina Cărbunariu, and in general the creators of documentary theater, do not aim to give sentences, fix social situations, or determine a certain type of attitude on the part of the spectators. The point of social theater, this form of political theater, is to direct attention towards a certain issue, which it considers important, presenting that issue from as many angles, and perspectives as possible, without taking a type of attitude that directs the public's judgment in a certain direction."²⁶

So, we observe how this type of show took shape in the Romanian theatrical space and what kind of impact it has on our society. All the performances mentioned above, plus many others, both from the independent and from the institutionalized space, managed to put the documentary theater, and later, the verbatim theater, on the map of the Romanian theater.

Verbatim theater in Romania is based on roughly the same representatives. Most of those previously mentioned have performed, in addition to documentary shows, also performances using the verbatim

26 Luana Popa, *Teatru documentar – imersiunea esteticului în social* - interviu cu O. Cîntec, <https://www.teatrulmateivisniec.ro/ro/stiri/teatru-documentarimersiunea-esteticului-in-social>, 2019, accessed online on 01.07.2022.

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technique. In this sense, we can mention a few: *3 Milioane* by Adina Lazăr and Alexandra Felseghi, *Istorie la persoana întâi* - collective project, or *Sub pământ* by Mihaela Michailov.

Other performances that were based on the verbatim technique, but which turned towards the fictional, are *În numele tatălui* by Robert Bălan, or *Eu sunt! Și?* By Lorán Betty and Dan Boldea.

I choose to discuss the show *3 Milioane*, directed by Adina Lazăr because it is one of the shows that I have seen and which had a great impact on the social level. This show was made starting from what it meant to collect signatures to change the Constitution in terms of the definition of the traditional family in 2018.

In short, this event was based on a citizens' initiative started by the *Coalition for the Family* at the end of 2015, through which it collected 3 million signatures to initiate a draft constitutional law to change the phrase "between spouses" in art. 48, para. (1) of the Constitution with a much more restrictive one, "between a man and a woman". This movement was supported and supported by the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Romania.²⁷

This performance was created based on the stories of some of the 3 million people who signed the initiative of the *Coalition for the Family*, being worked on verbatim and based on interviews and reports.

In addition to all this, the timing of this show was an opportune one, even before this change was voted on, the show appeared as a large-scale civic movement that tried to raise questions for people and make them understand what it entails this change at the social level. In this sense, in order to understand the context in which the show was made and the motivations of the authors, Adina Lazăr argues: "The question was raised that we could play the show "3 milioane" in Vâlcea, but we encountered - even though the director, I understood, embraced the idea - some problems at the county council and we are no longer welcome. Or, theaters, first of all, are state institutions and depend a lot on who is in charge of the local council. It is unlikely that a theater in a small town would accept such a thing, especially

27 Hélène Barthélemy, *American anti-LGBT groups battling same-sex marriage in Romania*, Splcenter Publication, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/09/27/american-anti-lgbt-groups-battling-same-sex-marriage-romania#.W61thNzZ--I.facebook>, 2018, accessed online on 06.01.2023

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since the PSD supports the project to amend the constitution and implicitly the organization of the referendum. They're in charge everywhere and if you come up with a show that campaigns against their policies I don't think they'd take it easy. [...] "3 million" is too subversive, and the goal is not to play in a state theater. I think that's not our goal either."²⁸

In other words, all these shows opened the way for other theater creators who understood how a show can be made, or what a show anchored in society and real looks like, and, last but not least, they gave it to the spectators in Romania the opportunity to take part in some extremely powerful performances that talk about them, about all of us.

Small groups of artists who had as a common interest the representation of society and its problems by calling on documentation and non-hierarchical creative methods, managed to pave the way for new waves of creators and experimental performances, anchored in the social and based on real facts.

In this sense, in order to better understand the direction that this kind of theater is taking, we can consider what the researcher Bonnie Marranca (b. 1947) said: "One of the things that concern me most today is whether contemporary theater has become too interested in reproducing the global crises of society. In other words, if it didn't become too journalistic—that is, simply full of compassion and lamentation? At the other end of the spectrum is the new theater of brutalism, with its fetishization of trauma, pain, and violence, which plays with one's demons and biological needs – not only in monodramas or solo performances but also in the new dramatic literature. Today we need creations of the spirit that conceptualize, not just document human behavior, creations that relate to public issues, not just personal, and that address a poetic and philosophical discourse, not just lament, even if this comes from a catastrophic imagination."²⁹

28 Paul Daniel Golban, *Interviu cu Adina Lazăr despre piesa „3 milioane“ & altele*, Revista Echinox, 2018, <https://revistaechinox.ro/2018/05/interviu-cu-adina-lazar-despre-piesa-3-milioane-altele-2/>, accessed online on 05.01.2023

29 Bonnie Marranca, *Ecologii teatrale*, trad. Alina Nelega, Ed. Arpas, Timișoara, 2012, p. 170

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Precisely in this sense, we see how many theater productions, even if they are based on verbatim or documentary theater techniques, no longer necessarily want to identify with them, or do not want to be limited by their rules. As previously mentioned by Marranca, today's theater needs spirit as well as documentation. Today's theater needs a personal imprint of the authors, their stories, and their experiences. I noticed previously that the director Adina Lazar mentioned distancing himself from the verbatim or documentary for the production of the show *Nu mai ține linea ocupată!* calling his own theater a documented theater. It is interesting, therefore, to think about these things and to see the evolution that this type of theater has in the Romanian space.

In this sense, I conducted a quantitative study, on 60 subjects, mostly directors, actors, and playwrights from Romania, chosen through close groups of friends, precisely to better understand their perspectives and reporting on documentary and verbatim theater.

Through this study, conducted entirely online, by sending questionnaires that had a set of 11 simple questions, the results I discovered were surprising because they made me better understand the relevance and impact that this type of theater has in Romania.

This quantitative study started from my curiosity to understand more deeply the interest in documentary and verbatim theatre, but above all, I wanted to see how many of the interviewees had ever practiced one of these forms of theatre.

In this sense, the results of the study are:

General data of the study:

- Number of subjects: 60.
- Age groups: 20-25 years (40%), 25-30 years (35%), 30-35 years (20%), 35-40 years (3%) and 40-45 (2%)).
- Education level: High school education (6.67%), Bachelor's degree (33.33%), Master's degree (53.33%) and Doctorate (6.67%).
- Employee status in a cultural institution: Employed (20.69%) and Unemployed (79.31%).

Results of the study:

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- Familiarity with the term verbatim: I know what the term verbatim means (53.33%); I don't know what the term verbatim means (40%); and they have heard of the term verbatim but do not know exactly how to explain it (6.67%).
- Have they ever attended a documentary theater performance: Yes(83.33%); No (16.67%).
- Have they ever attended a verbatim theater performance: Yes (45.16%); No (54.87%).
- I know the difference between verbatim and documentary theatre: Yes (50%); No (50%).
- They were part of the team of a documentary-type show: Yes(33.33%); No(56.67%); Not the case/I am not a practitioner (10%).
- They were part of the team of a verbatim show: Yes (34.48%); No(58.62%); Not the case/I am not a practitioner (6.90%).
- Do you agree with the following statement: Verbatim theater breaks away from the scope of documentary theater with a clear and precise purpose, namely the desire to present the story in the real words of ordinary people, giving a voice to the people through stage reinterpretation. – Yes (82.14%); No (21.43%).
- Do you agree with the following statement: The verbatim writer must equally be considered a creator, and a dramatist, just like a conventional playwright. You could not say that a portrait painter who has a subject seated before him is less of an artist than a painter who invents a portrait from his own imagination. – Yes (89.29%); No (10.71%).

We observe, therefore, that more than 50% of the subjects interviewed, all graduates of theater studies, whether at the high school or higher education level, are familiar with the term verbatim. This tells us a lot about the ground that this type of theater has gained among theater people and

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above all, it confirms that it is a form of theater of great interest among them. On the other hand, more than 30% of the subjects had at least once been part of a creative team that built a verbatim show, either during school or after graduation.

On the other hand, we notice that not many people know the concrete difference between verbatim theater and documentary theater. Although we have an equal percentage between them, compared to those who have practiced verbatim or documentary theater at least once, there are quite a few who cannot tell the difference between them.

In this sense, this lack of clarity probably comes from the theoretical training they had. Indeed, there are few courses that discuss these forms of theater in detail. As a graduate with a double major, both in acting and in theater, I can confirm that too few times, in my training, at the level of the courses, I was introduced to these new forms of theater.

Beyond all this, I think it is necessary to introduce at a practical level, a course that meets the student and that helps him explore more forms of making theater already during the faculty, so that, when he leaves the faculty benches, to be able to choose one or another area of the theater that interests him and to be prepared for different projects that may involve working on methods such as verbatim, devised, collaborative practices, etc.

Last but not least, related to the two statements at the end, we note that over 80% of the subjects agreed with the fact that verbatim theater is a theater of words and of ordinary people who receive a voice through art, and especially the playwrights of verbatim theater who should be considered equally playwrights, as those who write conventional theater.

Therefore, studying verbatim theater in drama schools is an important thing because it encourages artists to engage with social and political issues, it encourages the authenticity and ethics of storytelling, it encourages interdisciplinary cooperation, and it encourages innovation and experimentation. By delving into this genre, theater students can develop a deeper understanding of the power of theater as a tool for social and personal transformation. Verbatim Theater is based on truth and authenticity. Studying this form of theater can help actors and directors develop their skills in portraying real people with accuracy and sensitivity.

Conclusion

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In conclusion, we can say that documentary theater and verbatim theater nowadays have their origins in the 20s-30s, when bands like *Agitprop* or Erwin Piscator, by their nature of making theater with documentary inserts and focused on the man in turn, started a new wave, which then spread towards Brecht and Augusto Boal, who took over the ideology of social theater and developed it in various ways. Sure, it's important to understand that social, political, documentary, and verbatim theater are different types of theater, but they all have a common starting point. Beyond that, verbatim theater was influenced by these forms of theater and broke away from the idea of documentary theater precisely to develop in a specific area of the subjective and pure truth of the subject or subjects interviewed.

All of them, together with the representatives from the American, Israeli, and European space, carried forward the main idea of the documentary theater, more precisely, the idea of an extremely social theater that has the power to transform people through the themes addressed and the way it is staged. At the same time, both forms of theatre, both documentary theater and verbatim theater, currently emphasize truth and its representation on stage through documentation and research, and then their use in the final artistic product.

Verbatim theatre, unlike documentary theatre, preserves in its entirety the material collected through methods such as the interview, as the basic text of the final performance. In other words, verbatim does not just document a certain subject, but moves towards a social inquiry that wants to present the truth from the experiences of the individual, not just from the experiences of a social group. In this way, he also tries to move away from what we call fiction and goes toward a reconstruction of reality as truthful as possible.

From my artistic practice, both from the perspective of the actor and the playwright, I understood how important personal involvement is in a project of this kind, and above all the desire to preserve at all costs the truth from which one starts when building a verbatim or documentary type show. At the same time, the fact that you work with true stories and in many cases you have the opportunity to know the subject that is the basis of the worktext, or that you play, increases the degree of responsibility towards the artistic product in you as an artist and especially the type of involvement differs from a classic project and the way you approach a normal text.

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Verbatim theater indeed involves transcribing texts from interviews, conversations, and speeches and using them as a basis for the performance text. The resulting play is performed word for word, most of the time, by the actors, who say the actual words spoken by the source persons. Although verbatim theater seems to be restrictive from this point of view, it is not - precisely because of the fact that it succeeds in opening the way for the actors to a thorough study of the character, through access to research materials, and it gives the playwright the freedom to select and essentialize, and very often to shape (without changing the meaning and basic truth of the story) the story that he later transforms into an independent dramatic text.

However, both documentary theater and verbatim theater are born as a reaction against the media and the type of information that flows through it. From the desire to capitalize on the information that, through the mass media, is propagated as raw and cold information most of the time, through the theater and the artistic convention, the artists try to bring it closer to the receiver/spectator and even it turns him into an active participant, into a spectacle-actor.

Thus, verbatim theater takes real stories, which it transforms into theatrical stories, told by an actor on a stage. All these stories, even set in an artistic convention, retain the essence and the truth, the real and the subjective - and through the actor they end up being heard by a wide audience.

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