

Liberating the Actor to Find the Voice of a Play:

*An investigation into theatre directing processes used with actors to discover and articulate the authentic message of the play, with specific application to My Name is Rachel Corrie*

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## SUMMARY

### *LIBERATING THE ACTOR TO FIND THE VOICE OF A PLAY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THEATRE DIRECTING PROCESSES USED WITH ACTORS TO DISCOVER AND ARTICULATE THE AUTHENTIC MESSAGE OF THE PLAY, WITH SPECIFIC APPLICATION TO MY NAME IS RACHEL CORRIE*

This dissertation explores the ability of liberating actors in order to find the voice for a play, particularly *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, a piece of documentary theatre which highlights human rights abuses within the Israel/Palestine dispute; primarily through the use of theatre directing techniques that I have experienced first-hand through professional placements and research. The title *My Name is Rachel Corrie* already advocates Rachel's personal journey. I will also examine the plays efficacy in dealing with human rights abuses taking place in the Middle East.

**Chapter One** features experiences and research I had gathered whilst working on professional placements at the Lakeside Theatre and the Mercury Theatre with Tony Casement and Daniel Buckroyd respectively. By working on these productions, I gained a much greater understanding of the relationships between actor and director and ultimately how to get the best results from my actors.

**Chapter Two** explores how documentary theatre might highlight human rights abuses.

**Chapter Three** examines my research and development with reference to workshops that were designed to affirm some directorial decisions made early in the directing process. Some rehearsal techniques are also referenced whilst in the rehearsal room for the play's production at the Lakeside Theatre.

**Chapter Four** reviews the effectiveness of my production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* and its development for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, especially when performing it for a public audience away from home (not composed of my peers).

**Chapter Five** compiles much of the research I had carried up until this point in preparation for the production's examined performance, including feedback from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival production for development. It also examines another directing style I had obtained whilst working with a professional theatre director, which eventually altered the actors' performances and how they saw the world through Rachel both as a person and character.

**Chapter Six** considers the political backdrop of the play, raising the question: is it still relevant? It also compares *My Name is Rachel Corrie* with other plays that address the Israel/Palestine conflict.

## Introduction

During the last two years I have used various methods for my research; including attending symposiums, professional work placements and attachments, exploratory practical research workshops and practical research and development towards a production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* in three phases. My initial research began by attending a symposium dedicated to the work of German theatre director, Thomas Ostermeier: 'Reinventing Directors' Theatre at the Schaubühne Berlin', organised by the European Theatre Research Network (ETRN). I also completed two assistant director placements: one with Tony Casement, then Associate Director at the Mercury Theatre, at the Lakeside Theatre (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*) and one with Daniel Buckroyd, Artistic Director of the Mercury Theatre (*Noises Off*) at the Mercury Theatre. Additionally, I was selected to take part in the Mercury Theatre's 'Early Career Training Programme' as a director to work with industry professionals over a four-month period led by Associate Director Dan Sherer, to further develop my directing ability. Practical research undertaken whilst working with these industry professionals is referenced throughout this dissertation. I have also directed three separate productions of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*; previews at the Lakeside Theatre, a run at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and a final production for examination. Directing the play has been the central practical research vehicle, where the practical and theoretical ideas under investigation were implemented.

There is disparity of the dramatic form of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. We could label the play 'verbatim', which is a form of documented theatre where the play is constructed by the spoken words of people who have usually been interviewed regarding a particular event. On the other hand, we could also refer to the play as 'documentary', which unlike verbatim theatre uses pre-existing materials for the composition of the script. For this occasion, I will refer to *My Name is Rachel Corrie* as 'documentary theatre' due to the plays formation of Rachel's pre-existing materials.

When discussing the ideals of ‘truth’, ‘honesty’ and ‘authenticity’ in performance there arises an issue with its resulting lexical tension. Lexical tensions can surface when using this terminology in academic contexts as opposed to the practical set up of a rehearsal room. Due to these tensions taking place, it is important to note that throughout this dissertation concepts of ‘truth’ are categorised into factual, personal, social, emotional and cultural truths. ‘Authenticity’ is another complex term when used practically, through the rehearsal process and academically, throughout the dissertation. I will use this term to mean ‘genuine’, usually within the actor. It becomes complicated to use the word ‘authentic’ when the very form of theatre is to ‘pretend’ or ‘put on’.

This dissertation attempts to investigate how theatre-directing processes used with actors can help liberate performances, whilst discovering the actors’ political voice along the way, with specific application to *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. I will show why this is important by drawing parallels between Rachel and the three young actors I will be using – using actors with a similar age to Rachel will hopefully enhance the plays youthful, idealistic qualities within the actor. This dissertation methodically shows my research and discoveries as a director via techniques applied in the rehearsal room; pragmatic and artistic choices; discovering the political power of documentary testimony through the form of theatre, which led to a research into the Israel/Palestine conflict, and recent plays that address it. The personal nature of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* begins with its documentary form, using Corrie’s own diary entries and emails, in which the actors offer their own personal experiences by responding truthfully and imaginatively to the given circumstances to the best of their ability.

Chapter One: Professional Working Environments: A brief overview describes the experiences of two professional placements I had completed, working on *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (John Ford) and *Noises Off* (Michael Frayn), respectively. These placements were as assistant director to Tony Casement at the Lakeside Theatre and assistant director to Daniel Buckroyd at the Mercury Theatre. I will briefly describe some techniques picked up from their rehearsal rooms and how I used these to influence my actors when working on *My Name is Rachel Corrie*.

Chapter Two: Documentary Theatre is an overview of documentary theatre and explores how it can be used to discover an authentic voice of a play. It considers both the strengths and shortcomings of using documentary testimonies, with specific reference to *My Name is Rachel Corrie* – arguing that the diary/journal style could lead artists/audiences to focus on Corrie’s poetic use of language rather than acknowledging the dramaturgical craft of Viner and Rickman via its content as a tool for change. This chapter will also examine some of the relationships to and efficacy of documentary theatre and human rights.

Chapter Three: *My Name is Rachel Corrie* Research and Development (Part One) investigates some early directorial choices made prior to casting *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. Through a series of preliminary workshops, I applied researched rehearsal techniques to experiment with these choices. Here I am using theatre practice as the grounds for investigative research, with my specific role as director working with a group of student actors. This chapter also offers an insight into the rehearsal room and how these techniques were applied leading up to the first performances of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*.

Chapter Four: *My Name is Rachel Corrie* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival evaluates the productions reception at the Lakeside Theatre and what needed developing in preparation for the next performance(s) at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It also covers the pragmatic choices that were necessary for the festival, such as losing a cast member and having to cut at least thirty-minutes from its original performance.

Chapter Five: *My Name is Rachel Corrie* Research and Development (Part Two) focuses on the development and evaluation of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* from its initial rehearsals, its previews and tour to Edinburgh Fringe Festival to its final performance(s) at the Lakeside Theatre.

Chapter Six: How is the play still relevant? compares *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) to subsequent plays which address the Israel/Palestine conflict: – *Seven Jewish Children* (2009) by

Caryl Churchill, Theatre Ad Infinitum's *Ballad of the Burning Star* (2013) by Nir Paldi, and *The Siege* (2015) devised by The Freedom Theatre – I will argue the case for the relevance of a contemporary production ten years further into the conflict.

### **Professional Working Environments; A brief overview**

Over the course of my Masters in Directing by research, I have completed two directing placements at the Lakeside Theatre and the Mercury Theatre, with Tony Casement and Daniel Buckroyd respectively. These placements have allowed me to witness in-the-rehearsal-room techniques used with actors in order to generate an actor's emotional and personal truthfulness within their respective plays. The additional bonus of working on both a tragedy (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*) and comedy (*Noises Off*), has allowed me to witness similar techniques to produce different results.

### **Telling the Story – *'Tis Pity She's a Whore, Noises Off* and *My Name is Rachel Corrie***

Part of my directorial research included assistant directing a production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* with professional theatre director, Tony Casement. Whilst under his tutelage he allowed me to observe and work with some of his theatre directing methods, paying close attention to 'telling the story' and working on actors 'impulse' (Casement). As suggested by Mike Alfreds in his book *Different Every Night*, telling the story through performance comes to fruition once the actors behavioural instinct creates action that drives the story forward; "Actions are the steps along the spine – the through-line – of the plot. *Actions turn story into drama*".<sup>1</sup> It was obvious almost instantly that Casement worked with an actor's urge to react impulsively and "develop it from that point" as Casement mentioned during rehearsal. This bears resemblance to Meisner's "The Reality of Doing"<sup>2</sup> but without de-intellectualising the actor. Rather than critically analysing the play, this exercise allows the actors behavioural instincts to permeate the scene making the action more impulsive.

Storytelling in itself becomes a nebulous area, through its differing methods dependant on genre; for example storytelling in avant-garde may not be the same as naturalism. Through observation and

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Alfreds, *Different Every Night* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2007), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Westbrook, "The Reality of Doing", *Acting Coach Scotland*  
<<http://actingcoachscotland.co.uk/blog/reality-doing/>> (accessed 15 October 2016)



working with Casement in rehearsals it was clear that he works from the core belief that theatre and storytelling go hand-in-hand and that it is an actors job to convey this – whenever an unnaturally long pause took place for example, he simply explained to the actor that the story was lost and therefore so were the audience. In fact, during a rehearsal late on in the process Casement explained to me that he believed there to be only one pause in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* – the moment Giovanni and Annabella kiss. Buckroyd employed a similar process in *Noises Off* when it came to 'telling the story', ensuring that the actors were aware of the scenarios they were playing – mainly because these actors were playing actors playing characters. In order to help the actors navigate their way through this many layered reality, Buckroyd offered a constant reminder: "Whose story are you telling?" Whereas Casement was working from the core belief that pauses owned no place in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* because they extinguish the story, Buckroyd over-employed pauses for comic effect – a character would go to say something, pause, the audience would laugh, the actor would continue; every line was calculated with precision. This analysis of using pause within storytelling is an illustrative detail into wider practice; a moment of silence still contributes to parts of the story. There is a difference between Casement and Buckroyd's delivery of this exercise in the way they allow the actors to explore the story. Whereas Casement allows the actors to explore the possibilities of delivery, diction and direction, Buckroyd has a specific vision in which he would like the story to progress. Although both methods were able to work effectively in their respective productions there seems a limitation in confining an actor into a specific direction. With this confinement, surely there comes a limit of liberation.

When applying the theory of always telling the story to *My Name in Rachel Corrie* we also had to be careful with regards to which story we were trying to communicate. The title of the play would suggest Rachel's story is being told and initially our intention to communicate this was uppermost, but we could not ignore the larger story; the story Corrie was telling in her letters, e-mails and diaries, that of the Palestinian community she was being permitted to help.

My first production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* became centred on symmetrical staging for artistic harmony, at the same time it started to become clear that we were also focusing entirely on Rachel's life and story – perhaps fuelled by the innocent title of the play and captivated by her idealism and selflessness. By being captivated by Rachel's selflessness we convolute the story. It was our decision to help convey the story of the people of Palestine – Rachel's story is the means in which to tell it, yet she does not speak for the Palestinian people. It is not only Rachel's story; she becomes the mediator between the people of Palestine and the audience. Rachel's role as mediator – from the Western world – becomes necessary so that our audiences (also Western) can acknowledge our footprint in the history of the conflict. Her realisations can now become ours. Although the plays title suggests we are telling Rachel's story we must recognise the story interweaves with the plight of the Palestinian people. After our initial previews I realised that this needed to be altered, we needed not only to tell Rachel's story in order to help convey the message of the play, but to become advocates of her story in order to communicate the series of events that led her to Palestine, and ultimately, her untimely death.

After the initial preview performances telling both stories became a main focus for our Edinburgh production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. I looked at the storytelling techniques that Mike Alfreds outlines in his book *Then What Happens?* Alfreds explains that “the whole edifice of a piece of story-theatre collapses without its foundation: the essential requirement is to talk genuinely to the audience and to interact with them, incorporating their responses into the texture of the storytelling.”<sup>3</sup>

Paying particular attention to Alfreds' theory of interaction and employing some of his exercises allowed us to explore the nature of the play in a completely different way; the performance shifted from actors delivering a one-way lecture to an audience to become more of a three-way conversation between actors in which the audience are witness. By having several actors as opposed to one, we are able to generate a conversation between actors, which explores Rachel's thought process more in-depth. A stream of consciousness comes to life in full view of the audience. This was where the

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Alfreds, *Then What Happens?* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2013), 405.

layers within the piece started to develop; the conversations between actors in rehearsals that led on to the conversational quality arrived at in the production. Although this play is often perforated as ‘propaganda’ and ‘biased’, at the time of its first performances it played a crucial role in making its audiences aware of the atrocities in the Middle East, for “here is a play where the real dialogue begins when the curtain comes down”.<sup>4</sup>

A primary example of applying the process of telling the story came about when actor Sofie Solbø suggested that we should perhaps explore her monologue from pages 29-30 as if reading a book to the children:

Today, as I walked on top of the rubble, Egyptian soldiers called to me from the other side of the border: ‘Go! Go!’ because a tank was coming. And then waving and ‘What’s your name?’ Something disturbing about this friendly curiosity. To some degree, we are all kids curious about other kids. Egyptian kids shouting at strange women wandering into the paths of tanks. Palestinian kids shot from the tanks when they peek out from behind the walls to see what’s going on. International kids standing in front of tanks with banners. Israeli kids in the tanks – occasionally shouting, occasionally waving – many forced to be here, many just aggressive, anonymously shooting into the houses as we wander away.<sup>5</sup>

Suddenly a disturbing innocence was born. Sofie transformed hideous descriptions into an adventure whilst the other actors received the information as if they were children. This is where we needed to employ Alfreds’ exercise of *Supportively Interfering*. To explain in more detail, Sofie is represented with an (A) and the other actresses are presented with a (B):

*Supportively Interfering:*

(A) tells a story.(B) is totally positive towards (A) and the story and tries to be supportive” agreeing with whatever A says, filling in details that (A) might have missed (or so (B) thinks) and repeating details that should be emphasised for the audiences (or so (B) thinks). (A) tries to continue the story as smoothly as possible, handling (B’s) contributions in the least disruptive way possible<sup>6</sup>

When we applied this process the other actresses were offered immediate responsibility in emphasising key parts of the descriptive monologue for Sofie, which in turn allowed Sofie to respond emotionally to the characters of the children they were playing agreeing with the now adventurous terrors that surround them. Upon reflection, this was one of the key exercises when rehearsing *My*

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, <<http://cultureproject.org/current/rachel-corrie/>> (accessed July 12 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Corrie, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, ed Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2005), 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Alfreds, *Then What Happens?* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2013), 423.

*Name is Rachel Corrie* as it allowed the actresses to contribute and evaluate each other instantly – parts of this exercise even made its way into the performances in front of an audience leaving a disturbing silence to fill the auditorium. As Alfred's mentioned in his other book, *Different Every Night*, "I define theatre as an artistic medium in which the essential element are actors who, in front of an audience, transform themselves into other people, spontaneously and openly acting out stories; and in which everything else serves to enhance this phenomenon."<sup>7</sup>

### **Feeding the Line**

This Mike Alfreds technique often used with professional actors, was employed by Casement during the rehearsals for *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, which comprised of student actors. This permitted the actors to work off impulse. Even in the rehearsal room Casement described that:

"The exercise is not to achieve anything fancy, but to relieve responsibility of reading from a script from the actor. The actor forgets about following punctuation and expresses the line how they register it. It is an exercise based on impulse rather than thought. And as a bonus, the actor subconsciously learns the lines."<sup>8</sup>

Feeding the line simply requires the actor(s) to forget about reading the line or remembering the line, it allows them to lift their eyes from the script and play the situation. The main requirement for this exercise is that the actor feeding the line should do so without influencing the other actor being fed – by putting stresses or emotion into the words. By doing before thinking, the actor's impulse can create a more authentic response, rather than pre-determined.

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<sup>7</sup> Mike Alfreds, *Different Every Night* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2007), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Casement mentioned in conversation during a break. Day 3 of rehearsals.

## Documentary Theatre

The documentary form of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* illustrates an intention to enlighten and educate the audience by vicariously presenting the atrocities taking place in Israel/Palestine through Rachel Corrie's short life story – from childhood to death. However, the documentary style, composed of Corrie's thoughts, feelings and ideals taken from diary entries and e-mails, could lead the audience to overlook her search for a political voice.

The character development of Rachel is integral to the play. As suggested by Paul Rae in *Theatre and Human Rights*, "... *My Name is Rachel Corrie*... co-edited by Katherine Viner and Alan Rickman, is notable for the poignancy of character development."<sup>9</sup> Whilst working on the play I became more drawn to the play's powerful, personal story – an idealistic young woman who, troubled by the injustices of the world seemingly sacrificed her life to help others - rather than its intended message: to educate and enlighten the audience about the plight of Palestinians living in occupied territory. Perhaps it is the play's weakness that it is easier to empathise with Corrie's situation as opposed to that of the Palestinians whose plight she is describing. We are only presenting Rachel's de facto monologue; we are only using her own words.

By using documentary theatre, the audience have a heightened awareness that they are not subject to a fictional situation or imagined scenario, but exposed to a performance that is a reconstruction of Rachel's events, with an influence gained by her subjective authenticity of the text. This authenticity is in relation to the context of Rachel's story, we must remember that her opinions expressed throughout the play are only ever subjective – all viewpoints are her own. Every event that Rachel describes throughout the play is channelled through an actor; the actor acts like a medium. The audience know that everything they are hearing really happened; it is a true recreation of events, the actors are giving voice to the spirit of Rachel. Even conversations with other people – her parents,

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Rae, *Theatre and Human Rights* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 18.

Dr. Samir, her clients – are relayed solely through the actress, signifying the potential of the play’s character development.

*My Name is Rachel Corrie* was compiled and edited by the actor/director Alan Rickman and journalist Katharine Viner (now The Guardian’s Editor-in-Chief). When talking about arranging Corrie’s material, both Rickman and Viner have acknowledged her poetic use of language, which assisted the character development within the play. As Viner admits:

... I didn’t know that Rachel’s early writing – before she even thought of travelling to the Middle East, from her days as a schoolgirl, through college, to life working at a mental-health centre in her hometown of Olympia, Washington – would be similarly fascinating, and contain such elements of chilling prescience.<sup>10</sup>

When compiling *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, Rickman and Viner painstakingly ordered Corrie’s material, often using dates of entry, to structure the text in such a way that there is a natural progression of Corrie’s growth – from adolescent to adult – in her search for a political voice. Although the opening section of the play contextualises Corrie’s development into becoming a peace activist, the latter part of the play illuminates the Israel/Palestine conflict, as witnessed first-hand by Corrie. This transpires through Corrie’s writing. As Rickman says, “the rhythm of the writing changes dramatically. She has less time to consider but you can feel the growing fear.”<sup>11</sup> Yet at the same time Rickman acknowledges that Corrie’s writing, “has a kind of theatricality. The images jump off the page.”<sup>12</sup> We are now faced with a fear-ridden individual in a foreign land. The diary/documentary form invites the audience to share Rachel’s senses: what she can hear, see, touch, smell and taste. Considering Rickman and Viner’s differences, as artist and journalist, they shared similar insight when compiling the play by admitting that in order to address the conflict, they had to also illuminate Corrie’s humanity. Even Rachel’s father, Craig Corrie expressed that:

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<sup>10</sup> Katharine Viner, “Let me fight my monsters,” *The Guardian*, (8 April 2005), <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/apr/08/theatre.israelandthepalestinians>>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

they [Rickman and Viner] managed to capture Rachel's energy, her humour and her ability to question herself, as well as her world. For those who did not know Rachel but only knew of her, the play gave back to my daughter her humanity – no small achievement.<sup>13</sup>

Documentary theatre allows the actors to engage in a similar search for a political voice. By re-iterating Corrie's actual words the actors are finding Rachel's voice, they are finding the vocabulary to express something that hitherto they had no words for. By projecting a political voice through Rachel, the actors begin to agree or disagree with Rachel's subjective opinions. Where they disagree they begin to find their own voice. The documentary material provides an authentic value, as the actors were not presenting fictionalised text to an audience but Corrie's real words. In our production of the play the documentary form fundamentally affected the actors' process, as they were aware they were speaking Corrie's own words, they felt a great responsibility to present them truthfully. These are her words, her personal truth. An authenticity is discovered using Rachel's subjective perspective. It is important to note that the specific dialogue arrangements in *My Name is Rachel Corrie* would not be considered 'real speech', considering these words were never actually spoken by Corrie, these words were written; they are words extracted from e-mails and diary entries and although great thought had gone into their composition – these words had never actually 'rolled off the tongue' before.

Documentary theatre is often used as a tool for change. It is often used when the media has failed to represent a situation or when it systematically misrepresents one. It can help actors and audiences understand situations that may be alien to their own lives. As Hammond reiterates:

The content of such plays such as *My Name is Rachel Corrie...* - the suffering of the Palestinian people; institutional racism and injustice, the global threat of terrorism – might suggest that we turn to verbatim theatre because we feel that it is somehow better suited to the task of dealing with such serious subject matter. The world seems to have become a more serious place, and we want our theatre to help us understand it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Craig Corrie, "Alan Rickman gave the greatest gift to my late daughter, Rachel Corrie," *The Guardian*, (18 January 2016), <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/18/alan-rickman-rachel-corrie-play-actor>>

<sup>14</sup> Will Hammond, *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (Great Britain: Oberon Books Ltd, 2008), 8.

Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* is an early form of documentary theatre, which uses the transcripts from the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials of 1963-1965. The premiere of *The Investigation* was on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1965. It took place simultaneously on stages in fourteen East and West German cities as well as at the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. The play intended to expose the atrocities of the Holocaust. By using extreme precision in his highly composed, highly sculpted script, Weiss' message becomes too ideological for the audience to make up their own minds. Weiss was able to hold up a mirror to society. By letting the words on stage be delivered via the mouth of the actor the text is heard collectively by each individual audience member allowing the audience to experience the events of the company. They bear witness together. The strength and power of Weiss' play comes solely through the words. This documentary play, like *My Name is Rachel Corrie* enables actors, directors and writers to present an emotional authenticity through their art. As Cindy and Craig Corrie noted after first watching Rickman's production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* in 2005:

Theatre humanises; all art humanises. It takes us away from the merely logical and rational. In the Israel-Palestine conflict there is often a very logical calculus of death and war – and you must step out of the constructs of that logic in order to construct a logic for peace. / The play, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, is not just about how Rachel died, even if that is why she is known and remembered. It also illuminates her humanity, tracing her evolution from typical teenage self-exploration through to her search for a political voice.<sup>15</sup>

*London Road*, by Alecky Blythe also uses the verbatim/documentary form. The play was first performed at the National Theatre's Cottesloe theatre in London on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2011. *London Road* is a musical/play constructed from spoken accounts of the Ipswich murders and the eventual trial and conviction of Steve Wright, over the periods of 2006-2008. Blythe uses recent technological advances in order to make innovative verbatim theatre and has championed the recorded delivery technique. Through extensive research and interview phases, Blythe has used recorded interviews as a starting point in creating *London Road*. This method differs to the composition of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* by keeping authentic articulations in speech patterns and original idiosyncratic tone of voice – even though the play has similarly been edited and strongly curated. The name of her theatre

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<sup>15</sup> Cindy and Craig Corrie, "Theatre Review: My Name is Rachel Corrie", *The Electronic Intifada* (11 October 2005), < <http://electronicintifada.net/content/theatre-review-my-name-rachel-corrie/3494> > (accessed 12 October, 2016).



company, *Recorded Delivery*, reflects its performance style, as explained by Blythe in *Verbatim*

*Verbatim*:

In my experience, as you get further into a run, over-familiarity with the material actually deadens the performance. The fear of going on stage without knowing your lines certainly makes for very exciting theatre, but there is also something magical about the unique level of spontaneity that unlearned delivery demands. As well as speaking, the actors are forced actively to listen to their lines. With so much going on in their heads, this leaves almost no time to consider how they will deliver them.<sup>16</sup>

The application of this method, with the documented content, allows a social truth to permeate the auditorium in performance. This form of delivery appears to heighten the material further than when applied to *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, as the actors are reciting the lines as they were received in interview. I recently watched a performance of a new piece of verbatim theatre that used the recorded delivery technique, *Carry On Jaywick*, by Dan Murphy which heightened the audience's conscious awareness of character through witnessing authentic interruptions, thought processes, decisions, motivations and contradictions become more visible, creating a distancing effect for the audience. Authenticity here is achieved through the realism of speech pattern, however these speeches have still gone through an editing process. This form of delivery was impossible for Viner and Rickman to achieve with the staging of their play. There is a difference between the composition of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* and *London Road* that is exposed through each play's content. Viner and Rickman used their creative collaboration as a means to tell Corrie's story whereas Blythe wrote and collaborated years later with composer and lyricist Adam Cork with the curiosity to push the boundaries of verbatim theatre further. The experimental collaboration between Blythe and Cork became a release for the actors, as Cork explains; "As with non-musical documentary theatre, the actors find they are inhabited (or possessed) by the voices of the people they represent, rather than creating roles using the traditional rules of characterisation."<sup>17</sup> Both plays both manage to attain their own authentic value through different means: *My Name is Rachel Corrie* concerns the personal account of a peace

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<sup>16</sup> Will Hammond, *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (Great Britain: Oberon Books Ltd, 2008), 80-81.

<sup>17</sup> Alecky Blythe, *London Road* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2011), x.

activist, whereas *London Road* addresses the before and after reverberations of the play's subject matter using realistic speech patterns.

**My Name is Rachel Corrie - Research and Development (Part One)**

Theatre has no obligation to give a complete picture. Its only duty is to be honest. And what you get here is a stunning account of one woman's passionate response to a particular situation.<sup>18</sup>

*My Name is Rachel Corrie* provides the potential to build an intellectual bridge between actors, audience and the Israel/Palestine conflict. It might also distance the audience if they were to disagree, yet still provides a personalised viewpoint. It differs from news reports or a column in a newspaper because it offers a perspective from an individual's passionate response, as opposed to news broadcasts. Rachel Corrie is able to offer us something far more specific than any news channel – she is involved. As Peter Brook once explained: “It [theatre] makes the past and the future part of the present, it gives us a distance from what normally envelops us and abolishes the distance between us and what is normally far away.”<sup>19</sup>

Through the medium of theatre the actors and I were able to present a character in Rachel Corrie who is innocent and idealistic; someone that can appeal to our better selves. The actors share her journey with audiences and even though Corrie was killed over a decade ago, her passionate response to the conflict continues with each performance of the play. These passages of text, discovered and edited by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, were dramaturgically crafted into its theatrical form creating a means of conversation. Peter Brook concurs: “A story from today's newspapers can suddenly seem much less true, less intimate than something from another time, another land. It is the truth of the present moment that counts, the absolute sense of conviction that only appear when a unity binds performer and audience.”<sup>20</sup> Through this evocation we discover that theatre provides us the contextual grounds to reconstruct an event through performer, reciting Rachel's personal truth. The play has a context.

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Billington, review of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, *The Guardian*, April 14 2005, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/apr/14/theatre.politicaltheatre>>

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets* (London: Methuen Drama, 1993), 95.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Originally a one-woman show, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, edited into monologue form, addresses a conflict that affects many. In my opinion, I consider Rachel a martyr to the cause of Palestine by refusing to advocate Israel's actions in the conflict. As one of the first American martyrs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: reporting of Corrie's death reached innumerable amounts of people within days of her passing, allowing these stories of injustice in Palestine to fill theatres, newspapers and television channels across the globe. As Alan Bennett once said, "We are mulched by the dead, though one person's death will tell you more than a thousand."<sup>21</sup> Hundreds of Palestinian deaths go unrecorded in the Western press but the death of one white American woman hit the headlines.

### **On staging *My Name is Rachel Corrie***

When researching the early staging of the play, particularly its original run at the Royal Court Theatre, London, directed by Alan Rickman and starring Megan Dodds, I found a provocative article reviewing the play's original staging as a one-woman show. Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of Georgia, George Contini noted that "the staging boils down to how many different places Dodds can sit or stand whilst speaking Rachel's words".<sup>22</sup> This information followed a similar line of thought I had when first reading the play; how do I make this more of a conversation between actors rather than a lecture to an audience? Although it is not in Rachel Corrie's conjecture to lecture, the very format of the text – a de facto monologue - seems to encourage it.

At first, I was concerned over the sheer amount of text there would be for a student actor to learn for this production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, especially as any student actor I would use would also have their own degree and studies to focus on alongside mine. This concern also came about when understanding the importance and delicacy of Corrie's personal material – just a familiarity with lines would not do justice to the play, Rachel or the conflict. The text needed to be learnt as a whole. A pragmatic decision had to be made; cast one student actor and hope the play would be feasible (and perhaps cut some text) or cast several student actors to play Rachel Corrie (therefore splitting

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2004), 106.

<sup>22</sup> George Contini, "Reviewed Work: *My Name is Rachel Corrie*", *Theatre Journal* Vol. 59, No. 1 (2007), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25069972>>

the text between them). The latter option seemed agreeable to Contini's argument of plain staging – by having more than one Rachel, the play can become more conversational and less stagnant. This was when the first major directorial decision was made: half pragmatic, half artistic.

To prevent the audience feeling as if they were being lectured and to allow the student actors enough time not only learn lines but understand them in detail, an experiment began which was conducted prior to the casting phase of the production. I would see if the production could work with more than one actor, to help engage the audience – to take them by the hand and share the experiences – to use the text as the beginning of a conversation. As William Gaskill mentions in *Words into Action*:

A story is something that has already happened and it is told in the past tense. A play is something that has the pretence of happening here and now... The actor should be in charge of the audience's experience and must take decisions as to how far he wants them to enter his inner state and how far to remain detached.<sup>23</sup>

By using Gaskill's statement for preparation, I was able to use the actors' personal stories as a method of storytelling practice. All events were told in the past tense, yet we were all experiencing the events in the *now*. Using the actors' personal truth allowed us to witness ones thought process. The actor allowed us to feel how they felt.

I held two workshops prior to the casting phase to see if this concept could work in performance. These workshops were held on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> November 2014 respectively. These workshops were designed with one primary objective in mind: to see if *My Name is Rachel Corrie* could work with several student actors instead of an individual. Four student actors were used for this: Sofie Solbø, Savannah Selleck, Georgina Millen and Dani Kolanis. These workshops were intentionally designed to remain off-text, the relationship between the actors was more important at this stage. By having the actors use their own words, they were able to engage one another with personal truths – not only are they experiencing the craft of sharing, they partake in the art of receiving. They experience the role of the audience. I undertook a series of exercises:

### **Example Exercise – *Observation and Repetition***

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<sup>23</sup> William Gaskill, *Words into Action* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2007), 40.

The first part of this exercise I first observed in a class led by Barbara Peirson for a first-year module, *Text into Action*. When observing this exercise for the first time I noticed that concentration and a duty to be honest was permeating the classroom.

The student actors were split into two and sat opposite each other, about five to six feet apart. At regular intervals I would ask them questions that helped them examine their partner: “*What can you tell by their eyes?*” “*Are they tired, awake, alert?*” “*What do their shoulders say?*” “*What does their body language say? Are they tense?*” It was crucial that these statements were not hastened, what the actors are essentially doing is asking themselves the question: “*What is the other persons story?*” Once the actors received the more specific questions, further questions were asked that were designed to highlight the bigger story: “*What is this person like?*” “*How are they presenting themselves?*” “*How are they feeling?*” From here the actors will have started to gain an impression of the person sitting opposite them. This is when I allowed them to think of a word to describe their partner.

The actors are now allowed a small script, composed of only five words, to call and respond to each other; for example Sofie would say “*You are...*” and Dani would respond with “*Yes, I am...*” Now that the actors have been giving their small exchange, the person saying the first clause would include their own descriptive word for their partner; in this case Sofie said, “*You are [nervous]*”. It is important to understand that the word that Sofie has used is not designed to hurt or offend Dani but to represent a truthful observation that Sofie has had. Dani could be nervous about something, perhaps even the workshop. It now becomes Dani’s job to reply in agreement; “*Yes, I am [nervous]*” This short exchange was repeated several times in order to “de-intellectualise” the actors, to prevent them *thinking* about what they were saying – they should do before they think, working on impulse, similar to Tony Casements methods on impulsively acting. Once this had been repeated, the dialogue was swapped to give both actors a chance to describe and respond to their partner.

The exercise is developed further so that there is an occasional contradiction; for example – with Sofie describing – “*You are [nervous]*” responded with “*Yes, I am [nervous]*”. “*You are [nervous]*” responded with “*No, I am not [nervous]*”. This rejection created a minor shift in body language and tension. Again, after several repetitions, the dialogue was swapped to allow both actors the opportunity to reject the other. From here the actors began to play with one another more freely, so that the acceptances and rejections become their own conscious choice. This playfulness, which arose in the actors, was reminiscent of an interpretation of playfulness that I wanted to draw out in certain sections of the text, particularly the Dairy Queen monologue on Page 40; “I took the clients out in the company car for insurance reasons today to Dairy Queen”.<sup>24</sup> This playfulness comes out of the actors’ ability to adopt different characters, creating a more reactive performance.

We then incorporated all four actors in the exercise; two performing and two observing as an audience – as Georgina and Savanah will have experimented alongside Sofie and Dani. By having two actors now watching Sofie and Dani I was able to ask the observers to perform back exactly what they had observed. This gave Sofie and Dani the opportunity to observe the minutiae of their body language, which was now emphasised when performed back. As suggested by Victoria Hart in the *Handbook of Acting Techniques*, “There is a world of difference between the actor who is caused authentically to do what his character must do and the actor who only indicates or self-generates his actions.”<sup>25</sup> Through this use of repetition, the actor begins to learn that simply indicating something is too general; they should **do** rather than **indicate**.

### **Reflection of Truth on Observation and Repetition Workshop**

#### *Just Repeat*

One actor starts the exercise by responding to something he sees, something tangible that is true and present about the other – nothing complex, just his open and honest observation. The other actor must listen and repeat exactly what he has heard.

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<sup>24</sup> Rachel Corrie, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, ed Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2005), 40.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Bartow et al., *Handbook of Acting Techniques* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2008), 51.

*Repeat Exactly What You Hear, and Tell the Truth!*<sup>26</sup>

At the time of conducting these workshops it was unbeknownst to me that these exercises were almost like-for-like with Sanford Meisner's methods. As mentioned in *The Handbook of Acting Techniques*: "Meisner begins this process by removing the script, and with it, any necessity for the actor to achieve a predetermined result of any kind. The exercise starts with two actors standing facing each other, five or six feet apart."<sup>27</sup> Having witnessed these exercises in Barbara's class and then applying them into my own investigative workshops, I was then able to research Meisner's original method, which Victoria Hart asserts: "They [the actors] are making real contact with one another, effortlessly, by the simple act of repeating exactly what they hear, listening and answering, responding through the repetitions."<sup>28</sup> This contact that the actors experienced in these workshops became vital when deciding whether several actors could work instead of one, particularly as *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is recognised as a one-woman show. This repetitive exercise allowed the actors to be more specific with their actions rather than generalised, especially as "there is a world of difference between the actor who is caused authentically to do what [their] character must do and the actor who only indicates or self-generates [their] actions."<sup>29</sup> Due to these workshops, what was originally a pragmatic decision now became a creative one.

### **Going Against the Grain**

Another decision and one that I did not want the actors to find an issue with was the North American accent that Corrie inherited from her home in Olympia, Washington. The actors I would be working with were un-trained with little previous experience of performing; therefore I felt that an accent could become an overwhelming and interfering factor when rehearsing the play. How could I expect novice actors, who are beginning to learn their craft, to perfect an accent whilst dealing with such enormous emotional content? I did not want the accent to get in the way. So rather than struggle with

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<sup>26</sup> Arthur Bartow et al., *Handbook of Acting Techniques* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2008), 51.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



such a specific accent, which could hinder the actors' emotional process, perhaps the pragmatic decision to remove it would make the process less worrisome. In comparison to the authentic message the play is realising through Corrie's humanity, the accent became immaterial. Although Corrie was one of the first American people to suffer at the hands of the Israel/Palestine conflict, it is also a stark message on the influence the Western world has had - and continues to have - on the conflict in the Middle East. My cast has comprised different nationalities throughout each phase, particularly the final performances: (Alice Murray (British/Jamaican), Ashling O'Shea (Irish/Sri Lankan) and Sofie Solbø (Norwegian)). I decided to embrace their ethnicity rather than struggle to hide it. This may have diminished the message that Corrie was one of the first American to die in the Israel/Palestine conflict, leading to outrage in the Western press and her consequential martyrdom. Instead I focused on the qualities that the actors shared with Corrie: young, middle class educated women from the West. Therefore, it becomes an even more powerful message when combining their entire personal heritages within Rachel as a character – a person from the Western world who needed to make a difference. The actors are then Westerners wanting to make a difference in telling Rachel's message for peace; it comes full circle.

### **Creating an Aesthetic**

Having already presented the actors with a complex play, filled with facts and figures, it became more feasible to authentically portray the message of the play with fewer set changes and props. The first part of the play, which takes place in Rachel's bedroom, describes a "messy" room, which was where most of the props were used, including: posters, photographs, drawings and books. As an opening image, the audience are exposed to Rachel's erratic yet creative nature; "Every morning I wake up in my red bedroom that seemed like genius when I painted it, but looks more and more like carnage these days"<sup>30</sup>. Through use of props there was the complex choice of how to incorporate a bed into the opening section – as it is her bedroom – without complicating the quick set change from Olympia to Jerusalem later on in the play. The original idea was to use an actual bed and somehow

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<sup>30</sup> Rachel Corrie, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, ed Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2005), 29-30.

remove it from the studio whilst music played over the top, but it could not work. We had spent the opening nineteen pages of the play forming Rachel's history and building her character to destroy this illusion by removing a piece of set. Eventually the actors and myself experimented with the idea of using smaller objects together to create her bed, covering it up with bed sheets to create the illusion of a bed. Wooden pallets were used, cut down to size and covered, which gave the actors full freedom of the bedroom – they were strong enough to jump on and lay on. Rather than removing the pallets from the production once Rachel travels to Jerusalem, we decided to keep them, split them up so that they could symbolise rubble within Palestine. As a result, a problem became our solution, this scene or set change became a symbolic 'breaking' of the play where the actors removed the final home comfort from Rachel's life, her bedroom. This became even more poignant towards the end of the play, when the audience – particularly those who did not know of Corrie's story – realised that she never saw home again.

Tony Casement and Gari Jones, two professional theatre directors I have worked with recently implement music into their rehearsal rooms and productions. Whereas Casement employs live spoken/sung music, like a piano and vocalist in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Jones uses mainly instrumental music to underscore his productions. As Katie Mitchell explains in *The Director's*

*Craft*:

Music has six main functions:

1. to describe time and place
2. to establish the atmosphere or mood of a scene
3. to underscore changes during the action
4. to support set pieces, like dances or parties
5. to cover set changes and
6. to give a production a sense of coherence, by judicious use of the same or similar musical material.<sup>31</sup>

Having observed how Casement and Jones have used music to accompany action in the past immediately put me at ease when I decided that music would also feature highly in this production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. It was not only a decision made because I had seen other directors implement it but it also highlights Corrie's creativity, particularly as she mentions music artists

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<sup>31</sup> Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 87.

throughout the play – which also provided me with a starting point. Corrie mentions several artists throughout the text, including Pat Benatar, The Grateful Dead, The Magnetic Fields and The Beatles. By using Mitchell's analysis of music functions, I was able to categorise the songs in this production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* with its corresponding number. The final playlist for the production was:

- (2, 5) Rock 'N' Roll Heart – Melanie
- (2) Afterthought – Dan Hyde
- (5) All My Little Words – The Magnetic Fields/Hand in My Pocket – Alanis Morissette
- (5) Invincible – Pat Benatar
- (2) Love in My Mind – Melanie
- (4) Ruby Tuesday – Melanie
- (2) Afraid of Nothing – Sharon Van Etten
- (1) Somebody's Baby – Pat Benatar

There was one change that took place between the performances at the Edinburgh Fringe and the final performances, where 'Hand in my Pocket' replaced 'All My Little Words'. This suggestion came from one of the actors who questioned whether it sounded too dissimilar to the other tracks whilst being too impossible to play quietly – as one of the actors spoke over the top of it. The elusiveness of 'Hand in my Pocket' was far more appropriate for this part of the play – as she packs up to leave home, unknowingly never to return.

**My Name is Rachel Corrie for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival**

My production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* began life with four actors, which was reduced to three in preparation for Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Only three actors could make the journey to Edinburgh; so the decision was pragmatic rather than artistic. However, once the rehearsal process began for the second time it became obvious that this pragmatism was to work in our favour rather than against us - with particular acknowledgment of the asymmetrical staging. Originally, and as a result of my own naivety, our first production became centred on creating a visually 'balanced' production – four actors designed the space. A curious metaphor when considering Rachel's arguments; "...you could be perpetuating the idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a balanced conflict, instead of a largely unarmed people against the fourth most powerful military in the world."<sup>32</sup> At this stage in the development process it became noticeable that this was to create a more gratifying performance to watch.

The leading factor that differentiated the previews at the Lakeside Theatre and the performances at Theatre 3 at Surgeon's Hall (Venue 53) was the space itself; judging by the stage layout (*see attachments*) we were always going to lose the depth, which was gifted to us at the Lakeside Theatre. Many of the pieces that involved physical sequences, such as the Dairy Queen monologue, became almost impossible to confine to such a small space. These excerpts had to be removed before we got to the festival. However, this did not prove to be too harmful to the staging as we were also limited with the playing time, having only 55 minutes to perform, with a 5-minute get-out. From its original running time of 90 minutes, we had to lose 35 minutes – without losing the intent, which Viner and Rickman crafted so delicately. Considering the first twenty pages of the text covers Corrie's early life, and search for a political voice I knew that much of this would have to be lost; I did not want the play to be facetious, it is dealing with one of the most complex conflicts in history.

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<sup>32</sup> Rachel Corrie, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, ed Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2005), 12.

But how could I remove so much of Corrie's material detailing her early life and still lead the audience to understand and concur with Corrie's political situation and motives?

With the reduction of cast size from four to three, which was ultimately a pragmatic decision, there rose a natural balance in allowing each actor enough possession of Corrie's words. This was one of the most positive outcomes. By performing to a public audience, having performed in front of mentors and peers previously, each individual audience member was given the opportunity to agree or disagree with three separate Rachels; especially in consideration to the 'sides' of the character each actor adopted – Ashling (the emotional), Sofie (the compassionate) and Emily (the statistical). Through presenting several Rachels the opportunity for the audience to identify increases. This idea came to fruition, particularly when one young woman after the second performance in Edinburgh asked to speak to me regarding Ashling's portrayal of Rachel, in which she commented that, "watching that young actor [Ashling], is like staring into a mirror, her ability to communicate her thoughts through another's writing is haunting, you should always continue to work with and nurture a performer with that potential."<sup>33</sup> This audience member's reaction of "staring into a mirror" is not unlike Weiss's intention when constructing *The Investigation*.

The biggest difference between the previews of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* and the production we created for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival was the overall message of the play. By removing a large portion of Corrie's life, the production became more centred on the conflict itself, which is by no means a detrimental factor. As Peter Brook explains in *The Empty Space*, "There is no doubt that a theatre can be a very special place. It is like a magnifying glass, and also like a reducing lens".<sup>34</sup> However, by eradicating much of her upbringing, we lost much of her early signs of idealistic humanity – the quality in which we were able to heighten in the original performances. The concern was delivering a propaganda piece. It was never my intention to do so, but to show something far subtler, a glimmer of hope.

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<sup>33</sup> In conversation with an audience member after the second performance at Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (England: Penguin Group, 1968), 110.

**My Name is Rachel Corrie Research and Development (Part Two)**

Although an actor's performance is *different every night*<sup>35</sup>, the envisioned message of the play – especially when using documentary theatre, due to factual representation – should endeavour to remain the same. A director's duty, in this instance, is managing his or her actors in order to find a personal truth within the text so that the message is, and remains, clear.

Having now directed this play twice, for the Lakeside Theatre and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, I had managed to observe some issues that needed to be addressed for the final performance. Although these issues have not hindered the previous performances, there are many ways in which the piece could be developed for the future. One major issue that had come to light at this point was placing Corrie above the facts and figures; her story had become more important than the people she was helping. To us, Rachel became a hagiographic figure, which became problematic. In order to correct this problem, I had the actors rehearse and experiment with the concept of Event, Circumstance and Behaviour so that the experiences they were having live on stage, were entirely truthful to themselves, by placing themselves in imaginary circumstances – having never been to Palestine themselves. In accordance with Sanford Meisner, acting is “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances”. Discovering a personal truth in behaviour will allow the actors to depict a personal authenticity in their portrayal of Rachel.

**Event, Circumstance and Behaviour**

It is the actor's objective to communicate the characters circumstances within the play's events as authentically and effectively as possible. These circumstances are the conditions in which the play exists – the *Who? What? Where? When?* The rehearsals are when an actors investigation begins, a discovery of truth, according to Meisner, in behaviour that uncovers an authentic response. In brief, it is a circumstance within an event that leads to a change in an individual's behaviour. This foundation, also known as ‘the reality of doing’, is universal. Everyone inhabits this practice every

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<sup>35</sup> In reference to Mike Alfred's book, *Different Every Night*.

day, all the time, and it is an actor's job to observe its efficacy within theatre and performance. This reality of doing allows directors and actors to investigate human responses to real situations in order to represent the 'authentic' message.

Although *My Name is Rachel Corrie* follows the journey of an individual, the casting of several actors allowed us more freedom within the rehearsal space when discovering circumstances. Pushing this idea further we were then able to explore event, circumstance and behaviour further, throughout the play:

As we continued to walk in the direction of the body – the shots shifted – hitting the ground two to four meters in front of us. We also heard two high-pitched, whistling shots above our heads. We stopped and Jenny requested to talk to the commanding officer.<sup>36</sup>

So here we have the circumstance; the group of people walking in the direction of the body combined with the first event; the gunfire. The change of events; whistling shots above their heads changed the actor's behaviour – in this case forcing them back. By unlocking the minutiae within this method, this final production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* became far more detailed than the ones that preceded it. Quite simply, without Meisner's 'reality of doing' with event, circumstance and behaviour, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* would have remained passive and centred on staging rather than on detailed, specific acting which allowed space to communicate Rachel's passionate response to the Israel/Palestine conflict.

***"I'm here for other children. I'm here because I care."*<sup>37</sup>**

One of the creative decisions that has always remained the same over the course of all three productions of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* was to remove the recording of ten-year-old Rachel at her school's Fifth Grade Press Conference on World Hunger:

I'm here for other children.  
I'm here because I care.  
I'm here because children everywhere are suffering and

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<sup>36</sup> Rachel Corrie, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, ed Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2005), 25.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

because forty thousand people die each day from hunger.  
 I'm here because those people are mostly children.  
 We have got to understand that the poor are all around us and  
 we are ignoring them.  
 We have got to understand that these deaths are preventable.  
 We have got to understand that people in Third World  
 countries think and care and smile and cry just like us.  
 We have got to understand that they dream our dreams and we  
 dream theirs.  
 We have got to understand that they are us. We are them.  
 My dream is to stop world hunger by the year 2000.  
 My dream is to give the poor a chance.  
 My dream is to save the forty thousand people who die each day.  
 My dream can and will come true if we all look to the future  
 and see the light that shines there.  
 If we ignore hunger, that light will go out.  
 If we all help and work together, it will grow and burn free  
 with the potential of tomorrow.

Although this speech could be regarded as one of the most memorable within the play, especially when considering it was part of some of Rachel's earliest work – writing this at only ten years old, it seemed an inappropriate piece of the jigsaw for our puzzle. Our main aim for this play is to help spread the message that Rachel started and by having the real Rachel at the end of the production seems to destroy the illusion; with American accent and looking very different from all the actors within the piece. We did not need to present the actual Rachel Corrie on screen because, as Declan Donnellan expresses in *The Actor and the Target*, "A theatre is not only a literal place, but also a space where we dream together, not merely a building, but a space that is both imaginative and collective."<sup>38</sup> The production did not seem to need the innocence of a Rachel Corrie as ten-year-old on screen to add dramatic effect, for why would it when the audience can already leave the theatre not only mourning Rachel Corrie's death but also with the loss of idealism and courage of youth? There is the potential for an audience to mourn the loss of idealism with or without this closing speech.

### **Plato's Simile of the Cave**

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<sup>38</sup> Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target* (Great Britain, Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2002), 1.



During the concluding rehearsals for *My Name is Rachel Corrie* it became clear that the actors' portrayal of Rachel closely relates to Plato's *Simile of the Cave*, a ubiquitous presence in theatre as a whole. In brief, Plato's analogy explains "the difference between substance and shadow in the physical world"<sup>39</sup>. It continues with a scenario; prisoners in a cave (who cannot move their heads) watching shadows on a wall. The shadows are created by firelight behind the prisoners and "between the fire and the prisoners...runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets"<sup>40</sup>. Already, a relationship is established between Plato's analogy and our production; his prisoners become our audience.

We can even go further by suggesting that the actors used parts of themselves to perform actions and create emotions like those Rachel might have experienced. Each actor shares their own experiences and are then able to find commonalities between their own lives and Rachel's – part of the actor is able to adopt a part of Rachel. For example, Ashling became the emotional state of Rachel building the bridge between hope and reality; Alice became the artistic element of Rachel controlling the soundtrack of the piece with headphones and finally, Sofie became the caring side of Rachel, the one who notices that "we are all kids curious about other kids"<sup>41</sup>. The actors grew to absorb and adopt these traits of Rachel Corrie in the rehearsal room, allowing a creative curiosity to permeate the space.

An authenticity derives from the actors' will to share Rachel's story, not *become* it. These questions began impeding our creative process, distancing us too far from the story we were simply trying to share. It was here that we started our 'creative vs. curiosity' search for the *real* answers. Rather than create an image for artistic gratification, it became a search into Corrie's past of why she made decisions that led to her unfortunate death. Due to this curiosity we were able to develop and present

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<sup>39</sup> Desmond Lee, trans., *Plato's The Republic* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007), 240.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Rachel Corrie, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, ed Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2005), 30.

our own contextualisation of the piece to stand alongside Rachel's. In some cases, the actors found a common ground with Rachel's emotions; for example, Sofie is Norwegian and lives in England away from her mother who lives in Norway. Sofie could use her own feelings of displacement and homesickness to truthfully convey her imagined circumstances. This played a major part in Sofie developing her version of Rachel as caring. She is alone the same as Rachel. By acknowledging these similarities between the actors and Rachel we are able to present a performance with real, raw emotion and intent. Although Sofie has never travelled to Palestine and experienced the turmoil first hand, by adding her own personal context she can create an invested performance through her imagined circumstances.

**My Name is Rachel Corrie: How is the play still relevant?**

The current Israel/Palestine conflict began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century although its roots began much earlier. The disputed territory came under the Balfour declaration in 1917 and one condition of this was a pledge to find a homeland for the Jewish diaspora. After the events of World War Two the United Nations recommended that there be a plan to partition Palestine into an Arab state, a Jewish state and the City of Jerusalem. Dispute regarding the dividing up of territory precipitated a civil war between 1947 and 1948.

When it was over...close to 800,000 people had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and eleven urban neighbourhoods emptied of their inhabitants.<sup>42</sup>

Illan Pappé contends that the dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948 by Israel was an ethnic cleansing operation, which these figures seem to suggest. However, the figures are still disputed as the Israeli's saw the Palestinians as illegal occupiers. Yet with figures this high, it would be regarded today as a crime against humanity under international law.

When selecting *My Name is Rachel Corrie* as the play to aid in liberating actors to find a voice, I had little knowledge regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict and the on-going struggles that take place on a daily basis in the Middle East. In the West, we see daily news reports about war all over the world, not only for its graphic content, but because these reports offer little/no solution. In contrast, plays such as *My Name is Rachel Corrie* offer much needed conversation that enable us to want and need to help but offers no solution. Unlike a news report, in which certain news is edited and removed by a broadcaster, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* provides us with a personal truth of an individual's story. However, there are similarities in that Viner and Rickman dramaturgically crafted the play - it has gone through a similar editing process – that the same dilution of information has taken place. There is still disparity over whether the play was crafted for political gain.

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<sup>42</sup> Ilan Pappé, preface to *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (England: Oneworld Publications Ltd, 2006), xiii.

I have watched several productions that investigate the Israel/Palestine conflict that have been written, produced and performed since *My Name is Rachel Corrie*'s premier in 2005. The conflict, with or without these productions, is an ever-evolving issue. As the Human Rights activist Frank Barat suggests:

Palestine is slowly becoming global – a social issue that all movements fighting for social justice need to embrace. The next step is connecting the dots between various struggles around the world and creating a truly united front.<sup>43</sup>

Barat, having expressed this notion in September 2014, eleven years after Rachel Corrie's death emphasises that the conflict is an issue that should be confronted in 'unity'. Although *My Name is Rachel Corrie* centres around Corrie the protagonist, it is presented through – in my opinion - her immeasurable humanity; one in which can inspire thousands and one where the real dialogue begins post-show. By producing these plays, especially in the West, we can open up these issues to audiences when access to information via the media is diluted and we can offer up the chance to open up conversations towards a better understanding.

*Seven Jewish Children*, a ten-minute play by Caryl Churchill, was written in response to the 2008-2009 Israeli military strike on Gaza. It was first performed at London's Royal Court Theatre on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2009. Again, we have a play written years after the events that led up to Corrie's death proving the continual, perpetual effort needed to make a change. The play, composed of seven scenes detailing nearly seventy years, shows Jewish adults discussing whether their children should be informed about certain events in recent Jewish history. These events are only ever suggested indirectly. But it remains relevant; Churchill's play covers seventy years, all of which is relevant as the Israel/Palestine conflict is a continuing complex sequence of events. In order to make a change going forward, do we need to look back and witness the mistakes? Churchill, a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, created the play in order for it to be produced gratis, with the only specification being to hold a collection for the people of Gaza. Churchill has also requested that

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<sup>43</sup> Frank Barat, introduction to *On Palestine* by Illan Pappé and Noam Chomsky (United States: Penguin Books, 2015), 7.

admission for this play should be free, which is designed for accessibility as well as charity.

However, the play received mixed reviews, with even Michael Billington commenting, “the play solves nothing, but shows theatre’s power to heighten consciousness and articulate moral outrage.”<sup>44</sup>

It is here where Billington uncovers something analogous to *My Name is Rachel Corrie*; we are not serving answers but are at least asking the questions to engage in public awareness.

*Ballad of the Burning Star*, a play by Theatre Ad Infinitum, premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 2013. It begins with a bomb warning. Immediately, we the audience feel uncomfortable yet we know this information is false for we are watching a piece of theatre, resulting in a collective, instantaneous suspicion of the characters. The author and director, Nir Paldi, features as the flamboyant drag queen, Star recalling the story of Israel and its agonising contradictions – which contrasts with *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, which recalls Palestine’s story. Even though both plays deal with different sides of the conflict, they are similar in original form; they were both intended as semi-autobiographical, one-person plays. It becomes apparent that each one intended to present a reliable narrator, reiterating the lack of information from other sources, for here the audience are presented with an individual’s personal voice of truth. We are allowed to share a journey together. Nonetheless *Ballad of the Burning Star* ended life as a cabaret, rather than one-man show, as reviewer Paul Taylor stated:

Paldi was originally going to present this semi-autobiographical material about a boy growing up in a Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories and his increasing confusion over whether he’s a victim or a persecutor as a one-man play but the outrageous mismatch here between form and content plunges you into the conflicted psyche of the nation with a raucous, taboo-breaking immediacy.<sup>45</sup>

When questioned after the production Paldi was asked why he used a drag queen cabaret as the means in which to tell his story he suggested that a drag queen can get away with saying near

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Billington, “Seven Jewish Children”, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/11/seven-jewish-children>>

<sup>45</sup> Paul Taylor, “Theatre Review: Story of Israel told by satirical cabaret”, *The Independent*, 29 February 2014, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/ballad-of-the-burning-star-theatre-review-story-of-israel-told-by-satirical-cabaret-9141392.html>>

anything that needed to be heard, reiterating that theatre was the most accessible form for himself and the audiences.

Although both *Ballad of the Burning Star* and *My Name is Rachel Corrie* express the suitability of a one-person performance, Theatre Ad Infinitum arrived at the opinion that more actors can contribute to this semi-autobiographical work just as I had when approaching *My Name is Rachel Corrie*.

Whereas the former used the chorus of Star-lets – Star’s militaristic troupe of dancers – to be harassed and humiliated, I employed several actors for a less unsettling means; to attempt to present Corrie’s thought process – almost a conversation within a conversation.

*The Siege*, produced by The Freedom Theatre of the Jenin refugee camp in Palestine, tells the story of the 39-day siege that took place during April 2002, roughly a year before Corrie’s death. *The Siege*, which toured the UK during 2015, is the biggest tour of a Palestinian theatre company in history and the first time that the Freedom Theatre had toured to Britain. As Freedom Theatre explain:

*The Siege* focuses on six fighters and their relationship to one another, to the Israeli army outside and to the clergy inside the church. The play also delves into issues about the possibility of morality in warfare and the consequences of a lengthy oppression through military occupation, as each fighter reflects upon his relationship to Palestine and to the struggle.<sup>46</sup>

Here, audiences are allowed to take a journey that the actors who they are watching have genuinely experienced providing a cultural truth almost unmatched, even though this event took place fourteen years ago. The Freedom Theatre continues their efforts whilst being constrained with their home base, Jenin Refugee Camp (an area severely affected by decades of oppression). *The Siege* also follows another similar pattern to the other plays mentioned: “The play is narrated by a tour guide who leads the audience into a reflection on the historical and spiritual importance of the church,

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<sup>46</sup> The Freedom Theatre, “The Siege”, <<http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/productions-productions/the-siege/>>

interspersed with dramatized scenes and authentic video material of the 2002 siege, cut by present-day interviews with the exiled fighters.”<sup>47</sup>

This is the commonality of most of the plays. Again, we are presented with an actor who we follow as narrator, following the events they find themselves in and share his/her experiences. This is similar to Rachel’s role in *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, the adults in *Seven Jewish Children*, and the narrator in *The Siege*. They are addressing the audience directly to highlight the problem more clearly. These plays are similar to how Thomas Ostermeier shattered the fourth wall with his production of *An Enemy of the People* “by inviting the audience into the debate, [Ostermeier] ... reveals the desire for radical change simmering under the surface of our well-ordered society.”<sup>48</sup>. Interestingly, all of these plays are made up of creative teams from different nationalities: *Seven Jewish Children* written by a British writer; *Ballad of the Burning Star* written by and starring an Israeli (who feels to both the oppressor and the oppressed); *The Siege* created by a group of Palestinians and finally; *My Name is Rachel Corrie* dramaturgically crafted by British theatre makers and written by an American woman. Every production has its own point of view. Everyone should be heard; all become pieces of a complex puzzle in the Israel/Palestine conflict, they all offer a different viewpoint.

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<sup>47</sup> The Freedom Theatre, “The Siege”, <<http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/productions-productions/the-siege/>>

<sup>48</sup> Michael Billington, “An Enemy of the People – like a rowdy version of Question Time”, *The Guardian*, 25 September 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/25/an-enemy-of-the-people-review-michael-billington>>

## Conclusion

The experiences gained over the course of the last two years, through professional placements and research and development rehearsal processes, have allowed me to explore the idea of ‘liberation through performance’: a powerful allegory alongside Rachel Corrie’s intention to liberate the people of Palestine.

In order to liberate these performances, the actors needed to embrace the character of Rachel Corrie, her idealistic qualities, which was fairly straightforward to achieve; these actors were at a similar age to Rachel was when she started to discover her ability to transcribe political thought. It was always important to encourage the actors to form their own opinion than to believe Rachel to be a reliable narrator. This was achieved through incorporating much of her complete works, *Let Me Stand Alone*, into the rehearsal room. Rather than being confined to the restricted text in *My Name is Rachel Corrie* that has been dramaturgically crafted, *Let Me Stand Alone* gave the actors access to what is in essence, Corrie’s life story. By giving us more source material of Rachel’s writing, *Let Me Stand Alone* gave us a hagiographic opinion of Rachel becoming our ‘go-to’ text, almost prophetically.

One of the most powerful moments over the last two years was the luxury I was afforded in watching the actors I was working with follow the same search for a political voice that Corrie took, albeit over a much shorter time period. From our collective naivety during the productions previews, the cast and I have been able to not only develop the play and its intentions but our own ideas and opinions. The collective social conscience that was borne out of this experience has and will continue to affect our work in the future. Since the final performance our photographer, Ethan Miller and Stage Manager Bonnie Murphy have both worked on *Carry On Jaywick*, a documentary play detailing the ‘most deprived town in England’. Sofie has enrolled in an MA in Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, with her ultimate goal to translate *The Container* by Clare Bayley for performance outside the Norwegian Parliament; Ashling now has an agent, who specialises in finding creative work for ethnic minorities; and Alice now performs for *Caravan Theatre*, currently



touring universities across the UK to raise awareness on sexual harassment. Although the process of working on *My Name is Rachel Corrie* has by no means been the sole contributor to the current paths of the team, they all now work from the core-belief that theatre, particularly political theatre, has a prominent place not only in art, but in their own lives. As Tom Oppenheim explains when talking about his grandmother, Stella Adler's method: "It [Adler's method] requires the conviction that human growth and growth as an actor are synonymous".<sup>49</sup> All of a sudden, theatre is no longer about the bright lights and standing ovations used to measure ones success; it is the belief that theatre can be used as a tool for change, both politically and personally.

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<sup>49</sup> Arthur Bartow et al., *Handbook of Acting Techniques* (Great Britain: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2008), 37-38.

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