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Performing the Encounter; a practice-led inquiry

by
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Performing the Encounter

Abstract

This dissertation explores the ethical and relational dimensions of verbatim theatre, focusing on how encounters between theatre-makers, participants, and audiences shape both the creative process and the final performance. Moving beyond traditional notions of representation, it argues that verbatim theatre is not merely a vehicle for reproducing real-life narratives but a dynamic practice of engagement, wit(h)nessing, and artistry.

Through a practice-led inquiry, two key projects - *Sense of Home* and *Company in the Gardens* - are examined to consider how verbatim theatre can foster attentiveness to the complexities of lived experience while avoiding ethical paralysis in creative work with real-life narratives. By prioritising the process of encounter over fixed notions of truth or authenticity, these projects explore how the exchange between interviewer and interviewee, performer and audience, generates meaning and challenges pre-existing assumptions.

The research situates verbatim theatre within broader discussions on ethics, presence, and relationality, considering how the form can resist simplification, create spaces for dialogue, and foster meaningful connections across difference. By weaving together autoethnographic reflections, theoretical analysis, and artistic practice, this study proposes a framework for an ethical and relational approach to verbatim theatre. Ultimately, it positions the form as a political act - an ongoing practice of presence, attentiveness, and shared meaning-making.

Keywords: Verbatim Theatre, Ethical Encounters, Performance as Witnessing, Relational Storytelling, Autoethnographic Practice

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Introduction

The seeds of this dissertation were sown in a cold, industrial space in Leiden in the Netherlands where, as a five-year-old, I witnessed my first verbatim theatre performance. It was titled *King Corn* (2000), and was a poetic portrait of Sam, the last worker in a dismantled flour factory. The performance, directed by my mother and performed by my father, imbued the mundane with beauty, drawing attention to the ordinary in ways that felt extraordinary. That early memory stayed with me and became a touchstone for my later explorations into verbatim theatre, where the rhythms of vernacular speech, the significance of real-life narratives, and the ethics of representation became central concerns.

This dissertation is a practice-led investigation into verbatim theatre, exploring how encounters between artists, participants, and audiences shape the process and outcomes of this form. At its heart lies a question that has guided my projects: How can verbatim theatre balance the relational and ethical dimensions of artistic practice with real-life narratives while honouring the relationship between interviewer and interviewee?

Structure

The chapters that follow explore this question through personal reflections, theoretical frameworks, and detailed accounts of my verbatim theatre projects, *Sense of Home* and *Company in the Gardens*. In doing so, the dissertation also raises a range of related sub-questions, stemming from this overarching inquiry. Each chapter builds on the last, weaving together practical experiences and academic insights to develop a blueprint for ethical and relational verbatim practice.

Chapter 1: A Practice-Led Journey

The dissertation opens with an exploration of three formative experiences that shaped my understanding of verbatim theatre. These reflections, including *King Corn* and my first neighbourhood project in Amsterdam, illuminate how my personal history and artistic development intersect with the questions and methodologies that underpin this research. This chapter situates my work within broader traditions of

interview-based theatre and introduces the research questions that guide the dissertation.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Literature Review

Chapter 2 presents the methodological approach underpinning my research which draws on auto-ethnography to integrate personal experience with cultural analysis. By reflecting on the evolving practices of verbatim theatre and applied theatre, I situate my work within key debates on ethics, positionality, and artistic agency. Key texts from scholars such as Helen Nicholson (2005), Julia Salverson (2008) and Clare Summerskill (2020) inform my approach, emphasising relationality and the importance of navigating the tensions between individual creativity and collaborative engagement with real-life narratives.

Chapter 3: Sense of Home

In Chapter 3, I examine *Sense of Home*, a verbatim theatre project inspired by my own experiences of displacement after moving to South Africa. This project investigates how people create a sense of home in unfamiliar environments, focusing on the real-life narratives of individuals connected to The Commons, a café in Muizenberg. The chapter details the interview process, ethical considerations, and performance design, reflecting on how working with participants' narratives became a means of fostering connection and understanding.

Chapter 4: Company in the Gardens

Building on the project outlined in the previous chapter, Chapter 4 explores *Company in the Gardens*, an eight-week workshop that culminated in a performance based on interviews conducted in Cape Town's Company Gardens. Here, I emphasise the importance of ethical and artistic flexibility in verbatim theatre, highlighting how themes of generational gaps and public space emerged through collaborative exploration with student-participants. The chapter examines how the interplay between personal reflection and collective engagement with real-life narratives shaped the final performance.

Chapter 5: Political dimension of Performing the Encounter

Chapter 5 examines the political dimension of verbatim theatre, not as a tool for advocacy or protest but as a practice rooted in presence, dialogue, and ethical engagement. Drawing on Bart Brandsma's (2017) concept of the "silent middle," I explore how verbatim theatre resists polarisation by creating spaces for reflection and connection. The chapter also engages with Diana Taylor's (2020) "ethics of presence," John Shotter's (2006) "withness-thinking," and Joe Salvatore's (2023) ideas on identity in performance, positioning verbatim theatre as a relational practice where meaning emerges through encounter.

Chapter 6: Toward an Ethical Blueprint for Verbatim Theatre

The final chapter synthesises insights from the preceding chapters to propose a blueprint for an ethical and relational approach to verbatim theatre. This model prioritises attentiveness, co-creation, and transparency, aiming to facilitate meaningful encounters that honour the complexity of participants' voices while preserving artistic agency. It reflects on the potential of verbatim theatre to bridge social divides, celebrate local knowledge, and engage with broader societal concerns—without compromising the relational integrity at the heart of the practice.

This dissertation is structured to build an understanding of verbatim theatre as both an artistic practice and an ethical engagement with real-life narratives. Each chapter contributes to this exploration by interweaving personal experiences, theoretical perspectives, and practical case studies. Beginning with a reflection on my formative encounters with verbatim theatre, the dissertation moves through methodological considerations, project analyses, and a discussion of the political dimensions of performance before culminating in a proposed ethical blueprint. Through this structure, I seek to articulate a nuanced approach to verbatim theatre that values relationality, attentiveness, and co-creation as fundamental to both the artistic and ethical dimensions of the practice.

Chapter 1 | Introduction: A practice-led enquiry

In this introductory chapter, three personal experiences with interview-based theatre that have been pivotal to my practise-led enquiry are outlined and reflected upon. The research questions that were inspired by each experience, and further interrogated in this dissertation, are listed after each description.

First experience: Poetry of the mundane

I was five years old when I encountered my first interview-based theatre play. I remember being in a cold industrial space with lots of windows, but only one that could open; a ladder, a candle and my father, saying very little, maintaining a concentrated silence. The play had been directed by my mother, Floor Huygen, and performed by my father, Bert Luppes. It was titled *King Corn – of zogezegd en alles*[1] and was about Sam, the last employee to have managed a dismantled flour factory before it was completely demolished in the Dutch city of Leiden. My mother collaborated with journalist Lex Bohlmeijer[2] who was tasked with interviewing the factory worker so as to create a performative portrait of him. The result was a poetic script without a clear storyline, stitched together from a transcribed collection of verbatim sentences, many of which were unfinished in thought and crooked in structure.

I am now 28 years old and my mother has passed away. I found a review for the play on the internet[3] in which my mother reveals her interest in using “everyday language

[1] ‘King Corn’ is the name of the flour factory and ‘zogezegd en alles’, translated roughly ‘as they say and all’ is a phrase the employee repeated often during the interviews.
[2] Radiomaker and correspondent of ‘good conversations’ at the Dutch news platform *De Correspondent.*
[3] Loek Zonneveld, 2016, *Er staat menselijkheid op het spel - Floor Huygen (1956-2016),* Theaterkrant, https://www.theaterkrant.nl/tm-artikel/er-staat-menselijkheid-op-het-spel-floor-huygen-1956-2016/

as translation of experience”. I don’t believe she knew the term ‘verbatim theatre’ at the time, and I cannot ask her now. However, I have been able to ask both my father, Bert, and journalist Lex Bohlmeijer to reflect back on various aspects of the play, including the interview, editing and staging processes.

According to Lex (personal communication, 2024 April 24), the interview process was challenging. Although Sam had agreed to participate in the project, he was not very talkative, making it difficult to gather sufficient material for a dramatic play script. Sam also tended to repeat the same stories at first, making it challenging to extract new information. My father recalled bringing a tape recorder with him during one visit to the factory, with Sam showing more interest in the device than in sharing his story (Bert Luppes, personal communication, 2024 September 5). Nevertheless, both Sam and the factory remained intriguing enough for Lex and my father to persist in the interview process.

Lex gradually built a rapport with Sam, leading to deeper conversations. During the first interview, Bohlmeijer had noticed Sam's frequent use of the phrase "zogezegd” which translated from Dutch means “so to say". Lex started shifting his focus from the content of Sam's stories to the way in which he expressed himself. With this shift in perspective, Lex realised that the language and rhythm of Sam's speech were as important as the narrative itself. Placing his attention on *how* Sam expressed himself rather than *what* he was saying became a recurring strategy for Lex during the rehearsal process (Lex Bohlmeijer, personal communication, 2024 April 24).

Their second interview with Sam included a tour of the empty factory. This seemed to make Sam more comfortable with opening up about his experiences. On reading the transcript for this second interview, artistic director Johan Simons felt that Sam might still have more to say and suggested that Lex return for another interview, this time with a list of ten existential questions about life, love and dying. According to Lex and based on his previous experience with Sam, he didn't expect much to come from these interview questions; to his surprise, Sam responded to all of them and shared more details than on previous occasions (Lex Bohlmeijer, personal communication, 2024 April 24).

The editing process involved close collaboration between Lex, who transcribed the interviews word for word, and my mother who selected fragments that she felt

captured the essence of Sam's character and stories. She had met Sam and seen the factory, but had not been present during the interviews. When she placed each of the selected sentences on a new line, a poem came to fruition. During the initial rehearsals for *Kingcorn*, my mother and father worked with this poetic reconstruction.

The Flemish writer Erik de Volder was then approached by my mother to write a play script based on these transcripts with the directive to stay true to the source-material. However, de Volder's final script differed significantly in content from the original transcripts. In his adaptation, he had cleaned up the verbatim language, removed what he thought were unnecessary words and phrases, and introduced a structure to the narrative. The story now had a plot-line with a clear progression and dramatic climax. In this fictional script, Sam makes the tragic decision to commit suicide in the attic of the factory. In essence, de Volder's version was more dramatic.

Two weeks before the premiere, my mother made the decision to return to the original transcribed texts as the basis for the performance, believing that the dramatised script did not authentically reflect the poetry of Sam's character and that of his personal story. Rather than placing the emphasis on dramatic content and structure, my mother chose to focus on the central theme of Sam's everyday life and how he spent his days in the factory as the end of his employment contract approached. In her selection of text fragments from the transcripts, my mother included statements demonstrating Sam's reluctance to speak, such as: "Well, do you want to know more about me?" and "Well, I don't really have much to say”.

When I dig back into my memories of watching the play, I see my father in the role of Sam on stage, pointing to different corners of the playing space while saying: “Look, a mouse”. I recall being intrigued by these simple sentences, which seemed weighty and meaningful, as well as the silences between his spoken words.

When I asked my father to reflect on what it was like to portray Sam, he recalled several challenges (Bert Luppes, personal communication, 2024 September 5). He was aware that Sam would be a member of the audience and approached the role with due respect. He perceived Sam as a sort of monument for his character, but maintained a degree of distance from fully embodying him. He reflects on having met Sam and how he knew the full scope of all the interviews, meaning that my father knew which details had not been included in the final performance. This enabled him

to play ‘the tip of the iceberg’. On reflection, my father believes that this is why the silences were laden with meaning, as though the things unspoken could nevertheless be felt (Bert Luppes, personal communication, 2024 September 5).

My father further recalls that it was during the first performances in front of an audience that the text truly came to life. In his experience, the presence of the audience was essential, particularly because the interview-based text implied an active listener as the script material is based on an interviewer asking questions while listening to the answers. When Sam came to watch the play, he expressed his satisfaction in a simple statement: “It’s the truth!”. In terms of his own process, my father observed that whenever he felt his performance was lacking in meaning, he would return to the script to ensure he had not missed any details in his lines. For him, the unique beauty of the play was captured in the nuance of the spoken language.

When I started my research on interview-based theatre, this memory of watching my father embodying Sam within this industrial space returned. I’ve seen numerous performances with my father, but this one I remember most vividly. I recall that even as a child, I sensed an intensity of concentration captured in both the phrases and silences. My mother’s intention for creating the play was a task given by the cultural government to pay homage to the city of Leiden. By creating a play around the story of a forgotten employee in a dismantled factory, she was able to highlight an aspect of the city that might otherwise go unnoticed. By staying true to Sam’s word-for-word language, she celebrated the poetry of the local dialect and rhythms. This approach invited the audience to pay attention to a seemingly common and everyday aspect of this particular city. Although the verbatim fragments were purposefully selected towards the creation of a meaningful theatre event, and Sam was not physically portrayed realistically by my father, the play still honoured Sam as the main source of inspiration. Something that transcended his individual truth, so that it would resonate with a public full of different people. Different from each other and different from Sam. My father said that the script has been played by various theatre groups years after this production, meaning that the play has meaning transcending its aim of paying homage to Sam’s story, or the city of Leiden. Although it's based on this particular local story there is a broader story interesting for audiences not connected to Sam or Leiden in that particular time the play was created.

My reflections on *Kingcorn* as interview-based theatre led to the following research questions which will be further explored in this dissertation:

Research questions (1-3):

- How does verbatim theatre cultivate attentiveness for a local story?
- Can a local story, told in vernacular language and based on word-for-word transcripts, presented in an artistic context pay homage to a place and person whilst simultaneously not claiming truth?
- What is the value of using vernacular language when using a local story as the main source of inspiration for performance?

Second experience: Performing myself into community

In 2018, I was a first-year student at the Theatre School of Amsterdam (Amsterdamse Toneel- en Kleinkunst Academie) in a four-year theatre-making program. One of our first tasks was to create and perform a 30-minute production based on our own identity. It was part of a new initiative within the acting department encouraging students to become theatre-makers: "You are an autonomous artist" was the prevailing message. Discussions about identity, whether related to gender, culture, or sexuality, dominated both our classroom as well as the cultural sector at large. I noticed that most performances inside the theatre school, and those in theatres around the city, often covered this theme, centred around the topics of gender, sexuality and race. Although I found some of the discussions insightful and they heightened my awareness of these topics, I also experienced many as repetitive and limited in their capacity to accommodate nuanced perspectives. In my view, this curbed the possibility for extracting value from in-depth discussions in which paradox and multilayered truths could be recognised.

I felt reluctant to engage with my identity in the way I was being asked to within the theatre school. The thought of isolating myself in a studio space over an 8-week period to create a performance around my individual identity seemed disconnected from what I wanted to explore, as well as *how* I wanted to explore it. I had always experienced my personal identity as fluid and interconnected with others, and found myself drawn to the encounter. In the book *Agnès Varda: Interviews* (2014:ix), I had read an observation by the documentary maker Agnès Varda stating: "Life is not a

dialectical idea, it’s a lived contradiction." This notion resonated deeply with me. Rather than defining myself within fixed categories, I have been interested in how identity emerges through experience and interaction; embracing contradiction rather than resolving it. I wanted to create something based on interaction, discovering what there was to learn and highlight within the meaningful exchanges I might have with people in my neighbourhood.

Having recently moved from a small village to a fast-paced city, I longed for a sense of connection. I was living in an apartment overlooking a public square and so my first impulse towards the creation of my 30-minute performance involved writing letters to my neighbours, asking if they would be open to meeting with me, allowing me to create a performative portrait of the square and its residents.

Some neighbours sent me letters in return, sharing stories about the square, while others invited me into their homes. I audio-recorded the visits, fascinated by the unfolding dialogues. One neighbour, for example, with whom I had only exchanged hallway greetings up until then, preferred to visit me at my apartment. Over dinner, I learnt that her social life mostly existed on the social media platform, Twitter[4]. She had struggled with obesity throughout her life and lost contact with most of her family and friends, yet was passionately involved in online discussions – so much so that she had once been temporarily banned from Twitter after sending an angry tweet[5] to Donald Trump, who was then President of the United States of America. I met her several more times and eventually visited her home, which was filled with years' worth of collected belongings including untouched kitchen appliances, board games and magazines. As I left, she gifted me a bread toaster that also functioned as a radio. I still have this in my possession.

Throughout this process, I was keenly aware of the balance between honouring the intimacy and uniqueness of these personal encounters, and risking their being received in performance as ridicule or mockery. I did not want to judge my neighbour's quirks or mannerisms. I focused on describing what I remembered encountering, allowing the moments to speak for themselves. These encounters,

[4] Twitter was renamed ‘X’ in 2023.
[5] A tweet is a short message or post shared on the platform, now referred to as a "post" since the rebranding to X.

along with the transcribed letters and recordings, became the foundation for my performance, which I envisioned as a kind of ‘Alice in Wonderland’ journey through my neighbourhood. I combined my personal observations, musings, and moments of vulnerability with transcribed content from the encounters. One scenario, for example, captured the misunderstanding I experienced when walking into a hairdressing salon just to strike up a conversation (rather than to make an appointment, as the employees seem to expect) and how ashamed I felt at their perceived desperation in my actions.

During the final performance, I sensed that the audience remained open and attentive, as if captivated by the ordinary details that were coming to life on stage. I experienced a similarity in the exchange between the audience and myself in the role of performer, as when I had taken on the role of being a witness to my neighbours, open and attentive to the lesser-known details in their lives. The project revealed to me how drama, humour, and poetry could be found in the everyday encounters I had with people who were previously strangers to me, and how these elements could be effectively translated through theatre and performance for others to see.

I had not yet read widely or critically explored the ethical debates surrounding the use of interviews in theatre, particularly concerns about potential exploitation. At that time I was strongly motivated to pay attention to the people and events surrounding me on a day-to-day basis, to observe the variety of our human lives, whilst simultaneously finding recognition in each other's stories as a way to counter prejudice. In *Utopia in Performance* (2005), Jill Dolan writes about the profound moments in performance that lift both performers and audiences into a space of shared hope and possibility. She calls these moments "utopian performatives," where live theatre creates a fleeting sense of connection and allows us to envision how the world might be if we engaged with one another with that same generosity and attentiveness being demonstrated through the performative.

> The utopian performative’s evanescence leaves us melancholy yet cheered, because, for however brief a moment, we felt something of what redemption might be like, of what humanism could really mean, of how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences. (Dolan, 2005:165-166)

In my reflections on this project, I realise that what I had experienced in creating and performing the work could be perceived as this "utopian performative." The attentiveness between my neighbours and I, and the act of postponing judgement, fostered a sense of beauty and connection. This same attentiveness and openness is what I sensed as a performer with the audience during the performance. Dolan argues that these moments do not necessarily lead to lasting social change but they do offer a glimpse of how we might live together more empathetically.

Throughout this project I was intrigued by how every encounter held the potential of becoming theatrical, when given appropriate attention. The neighbours became characters in my world of discovery. Some of the neighbours came to watch the performance, and our connection extended beyond the project. This experience inspired research questions around the potential value that verbatim performance may have for neighbourhood engagement in particular, but also more general community engagement.

Research questions (4-6):

- How can verbatim performance be used as a tool for community engagement?
- How does my work place itself within the context of community engaged theatre?
- What are the challenges and rewards of turning ordinary encounters into theatrical representations?

Experience 3: Ethical paralysis

> The possibility of the ethical stance in foolish witness comes from an insistence on engagement based on availability and the willingness to step forward without certainty. The goal is relationship, not success. (Salverson, 2008:246)

When I came to South Africa in 2023 to follow my Masters program in Applied Drama and Theatre studies at the University of Cape Town, I faced a longing for community and belonging again. I wanted to know the culture around me, to feel at home in my new neighbourhood in Cape Town. I found myself regularly visiting The Commons in Muizenberg, a cultural café hosting music gigs, documentaries, open

mics, and poetry nights. It became a space where I felt comfortable, even when I was alone. Inspired by my earlier work, I began to conduct a similar interview-based project, this time interviewing the people who were shaping this vibrant space. The central question I asked them, one I was also grappling with at that time, was: "How do you create a sense of home in displacement?"

As this project fell under my Master's program, which required that I draw up an ethics application and consent form, I was prompted to dive into literature on the ethics of testimonial and verbatim theatre. As I read, I became overwhelmed by the number of ethical dilemmas to consider. There were so many potential pitfalls: exploitation, the false claim of truthfulness, power imbalances, misrepresentation, mockery, and oversimplification. It was paralysing. I began to question my position as an outsider - an individual from the Netherlands, a country with a colonial connection to South Africa – collecting stories from local people in this new neighbourhood. Who was I to collect their stories, edit them, and possibly paraphrase them for a performance? Why would anyone even want to participate? The weight of these questions made me wonder if I should abandon the project entirely, focusing instead on my personal exploration of what "home" meant to me.

> Sometimes we can argue ourselves into a corner in the name of ethics or theory when our objections are really about the fear of making contact, of being rejected, of looking ridiculous. (...) The criteria for engagement must be found inside ourselves. (Salverson, 2008:250-251)

It was in the midst of feeling overwhelmed by these ethical dilemmas that Julia Salverson (2008) became a turning point for me. In her article ‘Taking Liberties: A Theatre Class of Foolish Witnesses’, she warns against the paralysis that can come from overthinking ethical considerations. She argues that the "paralysis of caution" stifles genuine engagement, as participants are driven by the fear of making mistakes or doing harm (Salverson, 2008:247). She advocates instead for what she calls becoming a "foolish witness," which involves stepping forward into the unknown with openness, even if the outcome is uncertain. This approach requires a willingness to engage, valuing the relational process rather than focusing on success or perfection. Salverson (2008) highlights that waiting for the perfect ethical framework can prevent any meaningful interaction from taking place.

This notion of moving beyond the paralysis of caution helped me realise that I need not have all the answers worked out, or all the contingency plans in place to avoid all risks, before continuing with my project. It reinforced my belief that this project was about fostering genuine encounters, about paying attention to the poetic potential of everyday interactions, rather than aspiring to a grand, singular truth. I knew from my previous experiences that there was a unique beauty in using real encounters as the foundation for performance. The act of listening, the connection that this fosters, the sense of community that arises through shared creation – all of these elements hold the potential to reveal the poetry of everyday language, capture human nuances, suspend judgement and bring attention to the ordinary in a way that makes it extraordinary.

Research questions (6-8):

- How can interview-based performance celebrate locality and foster community engagement, while navigating the ethical challenges of claim of truth, positionality, and representation?
- To what extent should the interviewees be included in the creation process if the production is intending to be community engaged?
- Does community engagement have to be at the cost of the artistic agency of the theatre maker in a verbatim process?

Chapter 2 | Methodology & Literature Review

Autoethnography

When I began writing this dissertation, I felt trapped within a prescribed writing format that did not seem suited to the nature of my research. I grappled with questions about my research focus and the structure I should adopt. I had immersed myself in numerous research articles, engaged in plenty of conversations, and accumulated a diversity of experiences that I attempted to distil into a coherent conceptual framework for a literature review. I wondered whether I should start the dissertation by providing an historical context for interview-based theatre. And if so, where then should this history start or end? The term "verbatim" has been applied to a variety of approaches, many of which diverged significantly from my own practice. Each attempt to structure my thoughts into general statements seemed to diminish the richness of what I wanted to convey. The challenge of fitting it into a predefined academic structure created a significant blockage in my creative process, ultimately affecting my motivation.

As I delved deeper into the academic literature surrounding verbatim theatre, I found myself entangled in debates about its ethics including: the potential exploitation of others' stories; verbatim theatre's claim to represent truth; and the inherent impossibility of fully conveying someone else's narrative. While these concerns are undoubtedly important, they felt disconnected from my own practice. My engagement with verbatim theatre has never been about capturing another's truth; instead, I remain fascinated by its capacity to foster meaningful engagement with others and inspire my own truth in the process. The foundational premise of my projects acknowledges that fully grasping or representing someone else's experience is impossible, but that this realization encourages attentive social engagement rather than avoidance (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). My work revolves around my perception of the people I interview, as I weave their stories through the lens of my own personal narrative. Hence, the interview-based theatre projects I explore and my approach to conducting this research are deeply intertwined with my identity.

This has motivated my use of autoethnography as a method for this dissertation. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as a method that challenges canonical research frameworks, merging personal experience with cultural analysis to produce both evocative and scholarly insights. They argue that this approach foregrounds subjectivity and relationality, making the researcher's influence an explicit and integral part of the process (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

Similarly, Rahul Mitra (2010) emphasises the value of reflexivity within autoethnography, positioning the researcher as a co-participant in the creation of knowledge rather than an objective observer. Mitra's reflections on his own research journey resonated deeply with me, particularly his assertion that our personal narratives shape the questions we pose and the interpretations we derive. By embracing this perspective, I have come to see my subjectivity not as a limitation but as a powerful tool for understanding the relational dynamics at the heart of verbatim theatre (Mitra, 2010). This has allowed me to focus on documenting not only my artistic process but also the ways in which my identity and experiences influence – and are influenced by – the material I create.

Moreover, Allan Munro (2011) notes that autoethnography is particularly effective for documenting creative processes that are "messy" and emergent, as it captures the interplay between the self, the practice, and the cultural context. He highlights how the act of documenting these processes generates new knowledge by reflecting on the dynamic tensions between the designer's unique perspective, the demands of the medium, and the broader cultural norms or expectations (Munro, 2011). This insight has been instrumental in shaping my approach, as it encourages me to explore how the relational exchanges in my projects generate new questions and evolve organically through the iterative cycles of interviews, transcriptions, rehearsals, and performances.

Rather than adhering strictly to the linear and analytical conventions most commonly found in academic writing, I aim to document how my experiences, identity, and artistic projects have shaped – and continue to shape – my understanding of verbatim theatre and the methodologies I employ. The interplay between self and other informs the structure of my work, emphasising that the research is as much a reflection of my experiences as a researcher as it is about the material I explore.

Writing about my own experiences allows me to investigate how verbatim theatre functions as a method, as well as how it shapes, and is shaped by, my identity and artistic practice. This method acknowledges the fluid boundaries between self and other, researcher and subject, artist and audience. Simultaneously, this perspective allows my dissertation to serve not only as an exploration of verbatim theatre but also as a reflection on the intertwining of personal narrative and artistic research practice in the creation of meaningful performance.

Applied Theatre as Research

The use of Applied Theatre as Research (ATAR) was central to my methodology, particularly in the *Company in the Gardens* project. Anderson and O'Connor (2014) identify ATAR as a methodology that foregrounds the dynamic interplay between theatre-making, critical inquiry, and social engagement. Their approach situates the creative process as both a method and a site of knowledge production, where the evolving interactions between participants, facilitators, and the theatrical material generate insights that are as valuable as the final performance itself. ATAR places the emphasis on applied theatre as inherently dialogic, creating opportunities for participants and facilitators to engage in mutual learning and reflexive practice (Anderson & O'Connor, 2014).

Central to ATAR is the integration of planning, action, and reflection. Anderson and O'Connor (2014) argue that while a well-structured framework is necessary to guide the process, facilitators should remain responsive to the emerging dynamics of the group and the unpredictable discoveries that occur during workshops and rehearsals. This iterative process ensures that the research remains flexible and grounded in the lived experiences of participants. Reflective journaling is a key tool in this methodology, providing facilitators with a means to document and analyse their decisions, adaptations, and the broader impacts of their work.

Anderson and O'Connor (2014) emphasise three core dimensions of ATAR that distinguish it from other research methodologies:

1) Collaborative Inquiry

ATAR blurs the boundaries between researcher and participant, framing the process as a co-creative dialogue. The participants' voices and perspectives are central, shaping the trajectory of the research in ways that are often unexpected but deeply meaningful. Anderson and O'Connor describe a project where participants used Forum Theatre techniques to address local housing issues; the participants' lived experiences not only informed the narrative but also shaped the methods used, as their needs and insights called for specific adaptations to the planned structure (Anderson & O'Connor, 2014:197).

2) Generative Knowledge Production

Unlike traditional research, which often seeks to confirm hypotheses or produce definitive conclusions, ATAR is inherently exploratory. The knowledge generated through applied theatre is relational and emergent, arising from the creative process itself. Anderson and O'Connor (2014) highlight the importance of embracing ambiguity and recognising that the insights gained may be multifaceted, incomplete, and open to reinterpretation. They describe this as a "practice of questioning" where the research continuously evolves in response to the unfolding dynamics of the group (Anderson & O'Connor, 2014:192).

3) Ethical Responsiveness

ATAR places significant emphasis on the ethical dimensions of applied theatre practice. Facilitators are encouraged to engage with participants in ways that prioritise respect, reciprocity, and transparency. Anderson and O'Connor (2014) argue that this requires a willingness to confront power imbalances and to navigate the ethical dilemmas that arise when representing others' stories.

Navigating the ‘I’

In my dissertation, the "I" represents more than just a narrative voice: it is a dynamic lens through which I explore, reflect, and engage with the processes of verbatim theatre and community-building. My positionality as a writer, facilitator, theatre-maker, and researcher is not fixed but evolves alongside the projects and encounters described. This fluidity reflects my personal journey of navigating the spaces between self and other, between insider and outsider, and between the roles I take on in different contexts.

I was born in the Netherlands in 1995, raised in a small village where the close-knit community provided a sense of grounding. My initial academic journey, a Bachelor’s in Liberal Arts and Sciences, revealed to me the limitations of purely theoretical engagement. In discussion groups for various courses, I felt a disconnect, a sense that our personal stories and lived realities were left at the door. This detachment ignited a desire in me to connect knowledge to lived experience, to bring the personal and the academic into dialogue. Theatre, with its ability to embody paradox and hold space for vulnerability, became the medium through which I wanted to explore these connections. After completing my bachelor's degree, I pursued an acting degree at the Theatre School of Amsterdam.

During my first theatre projects, the "I" in my work was rooted in a personal quest for belonging. I moved through various roles – from stranger to interviewer or wit(h)ness,[6] to theatre maker and performer – interweaving other people’s stories that I had recorded with my own stories. This process transformed a public square into a shared stage. Over the course of my latter theatre projects, the "I" evolved further, occupying multiple roles, becoming a workshop facilitator, researcher, and director. In reflecting on these shifting roles, I have come to realise that the "I" in my dissertation is not static but performs multiple functions: as a storyteller, researcher, and collaborator. This dynamic presence shapes the narratives I engage with and how they are presented.

The relational dynamics at the heart of my practice are inseparable from these roles, which each bring opportunities and limitations. As a **stranger**, I began as an

[6] The concept of ‘withness’ will be discussed more thoroughly in later chapters.

outsider, observing from the periphery. This positionality allowed for moments of curiosity and openness, a willingness to ask questions unencumbered by preconceptions. Yet, the role of the stranger is not without its ethical tensions; it risks voyeurism and can lack the depth of understanding that comes with prolonged engagement. As I moved to become a **witness**, I noticed a shift: witnessing is more participatory than simply observing. This role invited me to enter into the lives and experiences of others, fostering a sense of shared humanity, yet it also required careful navigation to ensure that my presence did not overshadow or distort the narratives being shared with me.

The evolution into a **facilitator** brought new complexities and demands. My facilitation role in verbatim theatre workshops in *Company in the Gardens* involved balancing structure with flexibility. I aimed to create a safe and supportive environment where student-participants could explore their creative ideas while grappling with the ethical complexities of verbatim theatre. Through structured activities like free writing exercises and sensory observation, I encouraged the student-participants to find themes that resonated personally. Simultaneously, I provided the framework necessary to ensure progress toward a collective performance, facilitating reflection and discussion to deepen their engagement. My primary focus was to empower participants to shape their own narratives while fostering trust and respect in their interactions, allowing their voices to emerge authentically.

As a **director**, I took on the responsibility of shaping the final performance, making artistic and structural decisions that highlighted the essence of the encounters. This role required me not only to remain true to the specific moments and voices shared by participants but also to identify how these moments connected to a larger theme within the performance. Balancing this dual focus, I worked to craft a dramaturgical structure that provided coherence and flow. I sought to highlight the unique character of each encounter and the vernacular speech – the poetry inherent in the unique expressions of the person interviewed – while carefully selecting fragments that contributed meaningfully to the larger theme. The process involved navigating the tension between creative interpretation and ethical integrity, ensuring that the stories

honoured the participants' experiences and engaged the audience in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

In exploring these roles, I also recognise that my position as a **storyteller** is inherently relational, and the stories I present are not objective truths but co-constructed narratives shaped by my interactions and interpretations. This realization underscores the ethical dimension of my practice and highlights the importance of transparency in how stories are gathered, shared, and transformed.

The role of the **academic**, however, has presented one of the most persistent challenges. At times, I have feared that this role might overshadow the artist within me, prioritising theoretical analysis over creative expression. And yet, the academic lens has also provided tools for critical reflection, enabling me to articulate and contextualise the processes and principles underpinning my work. This felt duality between artist and academic has demanded that I constantly negotiate between creative spontaneity and scholarly rigour.

Writing from the "I" allows me to bridge these roles and to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity in the narratives I engage with. It is through this acknowledgment that I can model the vulnerability and reflexivity I seek to foster in my work. The "I" thus becomes a bridge between the personal and the communal, the self and the other, the artistic and the academic.

Through the exploration of my personal experiences with interview-based theatre, existing literature, and an analysis of two key projects from my master's studies, I seek to establish a verbatim theatre blueprint. This blueprint is not intended to provide a definitive answer for creating ethical verbatim work; rather, it aims to distinguish tools that, in my experience, help foster careful and deliberate artistic practices. The blueprint celebrates locality and seeks to cultivate attentive social engagement, emphasising the relational and contextual nature of verbatim theatre. By situating myself within the research and reflecting on the multiplicity of roles I inhabit, I aim to foster a deeper understanding of how these roles interact, overlap, and at times conflict, offering insights into the complexities of socially engaged theatre practices.

Literature review: The Historical Context of Verbatim Theatre

> [The] greatest reservoir of creativity inherent in people [is] their linguistic abilities. (Cheeseman as quoted in Paget, 1987:318)

Peter Cheeseman, the founding Artistic Director of the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, dedicated much of his career to producing theatre that reflected and celebrated the lives of local, working-class communities. He believed that authentic storytelling through vernacular speech was central to creating a meaningful connection between performers and audiences (Paget, 1987:318). Over time, verbatim theatre has emerged in varied contexts, shaped by evolving social, political, and cultural influences. In its formative stages, a clear distinction developed between a celebratory, community-focused form and a more investigative, issue-driven approach, which has helped inform my own research within current debates on verbatim theatre's development and ethical considerations.

The roots of verbatim theatre can be traced to the origins of documentary theatre, an artistic response to contemporary social realities. Erwin Piscator introduced the concept of "documentary theatre" with his 1925 production of *Trotz Alledem!* (*In Spite of Everything!*), which explored the history of the Communist Party and established theatre as a political platform, setting the stage for verbatim practices. Piscator's innovative use of multimedia, including projections, film, and newsreels, alongside direct quotes from political speeches and historical documents, revolutionized the theatrical form by grounding performances in factual material. This approach aimed not only to inform audiences but also to provoke critical reflection and inspire social action, positioning theatre as a medium for both education and activism (Summerskill, 2020:9). However, the term "verbatim theatre" itself only emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in England, coined by Derek Paget in reference to Peter Cheeseman's work at the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent (Stuart Fisher, 2020). During this period, Cheeseman produced the Stoke Documentaries, a series of plays based on interviews with local community members, primarily working-class individuals, who shared experiences of pivotal local events. One such production, *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974), focused on the closure of a steelworks in Stoke and was performed for ex-steelworkers who had participated in interviews (Summerskill, 2020:14).

Paget (1987) describes verbatim theatre as a distinct form of documentary theatre that draws primarily on recorded interviews with everyday people, conducted during research into a specific region, topic, or event. These recordings are transcribed and transformed into a script, which is then performed, often by the same individuals who collected the material. A hallmark of this method is its commitment to authenticity, with plays frequently performed in the same communities that inspired them, fostering a reciprocal relationship between creators and audiences: *"*[In] Verbatim Theatre, the firmest of commitments is thus made by the company to the use of vernacular speech, recorded as the primary source material of their play*"* (Paget, 1987:317).

This early form of verbatim theatre involved recording and transcribing interviews with ordinary people, capturing the unique vernacular of particular regions. Through these works, verbatim theatre democratised playwriting by engaging actors directly with community members and encouraging a shared creative process (Paget, 1987:318). Reflecting on this collaborative nature, Cheeseman (2005) later highlighted the ensemble's dual role as both researchers and creators, describing it as fundamental to his documentary projects.

As verbatim theatre spread beyond regions like Lancaster and Cheshire, it evolved into a form addressing broader, sometimes national issues. London-based companies, often catering to metropolitan audiences, began producing "Controversy Shows", investigative productions with a more journalistic tone than the community-centred, celebratory early works (Paget, 1987:322).

Talking to Terrorists (2005), written by Robin Soans and directed by Max Stafford-Clark, exemplifies the investigative style, drawing from interviews to explore global perspectives on terrorism. Unlike Cheeseman's work, where all actors took part in research, only a few cast members were involved in the preparatory phase of *Talking to Terrorists*, reflecting a shift toward a playwright-led, rather than an ensemble-driven, approach (Cantrell, 2013:169).

While verbatim theatre has increasingly taken on an investigative tone in its effort to address contemporary issues and fill gaps in media reporting, I have not followed this trend in my work. My preference aligns more closely with the celebratory origins

of the form, as exemplified by Cheeseman's Stoke Documentaries, with its commitment to reflecting the vernacular speech and lived experiences of locality and communities, and its emphasis on the dual role of actors as both researchers and performers. Rather than seeking to address a gap in the news or uncover investigative truths, my work prioritises the relational and artistic value of storytelling, and paying homage to locality whilst doing so.

Defining Key Concepts

> One single-sentence definition of verbatim theatre is 'a dramatic production based on spoken experiences shared by people who have been interviewed about a particular subject or theme'. But, like any dynamic concept in the arts, verbatim theatre processes vary – depending on the artists, practice and the context of the production. (Summerskill, 2020:8)

Verbatim has been closely associated with documentary theatre, theatre of testimony, applied drama, autobiographical performance and oral history performance. In *Creating verbatim theatre from oral histories*, Clare Summerskill (2020) explores the methodologies, ethics, and practicalities of transforming oral histories and personal testimonies into verbatim theatre. By connecting oral history methodologies with verbatim theatre, she aims to offer practical insight into creating ethically grounded, community-engaged performances.

Verbatim theatre, as Summerskill (2020:8) defines it, differs from documentary theatre, which relies on written documents like diaries or court records. Tribunal theatre, on the other hand, focuses on reconstructions of trial scripts or public inquiries, with little to no interview input. Theatre of testimony focuses specifically on marginalised individuals recounting traumatic experiences. Summerskill (2020:10) further mentions that examples of verbatim theatre methods include Recorded Delivery and Headphone Theatre, where actors narrate interview material played through earpieces in real-time.

Summerskill (2020) highlights that verbatim theatre defies a single definition because of the diverse methodologies, artistic intentions, and contexts that shape each production. She further emphasises that, while verbatim theatre fundamentally draws on real spoken experiences, its processes are highly adaptable, reflecting the

individual approaches and ethical considerations of the artists involved (Summerskill, 2020:22).

Applied drama engages communities in non-theatrical settings for social change, and may include verbatim methods. Applied theatre, as explored by Prendergast, Saxton and Kandil (2024), refers to a wide spectrum of performance practices that occur outside conventional theatre spaces, often engaging with marginalised communities to address pressing social or political issues. The methodology of applied theatre emphasises participatory processes, ethical considerations, and the capacity to generate dialogue and foster transformation within communities (Prendergast, Saxton & Kandil, 2024:6).

Verbatim theatre is deeply related to applied theatre in its community-oriented approach but is not inherently bound to it. Verbatim theatre's reliance on real spoken accounts creates an intersection with applied theatre, particularly in its potential to engage communities and represent their lived realities. However, while applied theatre is often focused on fostering direct social change or addressing specific community concerns, verbatim theatre can also be purely artistic or documentary in its intentions, not necessarily aiming for community transformation.

The methodologies overlap when verbatim theatre is used within applied theatre contexts, such as in productions that transform personal testimonies into performances that reflect and interrogate societal issues. For instance, Summerskill (2020) notes how verbatim theatre draws on oral histories and testimony, aligning it with applied theatre's participatory ethos. Yet, the key distinction lies in intention: verbatim theatre's primary goal may remain the faithful artistic rendering of narratives, whereas applied theatre emphasises the participatory process as much as, if not more than, the final product.

As highlighted by Prendergast, Saxton and Kandil (2024), applied theatre is rooted in creating dialogues and fostering agency, often in spaces traditionally excluded from mainstream theatre. It shares with verbatim theatre a commitment to authenticity and representation but diverges in its broader pedagogical and activist goals (Prendergast, Saxton & Kandil, 2024:6). Thus, while the two forms are

interconnected, their application depends on the intended outcomes, whether to create an artistic narrative or address a community's specific needs.

Verbatim and community engaged theatre

Verbatim theatre serves as a compelling bridge between individual artistic motivations and collective storytelling. In my neighbourhood project, the act of gathering and sharing stories was not only a way to explore the experiences of others but also an opportunity to navigate my own quest for belonging. This dual purpose, however, raises essential questions: Can personal artistic motivations coexist with the collaborative aims of community engagement, or do they risk overshadowing the participants' voices? While verbatim theatre's use of word-for-word fragments celebrates the poetry of everyday language, it also carries an implicit claim to truthfulness, which can obscure the artist's interpretive role in shaping the final performance. Additionally, does structuring narratives around a broader theme dilute the collaborative essence of community engagement by prioritising artistic cohesion over individual truths?

Helen Nicholson, in her work *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (2005), provides a foundation for understanding these questions. She distinguishes between applied theatre and community-engaged theatre, even though the two are closely intertwined. Applied theatre encompasses a wide range of practices, including community theatre and theatre for development, often occurring in non-traditional contexts with aims of creating dialogue, empowerment, and social transformation. According to Nicholson (2005:17), applied drama and theatre "operate within a dynamic set of interrelationships that shift the boundaries between artist and audience, self and other, participant and practitioner."

Community-engaged theatre, on the other hand, narrows its focus on building reciprocal relationships within specific communities. It emphasises relationality, co-creation, and shared authorship, fostering spaces where marginalised voices are amplified, and collective agency is nurtured. Nicholson (2005) critiques viewing this practice as a one-sided act of charity, instead framing it as a reciprocal exchange. She uses the metaphor of gift-giving observing that "the act of gift-giving disrupts the

transactional logic of self-interest and invites a relational, ethical engagement with others” (Nicholson, 2005:88).

This metaphor resonates with my practice of verbatim theatre, where gathering and sharing stories is a form of care and connection. As I invite participants to share their experiences, I view their stories as gifts that require careful handling, honouring the trust placed in me. The performance, in turn, becomes a gift to the community and broader public, creating a shared space for reflection and dialogue.

Nicholson (2005) also critiques simplistic or overly altruistic notions of the gift. She emphasises that the process should not imply a hierarchical relationship between giver and receiver. Instead, it should foster equity, mutual respect, and shared ownership of the theatrical process. This critique aligns with my efforts to create a relational and ethical framework within my projects, where participants are not merely subjects of the performance but co-creators in the storytelling process. However, my approach also diverges as my projects often begin with a personal artistic question rather than an overt intent to serve the community. Even so, I aim to honour the participants’ contributions and the public spaces or neighbourhoods that form the backdrop of my work.

Peters and Burton (2023:5) provide further clarity on community-engaged theatre, defining it as inherently relational and collaborative which means “considering the social, cultural, political, and economic context of the community you are working with, alongside your creative and artistic goals." This understanding underscores the importance of mutual respect and shared ownership in creating meaningful and resonant work.

In verbatim theatre, this relational ethos introduces layers of complexity and responsibility. Peters and Burton (2025) place emphasis on the ethical significance of how stories are collected, interpreted, and presented. Participants’ narratives should be honoured without reducing them to mere spectacle or oversimplification. Shared authorship is central, with participants contributing not just as sources but as collaborators in shaping the themes and structure of the performance.

While the final product must retain the authenticity of the participants’ voices, it also requires artistic interpretation to craft a cohesive and impactful narrative. Peters and

Burton (2023) view process and product as inherently interconnected and equally significant in community-engaged verbatim theatre. By treating process and product as interdependent, they position community-engaged verbatim theatre as a practice that merges ethical collaboration with artistic excellence. This perspective challenges traditional hierarchies in theatre-making, proposing a model where the journey of co-creation is as significant as the destination of performance. Their approach underscores the belief that the process of collaboration, engagement, and co-creation directly informs the quality and impact of the final product, and vice versa (Peters & Burton, 2023).

In their analysis of the project *Bald Heads & Blue Stars* (2014), Peters and Burton reflect on how this verbatim play, which explored the experiences of women living with alopecia, transformed interviews into a composite character while maintaining the integrity of the participants' stories. They note that, although the participants were not directly involved in the later dramaturgical stages, their narratives remained central (Peters & Burton, 2023:159). This highlights a tension between artistic vision and participant agency – a tension I have also encountered in my own work. Structuring my performance around broader themes allowed me to create a cohesive narrative that resonated with the audience but, at the same time, limited the participants' role in shaping the final presentation.

Ultimately, the role of the artist in community-engaged theatre requires a careful balance between creative agency and participant involvement. As Van Erven (2002) argues, the success of such work lies in merging rigorous artistic methodologies with social intentionality, ensuring that the resulting performances are both aesthetically compelling and ethically grounded. Projects like *Bald Heads & Blue Stars* demonstrate how participants' voices can be honoured while maintaining the director's creative freedom.

In my practice, I continue to grapple with these tensions, striving to create performances that bridge personal artistic motivations with collective storytelling. My work has never had the singular goal of serving the community as its starting point and, therefore, might not fully align with what can be considered community-engaged verbatim work. However, in my recent projects, I have consciously explored how the creative process can embody principles of community engagement by valuing

participants' stories as sources of artistic inspiration—treating their voices with respect and recognising the poetic qualities of everyday life, rather than turning them into objects of entertainment. This approach allows me to honour the participants' contributions while navigating the balance between artistic vision and ethical collaboration.

Community engaged theatre in South-Africa

While my initial engagement with community-engaged theatre in South Africa was not explicitly informed by its history of verbatim practices, this tradition and the broader practices of community-engaged theatre have profoundly shaped my understanding of storytelling within this context. It was only through reflecting on my experiences, and encountering the work of theatre-makers such as Neil Coppen and the innovative Empatheatre collective, that I began to appreciate the depth and significance of community theatre in South Africa.

In selecting which community-engaged theatre projects to explore in depth, I was particularly interested in those that implement theatre at the crossroads of different communities and narratives, as well as at the intersection of (academic) research and artistic practice. Community-engaged theatre can take many forms, but I was drawn to projects that amplify under-represented voices and those that actively facilitate encounters between differing perspectives, fostering dialogue across social, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. Both Empatheatre and KKNK exemplify this in multiple ways: on a community-artistic level, through research-driven artistic processes, and in their collaborations with diverse communities. These projects do not simply collect and present stories; they engage in a process of negotiation between multiple perspectives, allowing different voices and identities to intersect in meaningful ways. This ability to bridge artistic expression, research, and lived experience resonated with my own explorations of ethical storytelling and relational dramaturgy.

One project that particularly shaped my perspective was *Karoo Kaarte*, led by Neil Coppen in collaboration with the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK)[7]. This project exemplified how real-life narratives could be integrated into a play script while remaining rooted in the community's lived realities. Through interviews, workshops, and collective creation, *Karoo Kaarte* amplified the voices of Oudtshoorn residents, particularly those from marginalised communities (Saterdaght*,* 2023). Observing this process, I was struck by how local histories and personal testimonies were interwoven with artistic interpretation.

Their site-specific production (2024), *Die Swartmerrie*[8]*,* incorporated stories gathered from interviews, connecting the past and present through its staging at a train station, a site imbued with both historical and cultural significance. The completed play was performed by people from the Oudtshoorn community, further rooting the production in the lived experiences of those it represented. Additionally, the script was co-written by Tiffany Jacobs, a writer from the Oudtshoorn community, ensuring that the creative process remained collaborative and reflective of local voices (Saterdaght*,* 2023). However, the production did not use transcribed fragments or the vernacular speech of those interviewed, instead opting for an interpretive approach that reflected the themes of the community's stories.

Another example is Empatheatre's play *The Last Country*[9], which draws on the testimonies of migrant women in Durban to explore themes of displacement, belonging, and resilience (Erwin, 2021). This production is based on 30 oral histories. The voices of the women were combined into a multi-vocal account, representing a tapestry of perspectives rather than a single point of view. This approach aimed to ensure that the audience connected with the overarching themes of displacement and belonging while maintaining the integrity of the participants' individual stories (Erwin, 2021).

[7] Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) is an annual South African arts festival that takes place in the town of Oudtshoorn, and has been showcasing Afrikaans-language theatre, music, and visual arts since 1994.

[8] *Die Swartmerrie* translates from Afrikaans to 'The Black Nightmare', and refers to both a literal black mare (horse) as well as a metaphorical nightmare, depending on the context.

[9] This project was launched in 2017 and is ongoing.

Empatheatre's creative decisions reflect their commitment to relational truth and ethical storytelling. By blending the stories into a unified narrative, they preserved the collective essence of the experiences without singling out or overexposing any one individual. This strategy gave audience members the opportunity to engage with the humanity and complexity of migration as a shared experience, while still respecting the individuality of the contributors. One innovative aspect of *The Last Country* was its immersive staging, with audience members seated in a circle together with the performers, creating an intimate space for storytelling and dialogue. This setup was intended to dismantle traditional boundaries between performer and spectator, fostering a shared space for reflection and exchange that extended into post-performance discussions facilitated by the creative team (Erwin, 2021).

In considering these examples, it is also important to also acknowledge the legacy of South African workshop theatre. This tradition emerged during the 1970s and 1980s as an accessible and politically urgent form of performance that sought to decentralise authorship and centre marginalised voices. Developed in opposition to apartheid structures and Eurocentric theatre norms, workshop theatre was strongly influenced by Brechtian techniques and African oral traditions. It relied on collective devising through improvisation, storytelling, and physical performance, and was often performed in informal settings such as churches, community halls, or public spaces (Kavanagh, 1985; Kruger, 1999).

As Fleishman (1991:6) describes, workshop theatre enabled "people from marginalised groups [to] express their sense of themselves in history." The process typically began with a theme or concern and unfolded through group improvisation, discussion, and personal storytelling. Rather than producing a factual record, the performance was what Fleishman calls a "bundle of meanings, relationships and themes" (1991:16), developed collectively in the rehearsal space, which functioned as both a pedagogical and political site. A widely cited example is the Junction Avenue Theatre Company's *Sophiatown* (1986), which drew on testimonies and historical accounts to explore the destruction of a vibrant cultural community under apartheid (Kruger, 1999).

While my own practice shares workshop theatre's commitment to community engagement and attentiveness to lived experience, it differs in structure and authorship. In *Sense of Home*, I conducted one-on-one interviews myself, while in *Company in the Gardens*, the interviews were conducted by the student-participants as part of a facilitated process. In both cases, however, the performance texts were not developed in collaboration with the interviewees, but were instead shaped through an individual dramaturgical lens. Authorship rests more clearly with me as theatre maker, who selects, arranges, and recontextualises the material into a form that resonates with broader audiences. Crucially, the aim is not to represent a community or speak on behalf of a collective identity, but to engage with each interview as a relational and reciprocal encounter, where the story offered becomes the starting point for a broader poetic and performative reflection. As interviewer and theatre maker, I include myself in the process—recognising my role in framing what is shared and how it is later translated. While this approach carries the risk of interpretive distance, it also allows for crafted nuance and dramaturgical coherence. The artistic agency involved in shaping the final work is central to my process—but like workshop theatre, it is grounded in care, attentiveness, and the ethical responsibility of encounter.

As I situate my work within this context, I acknowledge that my understanding of South Africa's theatrical history as it is related to both verbatim and community-engaged theatre is limited. My reflections are shaped by my personal experiences and engagement with projects like *Karoo Kaarte* and Empatheatre rather than comprehensive knowledge of the field. As Yvette Hutchison (2010) articulates in her exploration of post-1990s verbatim theatre, South African practices often embrace an African concept of truth that is relational and communal, contrasting with Western notions of rigid factuality. This idea resonates deeply with the country's history of holding multiple truths simultaneously, a necessity born of its complex and traumatic past. Projects like *Karoo Kaarte* and Empatheatre's productions exemplify how community-engaged theatre fosters such multiplicity, bridging the personal and collective while maintaining a balance between authenticity and artistic freedom.

These insights have directly informed my evolving understanding of a 'dramaturgy of belonging' which I introduce here and explore further in the next chapter. This concept encapsulates how shared storytelling can create spaces of connection and

reflection, even amidst divergent lived experiences. It also shaped how I approached my own projects, emphasising the ethical and relational dimensions of community engagement while navigating the complexities of representation and creative interpretation.

Reflecting on my time in South Africa, I am struck by how the country's history and cultural ethos cultivate an openness to multiplicity, where personal and collective narratives intersect fluidly. This awareness has reshaped my approach to verbatim theatre and community-engaged practices, prioritising the integration of lived experiences into performance without reducing them to a single narrative of truth. In the chapters ahead, I will explore how these learnings influenced my final project, particularly in the balance I sought to strike between individual authenticity and collective resonance.

Chapter 3 | Project 1 – *Sense of Home*

Context

In my verbatim project, *Sense of Home*, I set out to explore how people create a sense of home when they are in a state of displacement – a question that felt deeply personal to me when I moved from the Netherlands to South Africa to pursue a Masters degree at the University of Cape Town. As someone trying to feel at home in a new environment, this research became not only a way to understand others but also a way to process my own experiences of being uprooted and adjusting to a new cultural context. I wanted to investigate what it means to feel at home and how that sense can be cultivated when the familiar is left behind.

> Feeling at home is often associated with something in the past. The place we grew up in, the people we grew up with, memories. Quite concrete, quite tangible. But talking about feeling at home in the present. It becomes less concrete. Less tangible.
>
> Since I arrived in South Africa, I have felt quite at home in the Commons. I felt comfortable going by myself. It made sense doing my research with the people creating this space.[10]

The project was conducted with a diverse group of people connected to The Commons, a café in Muizenberg, including founders, staff, and frequent visitors, many of whom had histories of migration, loss, or personal transformation. The people I interviewed included founder Kola (from Nigeria), bartender Densen (from Zimbabwe), manager Thando (from Soweto in South Africa), founder Candice (from Zimbabwe), cook Maurice (from Zimbabwe), and bartender Connor (from Congo). Each of them shared vivid and personal imagery that captured their sense of what 'feeling at home' meant to them. All participants gave written consent to be identified by their real names, as documented in the Participant Consent Form.

> For me, home is when I'm in flow. When I'm doing something that feels like it matters. That's when I stop searching.[11]
>
> It's like the sonic sensation… through the sound I begin to like paint the images… not necessarily the music, but this feeling, something associated with a place I call home.[12]
>
> She's wearing like a green dress… green with yellowish gold patterns… it's just the image of her being… it's care, it's warmth. Quite warm.[13]

[10] An extract, as written in my own words, from the 'script' of *Sense of Home*.
[11] Quote from Candice included in final script of *Sense of Home*
[12] Quote from Kola included in final script of *Sense of Home*
[13] Quote from Densen, describing his mothers dress, included in final script of *Sense of Home*

> When you said home… I just put together people in a room and it was like, okay, it's homey.[14]

> Everyone wants to be with her… because you know… when a person reaches a certain age, we just want to be surrounded by them.[15]

Displacement, for the purposes of this project, was defined broadly. It was not limited to those who had moved across countries but included anyone adjusting to a new environment or returning to a place that no longer felt familiar. This allowed me to focus on the process of settling in and forming connections rather than the reasons for leaving. The project became a way of bridging my own search for belonging with the experiences of others who had navigated similar feelings in different ways.

I chose The Commons, as my research platform because it was the first place where I had felt a connection after arriving in South Africa. The Commons is considered an inclusive space that celebrates cultural and social diversity, and I found it fitting for a project that sought to understand belonging. My goal was to find responses to the question 'how to create a sense of home in displacement', and whilst doing so create a portrait of The Commons through the stories of those who created and work in this space. I was particularly interested in how people's cultural backgrounds influence their sense of home and I wanted to approach culture as a fluid, lived experience rather than something fixed or defined by nationality.

The interview process became the foundation of this exploration, shaping the depth and texture of the final performance. Over five weeks, I conducted eight interviews with individuals who either were working at, or founded, The Commons. These interviews became a way to have meaningful conversations with people I might not otherwise have spoken to on such a personal level. The process taught me that the setting and the dynamics of the interview played a crucial role in shaping the depth of responses. I learned that talking about home was a vulnerable topic for many, and creating a sense of safety was essential. While The Commons felt like a natural starting point, I discovered that some participants felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts in quieter, more private spaces like my home. These shifts taught me to

[14] Quote from Thando ,describing her new 'chosen' family, included in final script of *Sense of Home*
[15] Quote from Connor, describing his grandmother in Congo, included in final script of *Sense of Home*

pay close attention to the needs of the participants and how the space itself could influence the outcomes of the conversations.

> High tide.
>
> A wall with a graffitied octopus, in front of a mountain. In front of a cloudy sky.
>
> I'm in South Africa.
>
> But in my head I'm back in Amsterdam looking into the laughing faces of my friends sitting on the other side of the bar where I work.
>
> I'm in St. James, in South Africa.[16]

I used selected fragments of transcribed vernacular speech to preserve the authenticity of these stories, capturing participants' exact words to reflect the nuances of their experiences. I was particularly looking for memories shared in the form of images, moments described visually or sensorially by the interviewees, which I felt could speak for themselves. This approach allowed me to put these impressions forward instead of relying on analytical commentary, which is often more prone to misinterpretation. This felt particularly important in a project about belonging, as it avoided generalisations and allowed the complexity of each individual's story to come through. Still, this process raised ethical questions about representation and accountability. How could I, as someone with my own biases and experiences, faithfully present the voices of others without imposing my own interpretations? To address this, I incorporated my own perspective into the performance, weaving diary entries and personal reflections alongside the verbatim fragments. By doing so, I made my position as a Dutch foreigner explicit, showing that I was part of the narrative rather than outside of it. And that their (re)presentations were influenced by my own perception.

The performance itself focused on the spoken content rather than visual or performative distractions. I chose not to use costumes or any other overtly theatrical elements, as I wanted the audience to focus on the words and descriptions of the participants. This decision stemmed from my own awareness of how my Dutch accent and personal mannerisms might affect how the stories were received. I felt

[16] An extract, as written in my own words, from the 'script' for *Sense of Home*.

that emphasising the content of what was said rather than how it was delivered allowed the participants' voices to come through more clearly.

The motivation behind this project was not simply to represent others – my intention as a theatre-maker was to create connections. After the performance, I asked audience members to reflect on what 'home' meant to them and discuss this with each other, with the hopes of sparking new conversations and connections.

Analysis

> This sense of belonging and sense of identity is narrated through stories that describe, share and confirm a sense of cohesion for our lifeworld but can also include revelations about 'how we fail' to establish cohesion. (Peters, 2019:43)

Sarah Peters' concept of a 'dramaturgy of belonging' provides a meaningful lens through which to reflect on the work I did with *Sense of Home*. Peters (2019) describes how verbatim theatre fosters connection by focusing on identity narratives – stories that help people understand their own experiences while connecting them to broader social or communal contexts. She explains that verbatim theatre creates opportunities for participants and audiences to move from feelings of alienation to a sense of belonging by making personal and often vulnerable stories visible (Peters, 2019). This really resonated with my experience in *Sense of Home*, and of how participants shared deeply personal reflections on what they associated with feeling at home or having to create a sense of home in unfamiliar or changing environments. Through their words, I began to see how our sense of belonging is not only connected to physical spaces but is also about the connections we build with others.

Peters (2019) also highlights the relational nature of verbatim theatre, particularly its use of direct address and storytelling to draw audiences into the narrative. This idea came to life during the performance of *Sense of Home*, where I deliberately created an intimate atmosphere to encourage a deeper connection. The room was lit by candlelight, with people sitting on cushions on the floor, and the focus was entirely on listening. Toward the end of the performance, I asked the audience to close their eyes and visualise anything that came to mind when I spoke about the feeling of home. I then invited them to share this image with someone else in the room. After the show, one audience member told me she had visualised her ex-partner,

someone that she had not thought about in a long time. She explained how she had struggled to feel the way she had once felt with him, with anyone else since their separation. It was a powerful moment that highlighted how the performance had opened up a space for her to reconnect with personal emotions and encouraged her to share these.

This experience demonstrated the proposition that verbatim theatre has the potential to foster dialogue, not only between performer and audience, but also amongst audience members. After the performance, others also began sharing their own experiences of displacement and belonging, emphasising how storytelling could act as a bridge. Peters' (2019) work reinforced my understanding that verbatim theatre creates a space for reflection, empathy, and connection. Her idea that this form of theatre builds communal ties by making differences visible rather than erasing them is one deeply connected to my intentions with this project.

The process of creating *Sense of Home* fostered a connection between myself and the interviewees, as well as creating unexpected bridges amongst the participants themselves. Through the interviews, I navigated my own sense of belonging alongside theirs, discovering drama, humour, and poetry in the everyday encounters with individuals who had previously been strangers. This act of narration brought our shared experiences into focus, weaving together the participants' diverse reflections on home.

Although the interviewees did not take part in the creative process of transforming their words into a theatrical narrative, some of them engaged with the performance as audience members. After the show, two interviewees expressed how seeing some of their words performed alongside those of their colleagues deepened their understanding of one another. They noted how the performance brought to light stories and insights they had not known before, creating a sense of closeness and shared experience. This moment affirmed for me how storytelling, both in process and performance, can foster empathy and connection within a community; or even cultivate community among those who already share a physical space.

Does *Sense of Home* qualify as a community-engaged project? Drawing on the frameworks of Helen Nicholson (2005) and Peters and Burton (2024), it is clear that

the project shares elements with community-engaged theatre but does not fully align with its principles.

Nicholson's perspective on community-engaged theatre emphasises relationality, shared authorship, and the co-creative process. In *Sense of Home*, however, participants' involvement ended after the interviews, with no direct role in shaping the themes, dramaturgy, or performance. While the narratives were centred and celebrated, the lack of shared authorship places the project outside Nicholson's definition of reciprocal co-creation (Nicholson, 2005:88).

Peters and Burton (2024) propose that community-engaged practice highlights the need for balancing social, cultural, and artistic goals with active community participation. They stress the ethical responsibility of ensuring that participants are collaborators, not merely sources of material. While *Sense of Home* aligns with this approach in its commitment to honouring participants' narratives, asking their ethical consent, and creating a platform for their voices, it diverges by prioritising my personal artistic vision over a collective process. The project's primary focus was on producing a cohesive narrative on my personal question of how to create a sense of home, whilst simultaneously portraying the stories of the people working in The Commons, rather than fostering shared ownership among participants.

Nevertheless, *Sense of Home* can still be viewed as community-engaged in its broader relational ethos. The project created spaces for dialogue and reflection, both during the interviews and in the performance. The relational dynamics of the interviews, the intimacy of the performance setting, and the post-show conversations align with Peters and Burton's (2024:5) assertion that community-engaged practice is "fundamentally relational" and takes the cultural and social contexts of the participants into consideration.

Relational Dynamics of the Interviews

The interviews were central to the project's participatory nature, shaped by mutual curiosity rather than a fixed structure. I approached interviewees informally, often meeting them at The Commons café or in other familiar spaces. Some participants also visited my home, where conversations unfolded in a more personal setting. Rather than adhering to a strict questionnaire, I adapted my approach based on

each interaction, allowing themes to emerge organically. This flexibility reinforced the co-creative nature of the process, ensuring that the act of storytelling remained relational.

Maurice: A Moment of Discomfort

One particularly sensitive moment emerged during my interview with Maurice. When I asked him what image came to mind when he thought of feeling at home, he paused and replied:

> You see, I eat bread here. I don't know what they are having back home. So you can eat the bread with the question in your mind. In your heart you feel like ah, OK, now I'm eating bread here. I'm eating eggs. I'm eating tea with milk. What about the people back home? So…it's very…I'm finding it difficult.[17]

It was the only point in the conversation when he looked down. I sensed I had touched something painful beyond my imagination. This exchange stayed with me—not only because of its emotional weight, but because Maurice did not attend the final performance. His absence raised a difficult question: if participants are not present to witness how their stories are shared and received, can the performance still be considered relational?

While all interviewees gave their consent, Maurice's absence made me reflect on the limits of that agreement. He had no opportunity to see how his words had been interpreted, or to respond to the emotional resonance they carried. Even though I tried to honour Maurice in the performance, by creating a moment of stillness around the difficulty and unfairness surrounding the theme of home, and how displacement carries such different levels of weight, I am still unsure whether that was enough. It felt important to include, especially given the diversity of the audience, and I believe it created a shared moment of quiet recognition. But without his presence, there was something unresolved.

This encounter made me more aware of how absence shapes ethical responsibility, and how care in representation extends beyond the interview and into the question of who gets to witness what their story becomes. Maurice's absence at the

[17] Quote from Maurice, describing what came up for him when he thought about 'feeling at home', included in final script of *Sense of Home*

performance left a gap—he had no opportunity to engage with how his words were framed or to respond to the way they resonated with others. This raised a tension I continue to reflect on: how do we navigate ethical storytelling when those who inspired it are not present to see what their story becomes? Importantly, the performance was never intended to recreate Maurice's, or any participant's, full narrative. Rather, it was an articulation of my own story - shaped through these encounters with interviewees, who agreed on this - and of what stayed with me. The performance became a personal reflection, not a re-presentation. That distinction feels essential to how I think about the ethics of care, interpretation, and accountability in interview-based theatre. And still, his absence lingered with me long after the performance ended and made me question the extent to which care in the interview process can carry through into performance when the person whose story left a mark is no longer there to witness how it is shared.

The Intimacy of the Performance Setting

Sense of Home was staged in Muizenberg, a relaxed, coastal suburb known for its alternative cultural scene, contrasting with Cape Town's more formal theatre venues. I curated the setting to maintain the personal and reflective nature of the stories – audience members sat close, some on cushions, with candlelight creating a warm, informal atmosphere. By removing the separation between performer and audience, I sought to mirror Muizenberg's ethos of casual, community-driven artistic encounters, fostering a sense of shared experience.

Post-Show Conversations

The performance also invited audience participation beyond passive viewing. In the lead-up to the event, I shared a short introductory video via The Commons' Instagram page, explaining that I would present my findings in a performative reflection on creating a sense of home in a state of displacement. This framing encouraged dialogue, which naturally extended into the post-show discussions. Rather than a formal Q&A, these conversations unfolded organically, with audience members sharing their own experiences of home and belonging. The performance became a catalyst for connection, reinforcing the idea that theatre can be an ongoing dialogue rather than a finished product. In this way, *Sense of Home* blurred the

boundaries between performance and conversation, embodying what Jill Dolan (2005) refers to as “utopian performatives”, moments in which theatre fosters shared reflection and new possibilities for understanding.

While *Sense of Home* does not fully meet the criteria of community-engaged theatre as defined by Nicholson (2005) or Peters and Burton (2024), it did foster connection and reflection through the thoughtful presentation of participants’ voices and the relationships built in the process. The project’s hybrid nature highlights the potential of verbatim theatre to engage communities while maintaining a space for individual artistic expression.

Chapter 4 | Project 2 – *Company in the Gardens*

Context

Building on the insights gained from *Sense of Home* and my observations of Empatheatre's work, this project sought to further explore the relational and ethical dimensions of verbatim theatre. In *Sense of Home*, I experimented with how verbatim fragments could create a dramaturgy of belonging, using carefully curated spaces – both in the interviews and the performance – to foster intimacy, dialogue and simultaneously pay homage to a space. The project highlighted the power of relational storytelling, not only in preserving lived experiences but through creating new exchanges between performer and audience. However, it also raised questions about representation, authorship, and participation: about how much agency participants should have in shaping the final piece, and how to navigate the extent to which artistic intervention reshapes real-life narratives.

Observing Empatheatre's work deepened my understanding of how practitioners of verbatim theatre can engage with real-life testimonies whilst maintaining creative flexibility. Further to this, their approach emphasised the ethics of representation, balancing fidelity to participants' stories with dramaturgical shaping that allowed for broader emotional and thematic resonance.

With these reflections in mind, I approached my second project, *Company in the Gardens*, as an opportunity to explore the complexities and rewards of using real-life encounters as the foundation for verbatim performance. This 8-week verbatim workshop focused on the skills developed by the theatre-maker throughout the creation process including how to engage with interviewees, how to structure material ethically, and how to navigate the interplay between documentation and creative adaptation.

The project was conducted with the participation of three South African students*,* Bethany (she/her, Eastern Cape), Nicole (they/them, Kwazulu-Natal), and Jeanelle (she/her, Western Cape)*,* who came from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds: two were theatre-making students and one was a facilitator of women's circles. As part of the ethical process, all of them gave signed consent for

their involvement in the project. Their real names are used in this dissertation with their permission, and the material cited throughout this chapter was drawn directly from transcripts of their reflections as documented during the workshop, my own written post-workshop reflections on the process, and final observations after the performance. Every care was taken to ensure accuracy in the transcription process and to show respect for how their voices are represented here.

The choice of space for this project was intentional: its social and historical tensions invite reflection on belonging, whose stories are more likely to gain visibility, and how public spaces shape personal narratives. The Company Gardens is one of the few places in Cape Town where a diversity of people – including tourists, homeless individuals, office workers, students, street vendors, pensioners and artists – may cross paths, momentarily share a space, or spend time together. It provides a spontaneous and un-curated social landscape, making it an ideal setting to explore various narratives and experiences.

This project was influenced by my experiences in South Africa and the literature on the ethical challenges of verbatim theatre, particularly debates around positionality, representation, and the balance between participant agency and artistic vision. Through *Company in the Gardens*, I aimed to refine my own methodology, building on previous insights while remaining open to new discoveries in how theatre-making can navigate the delicate space between facilitating valuable encounters, storytelling, performance, and ethical responsibility.

The workshop

The design of the *Company in the Gardens* workshop series (refer to *Table 1: Workshop plan*) was informed by the principles of Applied Theatre as Research (ATAR), particularly its emphasis on collaborative inquiry, generative knowledge production, and ethical responsiveness (Anderson & O'Connor, 2014). ATAR's iterative nature provided the incentive to structure the workshops as a flexible and responsive framework, rather than a rigid, pre-determined process, allowing space for adaptation based on participant input and emerging discoveries. Instead of positioning myself as an expert imparting knowledge, I sought to create a co-creative environment where the student-participants could actively engage with verbatim

theatre techniques, reflect on the ethical complexities of representation, and develop their own creative approaches. The workshops were designed to integrate planning, action, and reflection, ensuring that each session built upon the previous one while remaining open to shifts in direction based on the group's needs. This approach aligned with my overall research methodology, which prioritised relational dynamics, participatory engagement, and an openness to emergent insights, reinforcing the idea that knowledge is produced not only through structured exercises but through the interactions, discussions, and creative responses that unfold within the process itself. The initial workshop plan was structured as outlined in the table below.

Table 1: Workshop plan

Workshop	Description	Activities and Focus
Workshop 1	**Introduction to the course and each other + finding a theme**	**Getting to know each other and creating trust in the group. Finding a common theme for the verbatim project that is relevant to all students**
Workshop 2	**Practising observation and discussing ethics of verbatim**	**Looking at different examples of verbatim and discussing ethical issues. Exercises to observe the world from the perspective of our theme and practise sensory descriptions.**
Workshop 3	**Practising interviewing and listening**	**Discussing different ways of questioning and creating an interview setting. Practising listening. Creating questions for the interviews.**
Workshop 4	**Interviewing**	**Conducting interviews.**
Workshop 5	**Rehearsal**	**Creating script from interview material.**
Workshop 6	**Rehearsal**	**Creating performance from interview material.**
Workshop 7	**Rehearsal**	**Final rehearsal.**

Workshop 8	**Performance + reflection**	**Performance.** **Final reflection.**

The process began with foundational exercises designed to build trust and establish a collaborative working environment among the student-participants. Over eight weeks, I facilitated workshops that guided the students through various stages of verbatim theatre-making, emphasising ethical engagement, listening, and creative exploration.

Each workshop session began in the studio with a check-in, where I asked each participant to formulate a personal rule that would help them feel open and work freely. This was followed by a physical warm-up, which I led to help participants arrive in the space, both mentally and physically. These opening rituals helped create a sense of collective presence and prepared us for the day's work.

In the initial sessions, we explored personal and societal themes through free writing exercises and discussions. Rather than imposing a topic, I encouraged the student-participants to reflect on their own perspectives and experiences. Through this process, they collectively decided to focus on the interplay between age, voting, and generational perspectives in post-apartheid South Africa. The timing of the workshops – held in the lead-up to the South African national elections – naturally made this a recurring theme.

Before conducting interviews, the student-participants practised active listening and observation techniques. A key focus in this preparation was on description rather than interpretation; that is, learning to capture what was said, how it was said, and what was being observed, without imposing personal meaning onto the responses. This emphasis shaped not only the interviews themselves but also the later stages of reflection and performance.

We also discussed ethical considerations in verbatim theatre, particularly the responsibility of engaging with interviewees in a way that prioritised the encounter over the extraction of material for performance. To gather material rich in nuance

and depth, student-participants crafted open-ended questions designed to elicit memories and sensory details rather than opinions.

The student-participants conducted interviews with people they encountered in the Company Gardens, a public space with a layered history of colonial legacy, public gathering, and personal reflection. The park was not only the setting but also a subject of inquiry, as each participant developed a personal connection to the space. Some viewed it as a site of historical reflection, while others experienced it as a dynamic social hub[18].

During this phase, challenges emerged. While some student-participants felt a strong connection to the chosen theme, others struggled to engage with it or felt constrained by their expectations of what constituted ‘script-worthy’ material. This highlighted a key tension in the process of balancing artistic intent with the authenticity of the encounter.

Once the interviews were completed, we moved into the performance creation phase. The student-participants transcribed their interviews, reflecting on their own biases and assumptions in the process. Again, we maintained a focus on description rather than interpretation, allowing the material to shape itself rather than forcing thematic conclusions onto it.

Through physical embodiment exercises, participants explored the interplay between their own perspectives and those of their interviewees. To maintain transparency, the student-participants included their own reflections on the park and its significance. These personal perspectives (Addendum A) were integrated alongside the interview excerpts in the final performance, creating a layered exploration.

The final presentation was not intended as a polished theatrical product but as an exploration of the relational nature of verbatim theatre. It wove together interview excerpts with student-participants' reflections, avoiding binary representations by embracing the complexity of real-life narratives.

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[18] . Each interviewee gave verbal consent to be recorded and to have their contribution included in the project, as documented in the participant consent recordings.

A key focus of this project, aligned with ATAR, was on the process rather than the final performance. In post-performance reflections, student-participants and audience members noted how the experience deepened their understanding of both the interviewees and themselves. Many described the act of listening as central in shaping the entire creative process.

By emphasising the encounter itself as a source of inspiration, rather than aiming for ‘authentic’ representation, this project sought to cultivate a more nuanced engagement with verbatim theatre. The next section will analyse how these methodological choices influenced the student-participants' learning, the ethical dimensions of the work, and the challenges of navigating representation in verbatim theatre.

Analysis

Valuing the Encounter over Representation

> Verbatim theatre cannot present an objective truth or it would not succeed as art – and it must succeed as art to be effective as theatre. (Lane, 2010:77)

A key question explored during this workshop was how to create verbatim work that would honour the encounter with a stranger while avoiding the pitfalls of attempting to achieve an "authentic" representation. This approach challenges traditional verbatim theatre, which often seeks to present "real" and "authentic" stories, as critiqued by Stuart Fisher (2020). Stuart Fisher argues for a shift away from the obsession with fidelity to reality, advocating instead for a dramaturgical exploration of "truth claims" in testimonial theatre. She differentiates between verbatim and testimonial theatre, noting that while verbatim promises an accurate mode of repetition, testimonial performance invites audiences to actively listen and engage with the narratives presented (Stuart Fisher, 2020). These ideas influenced the design of the workshop, which emphasised the encounter as a source of inspiration for performance rather than a quest for truthful representation. The interviewees were taken as a source for inspiration to adjust the students’ own perspective on the theme of performance.

The Challenges of Finding a Theme

The first step of the workshop was intended to support students to find a theme that resonated with them personally. Based on my previous experience in creating verbatim work, an encounter is more likely to be authentic when the interviewer asks questions from a place of sincere interest. Equally important is being transparent about your artistic agenda from the start of the interview, ensuring that the interviewee understands how their words may be used in performance. This allows them to make an informed decision about whether they want to participate and have their words included in the work. To establish a theme from which to work for the rest of the process, I facilitated writing games and conversation during the first three workshops to discover what current subjects/topics might be of relevance to the students.

After several discussions about the themes that had emerged during this initial phase, we discussed the potential of verbatim theatre to capture stories that transcend binary perspectives, such as typical us-versus-them narratives. In an effort to find a theme that resonated with everyone, I asked the students to choose one they could all agree on. They decided on the upcoming elections and the generation gap between voters.

Once the students had formulated their interview questions and conducted some interviews in the Company Gardens, Bethany and Jeanelle expressed the challenges they had faced in finding authenticity in their interactions, since they did not resonate as strongly with the theme as some of the others in the group. Nicole, another participant in the project, connected strongly with the chosen theme, as the interview location held political significance for her.

Jeanelle's reflections, shared at the end of the workshop during a reflection round, demonstrate her discomfort:

> I interviewed three people. The first one was a man and he was just not giving me the images I was looking for, and after a while, I could tell he just wanted me to agree with his political statements. Which made me feel a little bit uncomfortable, cause I was like; what if I don't agree? What happens then? And he kept, like, saying, like ehm... 'is it right?' and then he'd, like, look at me.

This moment reveals an important tension between artistic intent and the openness required for verbatim encounters. Jeanelle, rather than listening without judgment, approached the interview with a specific artistic aim, seeking particular images to align with a creative vision. When these were not provided, she felt uncomfortable and uncertain about how to navigate the interaction. At the same time, she also experienced the discomfort of being positioned as an audience member to the interviewee's political views. This was a reversal of the usual power dynamic in interviews, where the interviewer tends to control the framing of the conversation.

This highlights a broader challenge in verbatim theatre which is that, as artists, we often feel compelled to steer responses to suit an artistic purpose. When this prior vision results in overpowering or disregarding the perspectives of others, it creates dangerous power dynamics that contradict the very premise of verbatim work as a form of witnessing and exchange. If the interviewer's goal is to extract only the material that aligns with a particular narrative, it raises the question of whether they are truly engaged in an act of listening, or simply constructing a script from their own perspective.

This challenge is heightened when theatre-makers do not feel a personal connection to the chosen theme. Without a sense of investment in the topic, there is a greater risk that the interview process becomes detached or overly directed, rather than shaped by curiosity and engagement. A stronger personal connection can foster more open-ended questioning, deeper listening, and a willingness to follow the conversation where it naturally leads. In this case, Jeanelle's disconnection from the theme may have influenced her need to control the encounter, reinforcing rather than disrupting power dynamics. Bethany also expressed feeling detached from the political theme, which affected her level of engagement during the interviews.

Recognising this, we went back to the drawing board. Rather than trying to find a single shared theme for all three students, I asked Bethany and Jeanelle to do a free writing exercise on what the Company Gardens personally meant to them. Through this process, they each identified themes that felt more authentic to their own experiences and perspectives. In the next workshop, they returned to the Gardens with their own themes and self-formulated questions. This shift resulted in more genuine encounters and better listening, as they felt more secure in their line of

questioning. With a stronger personal connection to their themes, they were able to approach the interviews with greater openness and curiosity, allowing the conversations to unfold more organically.

Steve Bottoms (2015) critiques traditional verbatim methods for failing to acknowledge the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. He reflects on his own verbatim play, *Counted* (2010), which explored electoral participation but ultimately mirrored the strategies of political parties, thereby reducing complex perspectives into simplified, performative statements. He argues that when verbatim interviews are framed as isolated testimonies without proper context or dialogue, they risk becoming monologues that resemble campaign speeches rather than authentic exchanges (Bottoms, 2015).

Bottoms (2015) highlights the need for verbatim theatre to acknowledge the interviewer's role rather than pretending their influence does not exist; instead of striving for an illusion of neutrality, the interviewer's position should be recognised – and where possible even integrated – into the final performance.

In my workshop, this idea was put into practice by incorporating the student-participants' own reflections on the Gardens alongside the verbatim monologues. By including their recorded voices expressing their perspectives and relationship to the space and connected theme of the questions, the performance acknowledged the interaction between interviewee and interviewer, rather than presenting fragments of the transcribed interviews as isolated narratives.

Embracing Vulnerability and Ethical Challenges

Julie Salverson's (2008) concept of the "foolish witness" became another cornerstone of the workshop's design. Salverson connects the idea of failure, witnessing, and displacement within the context of students grappling with their own backgrounds and migrations. She advocates for an ethical practice of testimonial performance that embraces vulnerability and the potential for failure, rather than a cautious, overly critical approach that can lead to inaction – what she terms "constipated self-examination" (Salverson, 2008:246). This resonates with my goal for the workshop, encouraging the student-participants to embrace the complexities

of their encounters and using them as a basis for performance, rather than being paralysed by the fear of misrepresentation.

Salverson (2008) also addresses the issue of identity in the context of witnessing by emphasising the relational aspect of witnessing and the importance of understanding one's own background and experiences. This aligned with my own experience in theatre school where an individuated focus on identity had been foregrounded and which, I believed, had not left sufficient space for integrating the paradoxes, complexities and fluidity of identity that might result when the 'self' encountered the 'other'.

My personal experience and observations, supported by Salverson's (2008) findings, inspired the underlying premise of this workshop: to face these ethical dilemmas by using the complex encounter as a foundation for performance. The workshop did not aim for authentic representation of student-participants but rather sought to explore how verbatim work could foster social understanding through the encounter itself. This method allowed student-participants to navigate the ethical complexities involved in representing others, discussing positionality, and differentiating between interpretation and description throughout the process.

Ethical encounters

Encounters are never neutral; they unfold within historical, social, and situational power imbalances that shape their dynamics. Differences in socio-economic background, lived experience, or the very structure of engagement (where one person initiates and another responds) create an inherent asymmetry. Sara Ahmed (2000) highlights how rarely encounters are likely to be spontaneous interactions, free of context; they are more likely to be shaped by prior expectations, with some individuals moving through public spaces assuming a natural sense of belonging, and others navigating these spaces with a heightened self-awareness (Ahmed, 2000).

John Shotter's (2006) concept of 'withness-thinking' provides a crucial framework for understanding the ethical encounters in *Company in the Gardens*. Shotter differentiates between 'aboutness-thinking', which frames knowledge as something external to be observed and recorded, and 'withness-thinking', which emphasises

relational, dialogical engagement that emerges in the moment. Rather than treating encounters as neutral exchanges, ‘withness-thinking’ acknowledges the complex interplay of past experiences, social positioning, and unspoken hierarchies (Shotter, 2006). Similarly, Ahmed’s perspective (2000) underscores how these dynamics, when left unexamined, risk reinforcing pre-existing structures of power rather than fostering genuine dialogue.

In the context of the performance, the act of meeting a stranger is not about extracting a predetermined narrative but about engaging in an unfolding, reciprocal process where meaning emerges through interaction. The emphasis shifts from gathering information to co-creating an experience where both parties actively shape the direction of the exchange. By fostering an environment in which the interviewer and interviewee contribute equally, *Company in the Gardens* resists one-sided storytelling and instead facilitates a shared, evolving encounter.

One of the key ethical concerns in such interactions is the issue of consent. As Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) note, seeking knowledge about another person is never neutral; it involves negotiation, and the person being approached must retain the right to set the terms of their engagement or opt out entirely. In applied theatre and verbatim practice, "informed consent" is often legally framed; but in live encounters, consent is fluid, shifting from moment to moment. This underscores the importance of allowing the interviewee agency over how they share their experiences and under what conditions.

In designing the workshop, I prioritised an approach that fostered genuine exchange rather than a one-directional extraction of stories. Students first wrote about what *Company Gardens* represented to them personally, identifying themes from their reflections. When conducting interviews in the Gardens, they introduced themselves by sharing what the space meant to them and asked permission to discuss a related theme. Before beginning the interview, they explained the nature of the project: that the conversation would be recorded and transcribed, and that some fragments might be used to create a script for an eventual performance, which the interviewees could attend if they wished. Additionally, the student participants asked if the interviewee agreed to state their consent when the recording started, ensuring transparency and reinforcing their agency in the process. This ensured that consent was not just about

permission to speak but also about understanding how their words would be used and having the option to witness the final creative outcome. Because the interviewees were strangers, the students could not anticipate their exact positionality. However, by initiating dialogue from a personal place, they increased the possibility of finding commonalities, creating an opportunity for an insider-outsider perspective. This method was intentional; rather than approaching the interview as a means of gathering material for a performance, it framed the interaction as an encounter of mutual exchange.

Summerskill (2020) explains how verbatim theatre is often scrutinised for potential appropriation, as it involves using narrators' stories to construct a play that ultimately serves the theatre maker's aims. She emphasises the importance of the relationship between interviewer and narrator, arguing that trust is shaped by shared experiences or identities (Summerskill, 2020:33). The concept of positionality is central here, referring to the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator, and whether the playwright belongs to the same population as their subjects or occupies a different space. Summerskill (2020:33) distinguishes between insiders, who share identity or lived experience with their interviewees, and outsiders, who do not, with many practitioners navigating a space between these two extremes.

Reflections from participants Bethany and Jeanelle illustrate how this approach shaped the interviews. Bethany described how starting with personal experiences made her feel "less nervous and more profound," adding that her "secure excitement" and genuine interest encouraged interviewees to speak "from a much more truthful place." She acknowledged that "there was a beauty to how the questions were answered... it was very personal." This was in stark contrast to her previous experience in which she had felt “quite tense” and “didn't really connect with the questions” (transcribed discussion after Workshop 5, 2024 May 23).

Jeanelle also noted a shift, describing how the interview felt "more like a conversation and less like an interview this time around." She observed that the atmosphere had become "so much more open, so much more relaxed... I could just very naturally speak about what I was saying" (transcribed recorded discussion after Workshop 5, 2024 May 23).

Ethical Decision making

The ethical complexities of representing others' stories, particularly in sensitive contexts like LGBTQ[19] narratives, has been reflected upon by Owis et al. (2023). They examine the ethical tensions and challenging decisions faced by artist-researchers involved in the verbatim project *Out at School* (2019), which aims to share insights gleaned from a research project about families dealing with LGBTQ issues. They further discuss the complexities inherent in people's stories and reflect upon the experience of confronting discomfort with various gender expressions. A notable ethical dilemma arises when an actor recounts the story of a young trans girl[20] who had experienced assault and transphobia (Owis et al., 2023). Although the actor had obtained ethical permission to share this narrative and fulfilled their commitments to the family involved, discomfort emerged during the performance, particularly as the child depicted in the play witnessed her own traumatic experience being retold. In response, the facilitators engaged in multiple discussions to determine which stories should be shared and why, ultimately deciding to edit the monologue.

> A slow ethic of care meant that we did not have a singular answer to these questions. Instead, we sat with the tension and we thought deeply about each story and each participant. We made space to question the benefits and the costs of including or not including different stories. (Owis et al., 2023:327)

The ethical decision-making process adopted during the creation of *Company in the Gardens* established a similar framework of care. Although the duration of the project was too brief to allow the involvement of interviewees in the performance creation process, I drew upon the careful decision-making exemplified by *Out at School* as a guiding principle.

I encouraged students to reflect on the ethical dilemmas of representing others by first practising with one another, allowing them to extract valuable insights from this experience before working with actual participants. Before conducting the interviews in the Gardens, I had students interview each other and then introduce themselves

[19] LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer, with the term often used to represent a broader spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities.
[20] Trans girl refers to a person who was assigned male at birth but identifies and lives as a girl or woman.

to the rest of the group as the person they had interviewed. Additionally, I encouraged them to abstract each other's physical appearance by using a mask, helping them practise using a real person as inspiration to create a physical character. This exercise not only allowed them to engage with representation but also deepened their understanding of the complexities involved in embodying another person's lived experience. I encouraged discussions around their experience and ethical difficulties that arose rather than presenting definitive answers. Afterwards, we constructed an ethical guideline based on the premise that one cannot know nor tell the authentic truth of someone else. The project did not aim to represent the participants encountered but rather to use the encounters as a source of inspiration. This was conveyed clearly when asking people in the Company Gardens for their consent.

Practice of Listening

To explore this ethics of care, the workshop drew on the expertise of Lex Bolmeijer, a seasoned journalist and radiomaker with over thirty years of experience in interviewing for radio, television and theatre. Bolmeijer, who had worked with my mother during the creative process for *King Corn*, brought valuable insights about the ethics and practice of listening. In my conversation with him (2024 April 24), he emphasised that effective communication is as much about listening as it is about speaking. He highlighted how deep listening allows one to capture the nuances, emotions, and intentions behind words which are aspects of communication often lost in written accounts. He argued that, through preserving subtle inflections and hesitations, audio recordings can convey authenticity in ways that are frequently overlooked in our visually dominated world.

Bolmeijer (personal communication, 2024 April 24) advocated for a balanced approach to interview preparation, warning against over-preparation which can stifle genuine curiosity. He stressed that real questions arise from a place of not knowing the answers, fostering deeper and more meaningful conversations. He proposed a 'door theory', suggesting that every response in an interview offers a potential pathway for further exploration, encouraging interviewers to remain open to unexpected insights and to follow where the interviewee's perspective leads (personal communication, 2024 April 24).

Furthermore, Bolmeijer (personal communication, 2024 April 24) underscored the importance of mental preparation and authenticity, suggesting that interviewers must be open to handling emotional or unexpected responses. He maintained that authenticity and curiosity on the part of the interviewer create a space where interviewees feel truly seen and heard.

It was through this workshop that I came to more deeply understand how the value of an interview does not only reside in the content generated but also in the genuine dialogue and trust that can be cultivated. This challenges the notion that verbatim theatre merely extracts and exploits people's stories. Instead, it underscores that the interview process itself has intrinsic value, deepening the quality of conversations and fostering a greater understanding between interviewer and interviewee.

This perspective aligns with oral historian Alistair Thomson's (2015) concept of 'composure', a process in which narrators structure their memories to make sense of their past and present lives. Thomson (2015) argues that the interview process offers narrators an opportunity for reflection, leading to deeper self-understanding. This reflective benefit extends to verbatim theatre, where interviewees may gain new insights into their own experiences. An example of this can be seen in a transcribed fragment of an interview conveyed by Jeanelle with a participant, in which he reflects:

> I love the questions, man. It's like, you know, it's like you're crystallising difficult questions that I cannot even ask myself, but which I do have inside of me. This park represents the renewal of my soul, which was dead in that park. (Interview transcript, Company Gardens, 2024 May 23)

This statement illustrates how the interview process itself can serve as a catalyst for personal revelation and self-reflection, reinforcing the idea that verbatim theatre is not simply a process of representation but can also facilitate meaningful engagement with lived experience.

Empathy and self-reflection

Although these workshops focused on vernacular speech, we also explored how to transition from the script to physical embodiment on the floor. Our goal was not to realistically portray the interviewees but to abstract their presence into believable

characters, aligning with my father's sentiment as discussed in Chapter 1. This raised a key tension: does full embodiment create a more authentic representation, while verbatim storytelling remains inherently presentational?

To navigate this, we introduced a physical exercise inspired by Salvatore's (2023) concept of 'playing across identity', which explores how performers engage with identities beyond their own. Salvatore argues that verbatim performance is not about perfect imitation but about the act of interpretation, shaped by an actor's physicality, speech, and relational awareness.

To facilitate this exercise of 'playing across identity', I asked students to close their eyes, envision the Company Gardens, and imagine stepping into the body of a person that they had interviewed. They were then invited to explore this person as an embodied character, paying attention to feeling states such as the weight of the character, how the character shifted their posture, and how they responded to music. At the end of this improvisation, they were asked to 'shake off' the character and returned to feeling their own physical presence. In a follow-up discussion, Nicole stated that this transformation exercise deepened her connection to her character (reflection documented during Workshop 6, 2024 May 30), reinforcing Salvatore's argument that embodiment is a way of experiencing another perspective rather than replicating it.

Performing with the vernacular speech of the interviewees also reinforced this experience of 'playing across identity'. Salvatore (2023) highlights how actors inhabiting the rhythms and cadences of another's speech engage in an act of discovery rather than impersonation. Students initially struggled with the different patterns and tonalities of their interviewees, but as they read and performed their words, they became more attuned to their distinct expressions, hesitations, and phrasing. This process underscored how speech is inherently tied to identity, and engaging with someone's linguistic patterns offered insight into their way of seeing the world.

While embodiment allowed students to physically engage with their interviewees' energy, transcription provided a different kind of reflection. As students listened back to their recordings, they confronted their own biases in real time. Bethany, for

example, realised that she had rushed through the questions, not leaving sufficient room for deeper responses from the interviewee. She further observed that she had initially viewed her interviewee as “a sweet old man,” but the process of revisiting his words revealed a complexity she had not recognised in the moment (reflection documented during Workshop 6, 2024 May 30).

Both the physical embodiment and transcription exercises underscored verbatim theatre’s potential to foster self-reflection and empathy. Embodiment provided a visceral connection to the interviewees, while transcription uncovered subtleties that might have been missed in real time. Together, these exercises encouraged students to critically examine their own biases, listening habits, and artistic choices, reinforcing that verbatim theatre is an interpretative and relational process rather than a static form of representation.

Facilitating in a Different Cultural Context

> Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the coloniser. (hooks, 2015:343)

The ethical challenges of working as an outsider in a cultural context different to your own have been addressed by bell hooks[21] (2015), who critiques the potential for colonialism in storytelling when narratives are appropriated for personal gain. As a Dutch facilitator working with a group of South African students, I was mindful of ethical risks and sought to create a space in which students could formulate their own questions and themes. This approach aimed to empower them to voice their experiences authentically, avoiding the imposition of my own cultural lens.

Facilitating this verbatim method with a diverse group of students was particularly significant, as it allowed agency to rest with multiple makers rather than a single creator. Unlike projects such as *Sense of Home*, where the interpretation of interviews lay with one dominant voice, the *Company of Gardens* process encouraged shared authorship. Nicole, Bethany, and Jeanelle each brought their own perspective to the work, shaping it in ways that reflected a multiplicity of lived

[21] bell hooks used lowercase to emphasize ideas over individual identity, reflecting her commitment to focusing on her work rather than personal recognition. Her name honours her great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks.

experiences. This distributed agency ensured that the act of representation was reciprocal, with each student actively engaging in the ethical complexities of embodiment, transcription, and performance.

Unfortunately, the workshop timeline that we had available provided limited opportunity for collaboratively transforming the interviews we had gathered into a script for performance. As a result, I took the lead in making final decisions about the content and structure of the script. While this was informed by my prior experience in verbatim theatre, I recognise that a more deeply collaborative approach could have enriched the process.

At the same time, I believe there is value in having someone with emotional distance from the interviewees involved in selecting which fragments to use in the performance. A more detached perspective can reveal nuanced moments that those closer to the material might overlook. I observed this in my mother's work on *King Corn*, in which she approached the transcripts according to how things had been stated, paying attention to the rhythms, pauses, and phrasing, treating the speech poetically and not only for its content. This kind of approach not only respects the texture of the original language but also allows for a clearer focus on telling a story and crafting an experience for the listener in performance.

Chapter 5 | Performing the encounter – a political dimension

As I reflect on my verbatim theatre practice, I realise that while its political dimension is not always explicit, it emerges through relational, ethical, and artistic processes that shape the work. Rather than positioning theatre as a tool for advocacy or protest, my practice aligns with a form of politics rooted in presence, dialogue, and nuanced engagement with complexity.

Bart Brandsma (2017) identifies the "silent middle" as a crucial space for resisting the binary forces of "us versus them" that drive polarisation. He argues that polarisation thrives on opposing camps, where dramatic conflict and binary thinking escalate divisions; cultivating spaces for reflection, dialogue, and connection can counteract this tendency. "Civilization does not progress through confrontation," he writes, "but by stepping beyond biological reflexes and choosing dialogue and mutual understanding" (Brandsma, 2017:45). Storytelling plays a crucial role in this process:

> Without exception, people's real desire is to be heard. They want to share their story, their perspective, their fears, and their hopes. And when that happens, something begins to shift. (Brandsma, 2017:45)

Verbatim theatre, with its emphasis on capturing and presenting diverse narratives, creates precisely these kinds of shifts, offering an alternative to polarized discourse by inviting audiences to engage with multiple perspectives rather than reinforcing existing divisions. By fostering empathy and deep listening, verbatim theatre encourages critical reflection and challenges assumptions, moving beyond simplistic representations of opposing views.

However, my work does not seek to represent other people's narratives as fixed accounts of experience. Instead, it places emphasis on the *encounter itself;* that is, on how the exchange between theatre-maker and participant shapes the verbatim work. The process is not about merely collecting or reproducing stories but about being present with the speaker, and allowing their words to shift the listener in ways that inform the artistic process.

Diana Taylor's (2020) concept of "the ethics of presence" deepens this understanding of how verbatim theatre engages with the political. Taylor distinguishes between archival knowledge (fixed, written documentation) and embodied knowledge (relational, performative, and transient forms of knowing). She argues that presence is an active ethical stance, where listening and witnessing become political gestures in themselves: "To be present is to take responsibility, to listen actively, and to respond meaningfully in ways that respect the complexity of others' experiences" (Taylor, 2020:67).

This aligns with my experience of verbatim theatre as a relational practice, where the encounter itself is central. The interview process requires an openness to being affected by another person's reality rather than merely collecting material for artistic purposes. This kind of engagement demands vulnerability and attentiveness, making listening itself a political act – one that resists extraction and instead prioritises ethical engagement.

In my practice, I have found that verbatim work invites both the interviewer and the interviewee to engage with an open mind, postponing judgment in favour of presence. For example, in *Company in the Gardens*, students recognised the gaps between their initial perceptions of their interviewees and the more complex realities they uncovered through transcription. This reinforces Taylor's (2020) assertion that presence is not passive but rather a commitment to recognising and holding space for complexity.

John Shotter's (2006) concept of 'withness-thinking' expands on the political dimension of verbatim theatre by emphasising knowledge as something that emerges through relational encounters rather than being objectively observed from a distance. This perspective challenges the idea that the theatre-maker is an external observer, passively recording voices to later reproduce onstage. Instead, it highlights the co-creative process of meaning-making in verbatim theatre. The performance is not an objective representation of reality but an interpretation shaped by the exchange between interviewer and interviewee, performer and audience. This shift from representation to engagement marks a key political intervention.

Joe Salvatore's (2023) exploration of 'playing across identity' further complicates these ethical considerations. He challenges the notion that performers can only portray identities they share, arguing instead that performance is an act of interpretation, not impersonation (Salvatore, 2023). His concept of 'bridging' suggests that stepping into someone else's words, when done with care and ethical awareness, can be a means of deepening engagement across divides.

This aligns with my experience in *Company in the Gardens*, where performers struggled with embodying voices beyond their own. Initially, they were hesitant, fearing misrepresentation. However, through performance, they discovered that verbatim theatre is not about mimicking the other, but about engaging with the rhythms, hesitations, and tonalities of their speech, opening up new ways of understanding. Salvatore's (2023) framework reinforces the notion that verbatim theatre has the potential to disrupt rigid identity categories, encouraging fluidity and dialogue rather than fixed perspectives.

James Thompson's (2009) concept of 'micro-politics' helps situate the political impact of these small yet profound acts of engagement. He argues that theatre's most transformative effects do not necessarily emerge from large-scale political statements but from intimate, relational moments of connection, care, and shared presence (Thompson, 2009:119).

Verbatim theatre thrives in these in-between spaces, where politics is not about delivering definitive messages but about creating conditions for listening, recognition, and encounter. By focusing on small acts of witnessing, presence, and co-creation, it resists the pressure to deliver clear-cut narratives and instead holds space for complexity, contradiction, and uncertainty. It does not seek to impose conclusions but instead invites audiences to navigate multiple perspectives, engaging with the fluid and evolving nature of meaning.

Chapter 6 | Toward an Ethical Blueprint

In this chapter, I draw together my findings to propose a blueprint for ethical verbatim theatre, offering principles and practices for what I consider to be three key components of the process: the Encounter, Playwrighting, and Performance. Rather than prescribing a fixed methodology, this framework provides tools for theatre-makers navigating the ethical and creative complexities of working with real voices and lived experiences. By outlining both principles and practical approaches, this chapter offers ways to engage with verbatim theatre as a dynamic and collaborative practice. The chapter ends with some concluding thoughts on how this framework informs my own approach and its potential for future verbatim theatre work.

1. The Encounter: Creating the Conditions for Connection

At the core of verbatim theatre is the encounter, a moment of engagement between the theatre-maker and the participant. This stage is not just about collecting material but about being shaped by the exchange. The theatre-maker's personal connection to the theme plays a vital role, influencing how they listen, engage, and later interpret the material. Transparency about this relationship fosters trust and allows for an open and reciprocal process.

Principles:

- Resonance with the Theme: The theatre-maker's connection to the subject must be acknowledged. This is not about authority over the topic but about Recognising how their perspective informs their listening and selection of material.
- Relational Listening: The act of listening is shaped by the presence of the listener. Attentive, non-extractive listening requires openness to what emerges rather than seeking specific narratives.
- Transparency and Trust: Participants should understand the purpose of the project, how their words may be used, and their agency in the process.
- Postponing Judgment: Entering the encounter without fixed expectations, allowing the conversation to unfold naturally rather than steering it toward a specific outcome.

- Attentiveness to the Ordinary: Recognising that theatre emerges not only from dramatic events but also from the rhythms, silences, and hesitations in everyday speech.

Practices:

- Clarifying Intentions: Before engaging with participants, the theatre-maker reflects on their personal stake in the theme and remains transparent about this when relevant.
- Creating a Responsive Setting: Conducting interviews in locations that feel comfortable and significant to the participants.
- Encouraging Open-Ended Conversations: Focusing on broad, exploratory questions that invite reflection rather than aiming for specific answers.
- Observing Speech Beyond Content: Paying attention to the way something is said – pauses, tone, repetition – rather than just the words themselves.

2. The Playwrighting: Describing Before Interpreting

Once the material has been gathered, the playwright acts as a mediator between the encounter and the performance. This stage is not about imposing meaning but about allowing the material to reveal its own significance. A key principle is the practice of describing rather than interpreting immediately – resisting the urge to shape the material too quickly and instead working closely with the texture of the original speech.

Principles:

- Encounter Over Extraction: The script is not a reproduction of reality but a response to the relational dynamics of the interview process.
- Holding Complexity: The playwright resists simplifying narratives into clear-cut themes, instead allowing multiple perspectives to coexist.
- Describing Before Interpreting: The first stage of working with transcripts involves capturing the language as it is, noticing patterns and rhythms before applying structure or meaning.
- Incorporating the Theatre-Maker's Perspective: Recognising that the playwright's voice is also present, shaping how the material is framed and

presented.

Practices:

- Transcription Without Reduction: Writing down verbatim material with all its pauses, hesitations, and unfinished thoughts intact.
- Identifying Recurring Motifs: Noticing repeated phrases, contradictions, and unexpected moments rather than forcing a singular message.
- Physicalising the Words: Reading transcripts aloud or embodying them to explore the inherent musicality and energy in the speech before altering structure.
- Layering Multiple Voices: Placing different perspectives next to each other rather than isolating individual stories.

3. The Performance: A Space for Relational Engagement

In performance, the encounter continues—between performer and audience. The aim is not representation but engagement, where the performer channels the presence of the interviewees rather than impersonating them.

Principles:

- Performing as Listening: The actor's role is to embody the rhythms and energies of the voices encountered, maintaining a sense of openness rather than control.
- Minimalism & Intimacy: Stripping away excess theatricality to allow the words and presence of the performer to take centre-stage.
- Audience as Co-Creator: Inviting the audience into the reflective space rather than presenting them with fixed conclusions.

Practices:

- Staging the Encounter: Creating immersive or informal performance settings that reflect the intimacy of the original conversations.
- Fragmentary & Poetic Storytelling: Embracing non-linear dramaturgy, allowing for gaps and silences to remain present.

- Inviting Audience Reflection: Structuring post-performance discussions or participatory elements to extend the spirit of the encounter beyond the stage.

Concluding thoughts

This dissertation began with personal reflections on my earliest encounters with interview-based theatre, moments that profoundly shaped my curiosity about the possibilities of verbatim theatre. From witnessing my parents' production of *King Corn*, I learned how verbatim work could elevate the ordinary into the poetic, fostering attentiveness to stories that might otherwise be overlooked. That memory became a touchstone, reminding me throughout this journey of the poetry of daily-life stories and uncovering meaning in everyday speech.

In my own projects, *Sense of Home* and *Company in the Gardens*, I aimed to carry forward this ethos, weaving my personal questions of belonging and connection into the relational and collaborative processes of verbatim theatre. These projects were not just exercises in storytelling but acts of mutual discovery – spaces in which the encounter between interviewer and interviewee, between performer and audience, became as significant as the narratives themselves.

Unlike the investigative traditions of verbatim theatre, which often aim to address gaps in news or provide a critical lens on pressing issues, my approach leans toward the celebratory. Influenced by the work of Peter Cheeseman and others in the tradition of community-focused theatre, I view the encounter as the heart of the process, the means by which actors become researchers and storytellers, and the performance is not offered as a verdict but rather an invitation for reflection. This perspective underscores my belief that the value of verbatim theatre lies as much in its process as in its product. In line with Shotter's concept of *withness* (Shotter, 2006), I understand these performances not as representations of another's story, but as responses shaped in relation to the encounter itself.

Through the framework of this dissertation, I have explored how verbatim theatre can navigate complex ethical and creative challenges, balancing the positionality of the artist with the agency of participants. By foregrounding relationality, listening, and co-creation, my work seeks to honour the poetry in personal narratives without imposing a singular artistic truth.

This journey has also been deeply personal: a way of processing my own displacements, grappling with the ethics of representation, and finding meaning in the spaces between self and other. The relational ethics of my practice have taught me that verbatim theatre, at its best, is not about claiming authority over someone else's story but about crafting shared spaces of vulnerability, attentiveness, and connection.

Looking ahead, I hope this work contributes to the ongoing conversations about the role of verbatim theatre in fostering community, bridging divides, and celebrating the relational power of storytelling. While this dissertation does not offer definitive answers, it provides a blueprint – a set of tools and reflections – that can inspire other practitioners to approach verbatim theatre with care, creativity, and an openness to the unexpected gifts of encounter.

Post-script Reflection

Yesterday, I attended a book launch at Chimurenga, a space in Cape Town deeply engaged in African intellectual and cultural discourse. The event centred on *Keorapetse Kgositsile & the Black Arts Movement* by Uhuru Portia Phalafala, a book that explores the South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile's role in transnational artistic and political movements. Kgositsile, an exiled poet and activist, played a key role in bridging African and African American literary and political thought, particularly through his engagement with radicalism, jazz, and spoken word. Phalafala examines his legacy and the ways his work challenges dominant cultural and linguistic hierarchies.

The event reminded me once again of how much I do not yet understand—how the more I learn, the more I realise what remains unknown to me. During the discussion, I struggled to recall the exact meaning of the word policing in English and asked for clarification. A woman in the room laughed and said, "Oh, you wouldn't know that—you're white." Laughter followed. I understood the critique: certain structures – such as policing – can be less visible to those who are not directly affected by them. Yet, I also felt an impulse to push back, to say that I do know policing – perhaps not in the way she meant, but as someone who has learned to self-regulate, to shrink, to adjust my behaviour to expectations that are not my own. But I quickly realised that my instinct to explain came from a need to prove that I understood; when, perhaps, this was not the space for me to do so. It was one of the few activist spaces I have been in during my two years of living here, despite witnessing inequality daily. And maybe that was precisely why, in that moment, my role was not to explain myself, but to listen.

I hesitated to include this reflection in my dissertation, as it raises personal questions that extend beyond the scope of my research. However, it also highlights a central tension that I would like to explore further: what does it mean to engage with not understanding? Much of my research in verbatim theatre has focused on the ethics of (re)presentation – on how theatre-makers translate recorded material into performance without claiming ownership over the stories they tell. Yet, this experience made me consider a broader question: could verbatim theatre be a

space that acknowledges the limits of knowledge rather than trying to resolve them? Instead of aiming to bridge gaps or generate empathy, could it become a practice that foregrounds difference as something to be witnessed, rather than explained?

While these questions extend beyond the immediate focus of this dissertation, they connect to a key concern in my research. While discussions of power and representation in theatre are often orientated towards audience members, exploring concerns about for whom performances are made, my research has taken a different approach. Rather than prioritising the audience's perspective, I have explored the agency of the artist and the relationships formed in the process of making verbatim theatre. I have considered how working with real people's words is not simply an act of transmission but a form of engagement that honours spaces, communities, and the interactions that unfold through listening.

That said, audience remains significant, particularly in a South African context where access, voice, and cultural ownership are shaped by histories of exclusion. While this dissertation does not fully engage with that dimension, it is an area for future research; in particular, examining how verbatim theatre functions within different audience dynamics and how the practice of listening and witnessing extends beyond the rehearsal room to shape the work's reception.

As I continue to reflect on these questions, I see the potential of verbatim theatre as a practice of presence: a way of paying homage to a place, to the people who shape it, and to the interactions that emerge through attention and encounter. It also raises important questions for theatre-makers working across lines of difference. Rather than using verbatim theatre as a means of making another's experience legible or relatable, it may offer something else: the opportunity to remain in a space of not-knowing. To listen without demanding resolution, to witness without assuming access, and to accept that some narratives are not ours to fully grasp.

For theatre-makers like myself, this shift in perspective is particularly significant. Rather than approaching verbatim theatre as a way to translate unfamiliar

experiences into something easily understood, it can serve as a practice of sitting with complexity. In a world where identity is often framed as something to be explained or made coherent, verbatim theatre offers a way to acknowledge that not all stories can, or should, be neatly understood. Instead, it asks us to be present without mastery, to remain open to the unfamiliar, and to cultivate relationships that are not dependent on full comprehension but on attentiveness, care, and respect.

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Addendum A – Student-participant's reflections of the Company Gardens

Jeanelle

All the versions of myself the park has seen...a little girl that went to the planetarium to watch stars and galaxies above me. Then old enough to go to the city with my gran, just the two of us sitting at the company garden's restaurant. She let me eat an entire piece of chocolate cake and my legs still can't reach the floor when I sit on the chair. Later passing through the park counting coins as we try and buy a beer at the liquor shop. Sitting under trees, writing poetry and waiting for hours to pass until the party starts. My mom would kill me. Then I am 18 and living in Gardens as I start my studies at Fedisa Fashion School. Leah forces me to walk to class with her every morning. I hate it because we have to carry all our shit but I love it because I get to see her interact with the world. We smoke cigarettes whenever we want, drink too much coffee and get to class late because we spoke to the man selling vegetables on the side of the road and got caught up admiring art at a gallery. Before I know it, it's second year and I am in love with a woman called Chloe. I tell her stories of Leah as we walk down the park. Sometimes happy but mostly I feel unfulfilled looking for an answer in the trees above me. I kiss her a lot anyway. Now I am 23 interviewing strangers under these trees. The birds and flowers and rats bring me a sense of ease. In some way sitting here is like sharing a living room with strangers known by the park, too.

Nicole

An oasis or safe place within the turbulence of a busy city. Gardens is a place that

you can go to no matter your age or heritage or your race, your social economic status. No matter who you are or what you do. People choose peace not violence. The view of the mountain. The green grass. You are a part of the city that is bigger than you and bigger than the working network. A place where you can watch school kids, Old people, couples. Bible study groups, social wellness, feeding the homeless, photo shoots. Wedding parties.

The list goes on but the one thing, I always thought of especially when I first started going to gardens. What is the company of The Company Gardens. Being a Hiddingh student, learning about the history of slavery, at the Bertram house and the Iziko museum, overlooking the gardens. It gave it sort of a sombre meaning. Now, free to public, reverence should be taken of what it represented before. How are we moving in this space as a so called free nation?

Bethany

A place where things live and breath, where things and beings can breath together. Where grass becomes the floor to a baby's first step at a picnic, where a bench becomes the meeting place for school kids, where a tree becomes part of a tourist's journey and even where a rodent becomes a thief to a family picnic. All of these things coexist all of these things make the company gardens a breathing place for me, my thoughts and even something as sacred as my love.

I remember when we once had a very hard conversation in the garden. me and him. me and my lover. You know when a conversation, a combination of words are actually the stepping stones to two very different results. One result is a where we either hold hands or never allow our beings to touch again. That conversation was kind of the epitome of a garden though. There was hard matters like hard matter, soil

that is filled with clumps and hard rock, dense, unseen from the outside world, hidden and only really seen if you dig it up and it's also necessary. No, it's life-giving. It births the sky scraping oak and luscious grass. It is a home for the worm the carpet for birthday parties, games and lovers. It allows life. And that's what our conversation was for my lover and I. Its irregular and bumpy terrain allowed us to reach a maturation and sprouting of our seeds of love that developed with our hands embracing not only each other but who we have been, who we are and what we will become.

It is the room where grass is the floor to a child's excitable sprint at a picnic, where the benches become monuments for school kids, where flowers remind tourists what wonder truly is, where the rodent finds its golden food crumb and it's another place where my lover and I cherish the seeds within us that are now blooming, unfolding and breathing.