

Truths, Ethics, and Politics and their Relations to Verbatim Theatre

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is intended to give a general view on verbatim theatre and to discuss the relation among truth, ethics and politics in verbatim theatre. The paper hypothesizes that in verbatim theatre there is a relation among truth, ethics, and politics and this relation is inevitable. The researcher follows the formalistic approach to analyze the selected text. The paper is limited to a verbatim solo play, *Nothing But Nothing*, written by the Iraqi playwright, Tewfik Al-Qady who was a an asylum-seeker in Australia when he wrote the play. The play is a good representative of verbatim theatre. The result of the discussion which validates the being put hypothesis comes at the end of the paper in the conclusion.

Key Words:- *Verbatim Theatre, Nothing but Nothing, Solo Drama, Truth, Ethics, Politics*

المستخلص :

تهدف هذه الورقة لالقاء نظرة عامة على نشأة المسرح الحرفي والعلاقة بين الحقيقة والاخلاق والسياسة كما تظهر في المسرح الحرفي. تضع الورقة فرضية ان العلاقة بين الحقيقة والاخلاق والسياسة هي علاقة حتمية في المسرح الحرفي. تتبع الورقة المنهج الشكلي لتحليل النص المختار. الورقة تتناول المسرحية المنفردة "لا شيء سوى العدم" للكاتب العراقي توفيق القاضي والذي كتبها عندما كان طالبا للجوء الانساني في استراليا (2005). تعتبر المسرحية مثالا جيدا للمرح الحرفي. في ختام الورقة استعراض للنتائج التي توصل اليها البحث والتي تؤكد صحة الفرضية التي ابتدأتها الورقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسرح الحرفي, لا شيء سوى العدم, توفيق القاضي, الحقيقة, الاخلاق, السياسة

INTRODUCTION:

'All plays in general', Marvin Carlson writes, 'might be called Ghosts [after Ibsen], since ... one of the universals of performance, both East and West, is its ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that "we are seeing what we saw before"'. (Carleton, 2015) This statement is very righteous and applicable to the verbatim plays. In verbatim performance, the audience are to be confronted with truthful events that happened before in real life and they are retold again by the engaged people on the stage. But this time what is needed is not mere watching and following the ghost but rather, engaging with the event

trying to carry the burden of human ethics on the back of the individual to be a decision-maker in the political side to change the lived reality. This comes in agreement with what is suggested by Nicholas J. Long:-

" the unique ability of theatre ..., lies in its capacity to create actual (if temporary) and affectively charged relations between and among both audience members and those on stage. This unique capacity of the theatrical medium offers distinct possibilities for changing audience members' conceptions". (Long, 2015, 305)

Definition and Background

In recent times, it is quite normal to have real events acted on the stages of theatre. But there is a kind of modern theatre which is more than simple acting of actual events. It is called verbatim theatre. *Verbatim theatre* as a term was invented for the first time in 1987 by Derek Paget. He described how its practitioners had seen a complete new spot of documentary appeared as a direct announcement of lived incident through the actor as instrument. (Barker, qtd. in Paget, 1987, 317) Verbatim theatre can be then defined as a form of [documentary theatre](#) which constructs the plays from the specific expressions spoken by people talked about an exacting event or topic.

Hence, Wikipedia Encyclopedia defines it as that in verbatim theatre, "the playwright interviews people that are connected to the topic that the play is focused on and uses their testimony to construct the piece. In this way, they seek to achieve a degree of authority akin to that represented by the news. Such plays may be focused on politics, disasters or even sporting events. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verbatim_theatre). Thus, The claim to authenticity as Alison Jeffers states "is often reinforced by the creators of verbatim theatre through conventions that serve to place it at the centre of their enterprise."(Jeffers, 2006,3)

Verbatim theatre can also be defined as 'a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews done with "ordinary" people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things'.(Paget, 1987, 36)

What is important about verbatim theatre is that it is a creative type of drama to

help tell the story of what actually happened. Verbatim theatre in its original form, however, uses these interviews as typically conducted by several actors who later appear in the performance.

As a verbatim play declares to reproduce the real words of real people, the playwright involves that this narrative offers truth to its spectators. The very name "verbatim theatre" infers that the field is an exact and authentic representation of real life; nothing has been fictionalized. Thus, the audience expects that the play is a resource of information. In this sense, the role of the playwright oscillates between dramatist and journalist, and there is a heightened expectation for truthful representation. For the playwright to steadiness treating sensitive material considerately and to be taken seriously as a dramatist, he or she must bear by some sort of ethical code and be responsible and respectable in the eyes of the interviewees, their colleagues, and the audience.(Blythe and Crok, 2014, 9)

Verbatim playwrights have to organize these recordings into the shape of a play. Indeed, verbatim playwrights do not avoid transcription if possible. In fact, they always 'transform' the interviews 'into a text', or at least in the narrow sense of the word.(Paget, 1987, 117)

Verbatim plays are often '*fed back* into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance in those communities'(Ibid)

These plays are likely to leave their communities of origin and be performed in mainstream settings, and they are likely to be published. Furthermore, in verbatim theatre 'the firmest of commitments is . . . made by the

company to the use of vernacular speech'(Ibid)

In summary, 'heritage' verbatim typically involves several collaborators taping interviews with those who are involved. These author-actors then transcribe, transform, and eventually perform these words to an audience of interviewees and their associates. In verbatim theatre, as Paget notes, the performance is characterized by 'the systematic display . . . of the source material (which becomes the *true* protagonist in the drama)'.(Ibid 318)

In this regard, verbatim theatre has its own merit among other fictional works and it has its own techniques and codes. Michael Billington states that " if we now accept it as a genre, it is not only because it offers necessary information. It is also because it can move and stir us as profoundly as any fiction."(<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/08/michael-billington-verbatim-theatre>)

Verbatim theatre has developed by using new film technologies of projection. It is strongly connected to a straightforward development of technology; i.e. the discovery of the handy cassette recorder. This, certainly allowed these persons' voices to be documented in their setting. Moreover, mobile interviews which could happen comprehends the dramatic promises of this sort of theatre. (<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/verbatim-theatre-iid-2551>) Since two decades, verbatim theatre has taken up an essential position on the stage in Britain, and is regarded as an insightful kind in "political theatre". (Verbatim theatre in(<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/verbatim-theatre-iid-2551>)

It takes its importance from the fact that this form of theatre has four major functions:

1. To re-examine national/ or local histories;
2. To observe or give a voice to local communities, or marginalized groups;
3. To scrutinize important events or issues;
4. To be didactic, (in other words to educate or "teach" towards increased and specific knowledge or understanding.)(Decent,2003,1)

Verbatim theatre has come up as the means which is ideal to depict most important societal issues for it is highly related to seeking for the truth that is missed in the world of globalization. It attempts to document the current events and traumas that many people suffer from without any attention from those who are responsible for. It has proliferated in Europe and North America since the 1990s, and post-9/11 has become increasingly visible on both mainstream and fringe stages. In the last 10 years it has come to occupy an important political territory in Britain where contentious international and national issues are aired and interrogated. In this sense, it follows the episodes that happen in the world and give a voice for those who undergo from these episodes. For example, in (2008) Philip Ralph wrote *Deep Cut*, and Fiona Evans wrote *Geoff Dead: Disco for Sale* (2008) which describe army deaths; Esther Wilson wrote *Unprotected* in (2006), while Alecky Blythe presented *The Girlfriend Experience* in (2008) which shows prostitution; while Tanika Gupta wrote *Gladiator Games* in (2005) which presents murder as the central theme and *London Road* in (2012) and perhaps most principally, a course of

work on the ongoing problem of the war in Iraq: Norton-Taylor wrote *Justifying War* in (2003), *Called to Account* in (2007) and *Tactical Questioning* in (2011). Moreover, Gregory Burke wrote *Black Watch* in (2007) and finally, Steve Gilroy wrote *The Motherland* in (2008). (<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/verbatim-theatre-iid-2551>)

Verbatim theatre has flourished worldwide. America has its own verbatim plays such as *Gross Indecency* by Moises Kaufman: *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* which is written in (1997) and above all *The Laramie Project* in (2000), and *The Laramie Project Ten Years Later* in (2009). Other works are: *Building Bridges* by Anna Deavere Smith, *Not Walls* in (1985) and *Fires in the Mirror* in (1992). Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's well-known play *The Exonerated* in (2002), an album of interviews with persons who have been out of death line. Australian theatre has an understanding of verbatim plays. The first written Australian verbatim drama was *Aftershocks* in (1993) which is written by Paul Brown, features many interviews with those who were in the upshot of the dreadful Newcastle earthquake. Alana Valentine wrote *Run Rabbit Run* in (2004) and *Parramatta Girls* in (2007). All those plays have encouraged the sketch of verbatim theatre in Australia. (<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/verbatim-theatre-iid-2551>)

In addition to the plays as performances, over recent years there have been a good number of precious pamphlets on verbatim theatre. Chris Megson and Alison Forsyth wrote *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* in (2009) which is an edited anthology of chapters on many various sides of

documentary and verbatim theatre. On the other hand, Dan Steward and Will Hammond wrote *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* in (2009). It includes interviews with verbatim writers and directors, *Acting in Documentary Theatre* in (2013) which is written by Tom Cantrell investigates how actors move toward playing factual people in verbatim plays, last but not the least Paul Brown wrote his book, *Verbatim Theatre: The Art of Authenticity* in (2010) which focuses on Australian verbatim productions. (Ibid)

Methodology and Limitation

This paper— in tackling such important and new subject as verbatim theatre— follows the formalistic approach. Analyzing the selected text needs formalistic approach to be the tool for it is the most suitable one as far as the historical background and the growth of verbatim theatre as well as a representing text are the concerns of the paper. The paper will be limited for studying *Nothing but Nothing* of Tewfik Al-Qady as a good representative of verbatim theatre after discussing the appearance of the verbatim plays and their features.

Discussion

The reasons for the apparent ‘explosion’ of verbatim theatre in the west— politically speaking— are complex and seem to be bound up with widespread suspicion of governments and their ‘spin’ merchants, a distrust of the media and a desire to uncover stories which may be being suppressed, and a western fetishization of representations of ‘the real’, perhaps most manifest in the obsession with so-called ‘reality’ television.

Nothing but Nothing (2005) is the selected verbatim play that this paper

tries to analyze to show verbatim theatre techniques. It is an Australian survival as told by those who were there. Written by the Iraqi Playwright, Tewfik Al-Qady who was an asylum seeker in Australia when he wrote the play. It is a documentary drama forged by the harrowing verbatim account of asylum victims- ordinary but marginalized people who faced adversity and lived to tell their own tragedy.

The play is described by the critic, Emma Cox as "a Solo, self-penned play". Moreover, it is an emotional, lyrical, and impressionistic work that was marketed in terms of truth, but not in a testimonial mould. Cox claims that the play confirmed a lifetimes growth of a trauma: a fearful and deprived childhood, the death of family members, and friends, political discrimination and detention as a young adult and the difficult boat journey to Australia.(Cox, 2015,47)

In its performance, though the audience are mostly from the Iraqi asylum seekers, there were a minority of the Australian community who were effectively representative of those to whom he needs to expose the ethical side of the Iraqi refugees' trauma.

Regarding the narrative of *Nothing but Nothing*, Cox said it is "fluid, unstable, and dream-like, privileging expressionistic and heightened emotion over linearity or structural coherence".(Ibid) In such a solo, autobiographical work, Al-Qady's fundamental intention is not merely to communicate but to be believed for he recounts traumatic experience. In the process of reflecting the truth and being believed, Al-Qady seems to have been indexed to emotional exposure and heightened theatricality. His irregular

pretentiousness like masked deeper anxieties associated with the burden of the witness to compel the listener or interlocutor. Al-Qady's mode reflects a different approach to the weight of history and dominant discourse from a rationalist, evidentiary one. Put it other way, Al-Qady's subjectivity in this play did not connect emotional overindulgence with untrustworthiness.

Nothing but Nothing exposes Al-Qady, the playwright, as an actor who performs as and speaking about different characters in his life such as mother, his lover, his daughter and his child as well as his adult selves. Moreover, he speaks for other populations with whom his experience joins. While the decentralization of the person witness emphasizes possibilities for coming across and contact, it can be challenging in terms of witness society and risks de-specifying human being experience. This dilemma centers the anxieties and slippages between one's self and the other(s), truth and fiction, that inhere in testament actions.(Cox, 2008, 193)

The play starts with the following lines in which Al-Qady is seen enacted himself as a child.

I am a child, I like to play,
I am a child, I like to play,
With everything,
I like to play soccer,
And play the guitar,
I would like to be an artist (192)

Singular specificity of testimonial speech is made active here by using the first person(I), while, using the present tense in the voice of an adult as a child creates a poetic detachment that disjoins the words from time and fixed understanding.

By switching of from past to present tense in describing the events in Iraq, Al-

Qady slides in and out of re-experience or re-enactment or acknowledgment:

What is this?

Is this love?

Her name was Leila.

With Leila,

I saw my dreams,

I liked her;

I loved her, Leila' (195)

In another position Al-Qady delivers an expressionistic presentences in a one-sided, repetitious conversation with his deceased father. In this conversation, he enacted his grief as the imperative of the child-self:

DAD!

Please come back,

I dearly miss you.

Please come back,

You've taken too long.

Please dad ,

Come back' (193)

One should take in consideration that these words are enacted by Al-Qady in an overwhelming bending position with his back to the audience.(Cox, 48) This position in a verbatim play gives evidence cleverly to the truth of traumatic loss of a father. Moreover, the use of stream of consciousness technique gives the impression of flow, or straight communication of a subject's expressive condition, which is always planned and skilled negotiation of prejudice. Here, it is an explicitly reconstructed first person disclosure, being in English language and not in his mother tongue, Arabic. This linguistic paraphrase was one which he saw intellectually and emotionally challenging as he has admitted himself :

I had'nt studied English

before and it was hard to

express my feelings with

little English. The language problem was another suffering for me"(Cox 2015, 18)

It is quite obvious that the repetition Al-Qady uses in the first person narration is willing, situated, and purposeful. On the other hand, being alone on the stage and via the text, Al-Qady throughout his performance reinforces the significance of the other speaker. Whether welcoming or aggressive or unresponsive, it does not matter.

Showing different points of his journey, Al-Qady engaged in a variety of dialogues: with his child- self, with his beloved Leila, with his daughter, with an Iraqi official and with Australian immigration official. Moreover, he sang an Arabic song that remains in his memory from childhood when his mother was singing it for him in the past. In all these dialogues, the audience can easily notice that the narrative is anguished and expressive of his own grief and loss though testified to the causalities of successive wars in Iraq. Verbatim playwrights, in this regard, as the writer, Dennis Woolf claims, "are looking for an emotional arc. rather than the linear narrative of cause and effect which creates the classic dramatic arc.(Jeffers, 2005) Al-Qady as enacted throughout his journey, presents in his narrative one-sided dialogue, an attempt to engage the whole environment's components; the ocean, the boat, and the sky as compassionate opposite speaker, so that he has achieved this outstanding emotional arc:

Good morning, sea,

I like you, and I am scared of you at the same time,

You are very big, and very deep,

Please be quite, and soft with us, we are weak people, (199)

With all the fear in the world, Al-Qady addresses the sea expressing his feelings in the present moment as well as the next ones. He is, like others, helpless so that he begs the sea to be kind with them for they are 'weak people". Here again the present tense narration of history invokes the past as forthcoming.

Politically speaking, Al-Qady said at the very beginning of his play:"I spent all my life between yes and no'(191). Taking in consideration the scenery of the play, on the stage there is a very big wooden cut-out of the word "No", painted in grey, stood at the back of the stage. The function of this piece in the scenery is as Cox assures to "exemplify Al-Qady's position outside the political agency."(Cox, 2015,49)

On the other side, throughout the performance of the play the words, "Please", "Thank you", and "Sorry" are repeated by Al-Qady several times:

Please, can I sleep here?

I just want to sleep,

Please, can I sleep in this ally?

Can I sleep in this corner?

Can I sleep in this footpath

Thank you, thank you.

(198)

His expression of grief on loss and powerlessness is reflected throughout the narration he uses in the various conversations. One of these conversations is that in which he expresses his loss of friends:

" at night I would miss my friends.

I would ask, where are my friends? Why did they leave? Are they ever going to come back? The

darkness seemed to always say: " no" . (191)

As a verbatim play, in its performance itself, the acting traditions vary completely regarding positions from those of naturalistic theatre. The classic proscenium arch theory of the fourth wall falls down in verbatim theatre, and the actors address the audience straightforwardly and accept their responses.(Jeffers, 2006, 3) Here, the playwright can engage the audience in the performance, in a political sense of the word. Baz Kershaw illustrates the principal role of audience in political performance saying that "the spectator is engaged fundamentally in the active construction of meaning as performance event proceeds. In this case, performance is "about " the transaction of meaning, a continuous negotiation between stage and auditorium to establish the significance of the signs and conventions through which they interact."(Kershaw, 2002,16-17)

Would you like to be my friend?

That is the question Al-Qady confronts the audience with. He adds then:

Could you help me?

These two questions imply Al-Qady's idea that the audience are the intended partners of the artist in his problem. Here, of course, Al-Qady throws the ethical burden on the audience to put them in the position of decision- makers rather than spectators. He sees in these audience, Australian people who have the right to elect the parliament- members so that they are who can get his plea for life far from war. The artist here tries to persuade them ethically with his political issue which is nothing but the truth regarding his position in the life. The playwright's attempt to draw the ethical empathy of the audience and then

invest it politically is very clear at this point of the play. Here, it is quite clear that Al-Qady is successful --by addressing the audience openly—in creating a point of truth claim that differs from that of the unreal play which is written by a playwright.

The uniqueness of Al-Qady's verbatim solo performance and the otherness of him as an Iraqi refugee strengthen this interrogative technique, about which Jo Bonney said that the "solo show expects and demands the active involvement of the people in the audience. They are watched as they watch. They are directly addressed, their energy resonates with that of the lone artist"(Cox,2015, 50)

As has been mentioned before, Al-Qady has used the scenery very craftily when he combines using the nil "no" at the back of the stage during the whole time of the performance with the two additional words "thank you" and "freedom" at the end of the play. These two words have given the impression to the audience that he has understood their positive response to his plea. He confronts them with the fact that they have actually become his partners.

Ethically correspondence, Al-Qady calls up a series of Liveness face to face summons: "the other becomes my neighbor precisely by the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and by so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question" (Wood and Simmons, 2008,85) In this sense one's responsibility for the other is pre-exists any self-consciousness, and it is absolute. Thus, he succeeds in conveying the truth of his own case as well as of other asylum seekers.

Politically, he has invested these words correctly. Ethically, he has found real partners for his case. The audience had to take into account beside the psychological, physical, and emotional shock concerned in the asylum-seekers' journey, the fact that all of the asylum-seekers were evading suffering emerges which made that trouble all the heavier. What is important here, is that some refugees sought to talk about their treatment by the Australian migration organization and what they saw as unjust and cruel nature, rather than about the experiences that had brought them to Australia.

Conclusion

Verbatim theatre is a need that is answered. It achieves the purpose for which it is made. Throughout verbatim plays, the playwrights convey the feelings and the traumas of those who involved in the argued issues. Though it is a new trend of theatre but it is very important because it tackles real events that need to be discussed. It has its own techniques and conventions that distinguish it from other kinds of theatre. Truth, ethics, and politics are essential components in verbatim theatre in that through presenting the truth the playwright tries to invoke the audience to engage in the case ethically and tries to solve the issue that is discussed. When the writer is successful in engaging the audience in his case, it is the politics that is needed to be tackled in a way or another to solve the problem the play handles.

Al-Qady's *Nothing But Nothing* is a case study for this paper. It is a good representative of verbatim theatre and it achieves the hypothesis that a verbatim play should have truth, ethics, and politics. Al-Qady exposes the issue of

the asylum-seekers as a truth that many people are suffering from. He is successful in engaging the audience in his case and be part of it. The listener to the stories told by those who have experienced violence will be into a relationship with the person who is telling these stories. Verbatim plays about refugees provoke issues regarding the center of this sort of relation. There will be many questions such as: who is telling the story? To whom are they telling it? For what reason? By so doing, the playwright makes his plea be righteous and reaches the political pinnacle it should reach when he shares his problem with the audience and let them carry the ethical responsibility towards the other.

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