

# Law, Narrative and Critique in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre

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The present article undertakes an interdisciplinary inquiry into contemporary British verbatim theatre as a site of interplay between law, art and politics. Focusing on the example of Matt Woodhead and Richard Norton-Taylor's 2016 play *Chilcot*, documenting the public inquiry into the UK's role in the 2003 Iraq war, the authors explore the work as a space of legal and political critique, and ask how the specific theatrical and narrative affordances of the verbatim form shape its critical substance.

**Keywords:** verbatim theatre, tribunal, law, narrative, critique, politics, democracy

## I: Introduction

Verbatim theatre is, as the blurb for an edited essay collection on the subject states, “the surprise success story of the modern stage”.<sup>1</sup> First defined and applied by Derek Paget in the late 1980s,<sup>2</sup> the term loosely refers to a mode of theatrical intervention that involves the re-performance of the recorded speech of real individuals. As Paget is himself at pains to stress, contemporary verbatim work in the British context has significant antecedents, both domestically in Peter Cheeseman's local documentary theatre productions in the 1960s, and internationally in the German tradition associated with, among others, Erwin Piscator, Rolf Hochhuth and Peter Weiss. Since the mid-1990s, however, verbatim techniques have been “re-discovered and re-lected *in the current conjuncture*”,<sup>3</sup> resulting in the emergence of a vibrantly diverse – and diversely vibrant – brand of engaged theatre that uses documented testimony to respond to urgent political concerns.

One of the most visible directions within this contemporary (re)turn to verbatim is that of ‘tribunal theatre’, typified by the cycle of plays mounted at London's Tricycle Theatre under the artistic directorship of Nicolas Kent. Common to a majority of these productions is the attempt at a meticulous re-enactment of edited transcripts of court trials and public inquiries – the aim, Kent suggests, is to create as close a mimetic reproduction of proceedings as possible. The project is manifestly political: the tribunal plays at the Tricycle invariably confront perceived injustices and seek to bring that which David Hare refers to as the “special scrutiny”<sup>4</sup> of theatre to bear on apparent flaws in the accountability of legal and political institutions. While the earlier productions address a variety of subjects – arms dealing (*Half the Picture*, 1994), war crimes (*Nuremberg*, 1996; *Srebrenica*, 1997), institutionalized racism (*The Colour of Justice*, 1999) – , the later plays converge on the events leading up to the Iraq war in 2003 and its legal, political and human consequences (*Justifying War*, 2003; *Guantanamo*, 2004; *Called to Account*, 2007; *Tactical Questioning*, 2011). Committed to disclosing hidden information and provoking public debate, these works belong to a particular strain of political verbatim that responds to, and seeks to redress, a “perceived democratic deficit in the wider political culture”.<sup>5</sup> Yet as *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington remarks, insofar as they offer “the bracing stimulus of fact”,<sup>6</sup> the tribunal plays are at their best when they also “fulfil[...] the conditions of art”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Will Hammond and Dan Steward (eds.), *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (London: Oberon, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Derek Paget, “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 3.12 (1987): 317-336.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Paget, “New Documentarism on Stage: Documentary Theatre in New Times,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 56.2 (2008): 129-141, 138. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> David Hare, “Why fabulate?,” *Guardian* (2 February 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Chris Megson, “‘This is All Theatre’: Iraq Centre Stage,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15.3 (2005): 369-371, 370.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Billington, “V is for Verbatim Theatre,” *Guardian* (8 May 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Billington, “Introduction,” in *The Tricycle: Collected Tribunal Plays, 1994-2012* (London: Oberon, 2014): 1-3, 2.

In this article, we offer an interdisciplinary inquiry into contemporary verbatim theatre as a site of interplay between law, art and politics. The tribunal plays at the Tricycle lend themselves especially well to such treatment, as not only do they place contentious matters within a legal frame, but they are also “inherently jurisprudential”<sup>8</sup> in aspiration and design. Thus it comes as no surprise that a number of scholars – including Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson,<sup>9</sup> Ian Ward,<sup>10</sup> Aoife Monks,<sup>11</sup> Sara Soncini<sup>12</sup> and Benedict Alexander Feldman<sup>13</sup> – have already explored ways in which certain of the plays touch upon, reflect and express issues of law and justice. Extending this body of work, we take as our focus a more recent example of tribunal theatre that stands outside the Tricycle repertoire, but which follows in the same tradition – the 2016 play *Chilcot*. Compiled by Kent’s long-time collaborator at the Tricycle, Richard Norton-Taylor, together with Matt Woodhead, *Chilcot* stages excerpts from the public inquiry into the UK’s role in the invasion of Iraq, alongside additional testimony from individuals afflicted by the war and its fallout. Proceeding from a distinctly law-and-humanities perspective, our interest here is to explore the play as a site of legal and political critique, and to ask how the specific theatrical and narrative affordances of the verbatim form shape its critical substance. This we pursue in three main steps. First, we consider the play’s deliberate foregrounding of questions of culpability and victimhood and, in particular, how the dramatic composition evokes alternative forms of judgment and justice to those administered by formal law and politics. Second, we turn to the ontological status of documentary material and probe the play’s openness to a more reflexive mode of critique that unsettles stable notions of law, truth and justice. Third, and in closing, we briefly reflect on the particular promise of verbatim theatre as a practice of democratizing law and politics, and on a number of potentially limiting factors that may constrain its democratic credentials. Throughout, we connect and build upon recent work in law, literature, theatre studies and documentary theory to propose new ways of thinking about the ethics and aesthetics of political verbatim, and its significance as a space for inquiry on matters of law and justice within the public sphere.

## II. The Chilcot Report: “A Litany of Failings”

To begin, a few preliminary words on the Chilcot inquiry itself. Established in 2009 by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and named for its chair Sir John Chilcot, the inquiry was tasked with investigating the decision-making processes in the run up to the 2003 invasion, and Britain’s role during the subsequent war and occupation. Between November 2009 and February 2011, the committee took more than 130 sessions of oral evidence, interviewed over 150 witnesses, and considered in excess of 150,000 government documents. When eventually published on 6 July 2016, the final report ran to 2.6 million words, split across twelve separate volumes.

The findings of the inquiry are well-documented and need not be rehearsed in any depth here.<sup>14</sup> Suffice it to say with Philippe Sands that the report details a “litany of failings”<sup>15</sup> on the part of the UK government. The decision to join the invasion was taken, Chilcot finds, “before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted”.<sup>16</sup> Judgments on the threat posed by Iraq’s weapons of mass

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Ward, “The Play of Terror,” in *Law and Art: Justice, Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. by Oren Ben-Dor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011): 177-187, 178. As Ward puts it: “[P]resenting before its audience a series of verbatim statements made by significant actors in real-life experiences”, the theatre “becomes, more patently than ever, a courtroom; just as the audience becomes a jury.”

<sup>9</sup> Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson, “Performing Injustice: Human Rights and Verbatim Theatre,” *Law and Humanities* 2.2 (2008): 191-211.

<sup>10</sup> Ward, “The Play of Terror.”

<sup>11</sup> Aoife Monks, “‘This Painful Chapter’: Performing the Law in *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23.3 (2013): 345-356.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Soncini, “War in Words: The Tricycle Theatre’s Re-Voicing of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry,” *Polémos* 9.2 (2015): 393-409.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Alexander Feldman, “The Theatre of Culpability: Reading the Tricycle’s Tribunal Plays through the Trial of Adolf Eichmann,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (2018): 1-22.

<sup>14</sup> The full report is available at

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20171123122743/http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-report/>. All subsequent references to the report are from this source.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Sands, “A Grand and Disastrous Deceit,” *London Review of Books* (28 July 2016): 9-11, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Statement by Sir John Chilcot, 6 July 2016.

destruction were “presented with a certainty that was not justified”.<sup>17</sup> Military operations were underprepared, troops under-equipped, and planning efforts for after the fall of Hussein “wholly inadequate”<sup>18</sup> – this despite warning of the potential consequences for the region. In its wider scope, meanwhile, the report details not only the government’s elaborate manoeuvres of political ‘spin’, but also a flagrant disregard of constitutional principles.

The vital issue of the lawfulness of the intervention in Iraq did not fall within the remit of the inquiry. With no lawyer among its members – and despite seeking submissions from legal experts on the merits of the government’s argument for war – the panel did not articulate any direct view on legality, deferring this to a “properly constituted and internationally recognized international court”.<sup>19</sup> It did, however, make findings with distinct legal implications, particularly with regards to the process by which the government arrived at the decision to support military action. Chapter five of the report, itself some 70,000 words in length, gives a painstakingly full account of how Lord Goldsmith, the Attorney General, eventually came to declare, in March 2003, that he was satisfied that an invasion would be legal – this despite telling Tony Blair in January of the same year that lawful war required a further Security Council resolution.<sup>20</sup> Chilcot also offers a deeply critical exposition of Blair’s conduct in sidestepping normal cabinet procedure to obtain a legal justification for war, identifying a series of decisive moments at which wider, substantive discussion ought to have occurred. Thus it is that the report ultimately hands down the restrained yet damning verdict that the circumstances in which it was decided that there was a legal basis for military action were “far from satisfactory”.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Theatres of Culpability and Victimhood

It is from this archival frame that Norton-Taylor and Woodhead extract the main body of the script for *Chilcot*. In the preface to the published text, the editors state openly their aim to “offer[...] audiences the opportunity to assess the key evidence for themselves, in some 20,000 words”.<sup>22</sup> The “key evidence” selected comprises testimony from twelve prominent witnesses to the inquiry.<sup>23</sup> These scenes are interrupted at various junctures by excerpts from interviews conducted with eight individuals whose lives were each, in distinct ways, irrevocably shaped by the effects of the war.<sup>24</sup> The inclusion of this additional material – from actors outside the inquiry – disrupts the strict realism conventionally associated with tribunal theatre, introducing a second level of verbatim content. This editorial technique generates, moreover, a distinct narrative – and political – aesthetic structured on the opposition and relation between the proceedings of the inquiry and the personal testimony of the interviewees.

To first take the two parts separately. The tribunal testimony adheres closely to the dramaturgical conventions of the Tricycle plays. The script is composed entirely from recorded proceedings and comprises a compressed précis of the inquiry. *Mise-en-scène* and acting styles are hyper-realistic, and

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<sup>17</sup> Statement by Sir John Chilcot, 6 July 2016.

<sup>18</sup> The Report on the Iraq Inquiry, Executive Summary, paras. 814 and 898.

<sup>19</sup> See Sands, “A Grand and Disastrous Deceit,” 10.

<sup>20</sup> The primary legal justification for the war was predicated on the argument that, since Iraq was in material breach of existing Security Council resolutions (Security Council Resolution 1441 (2002)), the authorization of the use of force provided by Resolution 687 could be ‘revived’ (see Chilcot Report, vol. 6, para. 690 ff.). The inquiry found, however, that in going to war without the backing of a second resolution and majority support, the government undermined the authority of the Security Council. It also held that, on the legal view finally adopted, the war would only then have been lawful if Iraq had committed “further material breaches as specified in Resolution 1441”.

<sup>21</sup> The Report on the Iraq Inquiry, Executive Summary, para. 432.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor and Matt Woodhead, *Chilcot* (London: Oberon, 2016), ix. Further references in the text, abbreviated as C, followed by page number.

<sup>23</sup> These are (in order of appearance): Sir Mark Allen, head of MI6 counter terrorism operation; Sir Michael Wood, chief legal adviser at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Lord Goldsmith, Attorney General; Hans Blix, chief UN weapons inspector in Iraq; Admiral Michael Boyce, chief of defence staff; Geoff Hoon, defence secretary; Jack Straw, foreign secretary; Tony Blair, prime minister; Alastair Campbell, minister’s director of communications and strategy; Clare Short, international development secretary; Unidentified MI6 witness; Eliza Manningham-Buller, head of MI5.

<sup>24</sup> The cast of characters lists these as: Oliver, a civil servant; Nick and Simon, UK veterans; Peter Brierley and Rose Gentle, military families; Sheikh Marwan Al Dulaimi, head of the revolutionary council; Ali, an Iraqi civilian living in Basra; Nadia, an Iraqi civilian living in Baghdad.

the entire production is stringently anti-theatrical – like the plays at the Tricycle, the tribunal component of *Chilcot* takes the form of a “forensic simulation of the inquiry’s disputations and settings”.<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that these scenes lack drama. On the contrary, the body of official testimony contains startling moments of disclosure that expose the dimensions of governmental incompetence and irresponsibility. Among these we might count Sir Michael Wood’s revelation that his legal counsel – that the UK could not lawfully use force against Iraq – was rejected by foreign secretary Jack Straw (himself a qualified lawyer) on the grounds that international law is “pretty vague” (C, 7),<sup>26</sup> and defence secretary Geoff Hoon’s admission that no representative in the cabinet was responsible for aftermath planning (C, 31). In its combined effect over the course of the play, the tribunal testimony presents a compelling distillation of the report’s findings, offering up to scrutiny not just the inadequate legal argument for war, but also the intimate workings of the machinery of government and the exercise of political power. The critical tenor of this retelling is sharpened by the inclusion of dissenting voices, notably those of international development secretary Clare Short, who bluntly dismisses the case for war and denounces Blair for withholding information from the cabinet (C, 55-59), and Eliza Manningham-Buller, the head of MI5, who recalls her advice, thought to have been fed to the prime minister via the Joint Intelligence Committee, that the conflict in Iraq would “substantially” aggravate the terrorist threat to the UK (C, 66). The verbatim nature of the testimony, meanwhile, sets the opportunity for audiences to scrutinize the language of power and to cut through – in Hare’s candid phrase – the levels of political “bullshit”.<sup>27</sup> In all this, *Chilcot* follows what Feldman identifies as the orthodoxy of the Tricycle’s tribunal dramas, fixing attention squarely on issues of culpability and complicity.<sup>28</sup> Here as there, the perspective afforded by the performance generates a heightened sense of those responsible for injustice being held to account, both in person and in public. Compensating for what the editors consider a potential lack of official visibility,<sup>29</sup> the play aspires to raise consciousness and facilitate engagement in ways not possible in more formal arenas. By making those involved accountable to some measure of public judgment, the theatrical re-staging of the inquiry is, moreover, cast as a gesture of redress that supplements official processes of law and justice.

Where *Chilcot* diverges from the orthodoxies of the Tricycle’s “theatre of culpability”, however, is in not making the tribunal testimony the sole locus of redress. What sets the play apart from the earlier Kent and Norton-Taylor collaborations is the decision to include transcribed interview material from beyond the official documentary text. Aside from raising formalist concerns (to which we will return later), this innovation is also vital to the play’s immediate political and ethical content. In Feldman’s terms, the testimonies of the interviewees push towards a focus on victimhood rather than culpability – this in keeping with a current trend in documentary theatre to accentuate the (auto)biographical perspective of the witness.<sup>30</sup> Collectively, these narratives furnish evidence of a range of experiences – of loss, trauma, guilt and suffering – that particularize the effects of government policies and practices on those at the forefront of the conflict. Much of this evidence is striking and poignant. Two British army veterans admit the open secret of American torture techniques and confess their shame at having been complicit in the destruction of civilian lives (C, 23-25). A high-placed civil servant recalls first reading the dossier detailing Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction and thinking it “an unutterable pile of dribble” (C, 14). Bereaved parents express their grief and disclose the crude equipment failings that caused the deaths of their sons (C, 35-38). Iraqi civilians recount the harrowing ordeal of kidnap, abuse and bombardment (C, 1, 45-46, 68-69). These are, Norton-Taylor and

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<sup>25</sup> Chris Megson, “Half the Picture: ‘A Certain Frisson’ at the Tricycle Theatre,” in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre, Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 195-208, 195. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Pressed on whether he agrees with Straw’s further claim that international law is an “uncertain field”, Wood delivers the following – sobering – rejoinder: “It is rather a general statement. Where I would strongly disagree is where he says ‘because there is no court to decide these matters’. He is somehow implying that one can therefore be more flexible and that, I think, is probably the opposite of the case. I think, because there is no court, those taking decisions have to be all the more scrupulous in adhering to the law.” (C, 7-8)

<sup>27</sup> David Hare, *Obedience, Struggle & Revolt* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 207.

<sup>28</sup> Feldman, “The Theatre of Culpability,” 3.

<sup>29</sup> In their introduction, Norton-Taylor and Woodhead write: “At the time of going to press (May 2016), Sir John Chilcot announced his inquiry’s report will finally be published on 6 July. [...] But there is a danger that this valuable evidence will be lost, smothered and eclipsed by the consequences of the EU referendum vote on 23 June and by spin from all sides.” (C, viii-ix)

<sup>30</sup> See Feldman, “The Theatre of Culpability,” 3.

Woodhead declare in their preface, voices that “needed to be heard” (C, viii): the retrieval of such additional testimony serves the aim – common to much verbatim and documentary theatre – of platforming the voices of those marginalized in and by official discourse.<sup>31</sup> Charged with “first order experience”,<sup>32</sup> these personal narratives assert a kind of authenticity distinct from that of the tribunal record. This we might loosely term the *authenticity of subjectivity*, of the first-hand account of lived events. Such accounts flesh out – both figuratively and literally – the harms wrought by UK policy decisions. They work, moreover, to implicate the viewer in a particular act of witnessing that effectively constitutes a call for responsibility and response.

#### IV. Empathy, Critique and Judgment

This premise – that narrative or subjective ‘truth’ carries particular ethical weight – underwrites much of the critical scholarship on literatures of testimony and witnessing, particularly in the context of human rights abuses and injustices. As Julie Stone Peters observes, it also recalls the leading claim of a strain of law-and-literature work – especially prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, though still with its advocates today – that foregrounds the value of narrative and ‘storytelling’ as a moral supplement to law.<sup>33</sup> Studies in this vein seek to recover (in a manner obviously relevant to contemporary verbatim dramatic practice) narratives of victimization elided from what are seen as the conventional stories told by law. The shared outlook is a broad agreement that narrative’s commitments to particularity and difference might leaven the hard abstractedness of law and promote an attitude of greater responsibility towards the victims of injustice. For some, this translates into an abiding, if critically questionable, faith in the morally curative power of narrative – *qua* narrative – to humanize and complete the law.<sup>34</sup> Our interest here, however, focuses in more limited fashion on the particular kinds of engagement the personal testimonies in *Chilcot* generate and their potential relevance to constituting and/or critiquing ideas of law, rights and justice. Most immediately, these narratives invite the spectator to enter imaginatively and affectively into the lived realities of suffering. The direct relaying of actual human situations and their meanings to those affected in the context of their lives reads as an exercise in the cultivation of “narrative imagination” (Martha Nussbaum)<sup>35</sup> or “imagined empathy” (Lynn Hunt).<sup>36</sup> As we aim to show, however, the specific manner of their presentation and framing encourages a response more akin to that suggested by Jill Bennett’s concept of “empathic vision” – one that conjoins affective and critical operations, and which includes a move towards intellectual reflection.<sup>37</sup> In a second, distinct yet related, vein, the personal testimonies also exert a further critical edge by bringing to light a set of counter-perspectives that challenge otherwise hegemonic legal and political discourse.

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<sup>31</sup> Hare describes verbatim theatre as an ideal medium “to give a voice to the voiceless”. David Hare, “Guide to Reality,” *Guardian* (30 April 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Derek Paget, “The ‘Broken Tradition’ of Documentary Theatre and its Continued Powers of Endurance,” in *Get Rea*: 224-238, 236.

<sup>33</sup> See Julie Stone Peters, “‘Literature’, the ‘Rights of Man’, and Narratives of Atrocity: Historical Backgrounds to the Culture of Testimony,” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (New York: Routledge, 2012): 19-39, 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> See here Desmond Manderson’s critique of what he terms the ‘romantic fallacy’ in law and literature studies. Desmond Manderson, *Kangaroo Courts and the Rule of Law: The Legacy of Modernism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 17-20.

<sup>35</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 30. There is, of course, a substantial body of critical literature that takes issue with the way in which scholars including Nussbaum and Hunt frame the concept of empathy in its relations to questions of law, rights and justice. See for instance Samuel Moyn’s review of Hunt’s book, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” *The Nation* (29 March 2007), in which, drawing on Hannah Arendt’s argument in *On Revolution*, he takes the author to task for uncritically valorizing empathy as a humanizing process. See further Mark Antaki, “Genre, Critique, and Human Rights,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 82.4 (2013): 974-996.

<sup>37</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Bennett draws on Deleuze’s concept of the “encountered sign” as an affective impression that compels the observer to “look”, “interpret”, and “think”. See Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: PUF, 1970), 24-25.

In her reading of the play, Marion Coste contends that the inclusion of the additional testimony effects a displacement of official discourse from the center to the margins of the political discussion.<sup>38</sup> Our view is slightly different, in that we consider the personal narratives not to supplant but rather to interact with the high politics of the tribunal material, and that it is, precisely, in the relations and tensions between the two levels of verbatim content that the play's particular critical thrust takes shape. Coste is surely correct to suggest that the dramatic composition owes to Brechtian techniques of montage and collage. Yet if the typical experience of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is to be drawn into a character's emotions and then pushed back to a critical distance,<sup>39</sup> here the effect is essentially reversed: where the main body of tribunal testimony evokes a kind of forensic sobriety, the personal interviews intrude punctually to jolt consciousness towards empathic identification. This may at first blush appear distinctly *anti-Brechtian*, given the explicit disavowal of empathy in his early dramaturgical writings. As is now widely acknowledged, however, that which Brecht rejects is a particular brand of empathy that stimulates thoughtless immersion and identification, while he later arrives at a more sophisticated position that admits a role for empathy in eliciting a specific class of emotions ("the sense of justice, the urge to freedom, and righteous anger")<sup>40</sup> that might stir an audience to critical reflection. Significant for our interests is that Brecht asserts here the importance of the interplay between empathy and detachment, how they each define and qualify the other, and how, in so doing, they might enable spectators to 'think feelings' and 'feel thoughtfully'.<sup>41</sup>

Whether knowingly or otherwise, *Chilcot* effectively revives this position through its structural configuration, which overtly juxtaposes empathy and distance, yet also engages them in a dialectic. In conveying the private anguish of those afflicted, the personal testimonies invite an initial affective response to the act of witnessing. Their episodic arrangement within the overarching economy of the play, however, mitigates against a mere passive empathy that stymies critical reflection. Rather the positioning of the testimonies in relation to the tribunal material calls for recognition of a causal connection between private suffering and public policy, which in turn animates a 'sense of justice' and 'righteous anger' that acts as a spur to further critical political thought. To make a similar point from the opposite direction: the addition of the personal material – in exposing the human consequences of governmental failures – charges the political critique with a deeper emotional resonance, encouraging the development of a critical attitude that may, in line with Brecht's theorizing, be passionately felt.

An exemplary instance of this is provided by the combined testimony of Rose Gentle and Peter Brierley, who each lost a son during the conflict. Situated almost directly at the mid-point of the play, the scene is heartrending, as both parents speak with rawness and candor about their loss. Each recounts the moment they learned of their son's passing, Rose recording her inability to register the news, Peter his numbness (C, 35). Both detail the specific equipment failures responsible for the respective deaths: Rose's son, Gordon, lost his life because protective armor was never fitted to his Land Rover; Peter's son, Shaun, because a metal plate was affixed to the wrong headlight of his vehicle (C, 36-37). They each speak of their anger at the "lies" (C, 37) told by Tony Blair, and make explicit reference to the Chilcot inquiry – Rose expressing her skepticism that it will provide answers, Peter his need for it to uncover the truth of what happened (C, 37). Independently, the two testimonies exert a powerful emotional pull. This is, however, accentuated by their specific arrangement *vis-à-vis* the tribunal evidence. In the scene immediately preceding, the audience witnesses the committee question Geoff Hoon over the lack of sufficient equipment supplied to troops on the ground; in the one that follows, it observes Blair's attempts to vindicate the decision for military action. This sequencing permits, even

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<sup>38</sup> Marion Coste, "'Let's do our thing': Theatre as a Democratic Forum Opposing the Institutionalized Political Discourse on the War in Iraq," *Études britanniques contemporaines* [online] 56 (2019). Published on 21 March 2019. Last accessed on 8 November 2019. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/6490>.

<sup>39</sup> On this point, see the useful summary provided by Oscar G. Brockett and Robert J. Ball: "Brecht's concept of alienation is often misinterpreted as a demand that spectators be continuously distanced from the events. In actuality, Brecht engages the audience empathetically and then, through some device (such as a song), creates the distance needed to evaluate what has been experienced during the empathetic moments. Thus there is a continuing alternation of empathy and distance." Oscar G. Brockett and Robert J. Ball, "Modernism and its Effect: 1885-1960", in *The Essential Theatre* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014): 161-195, 180.

<sup>40</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 227.

<sup>41</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, ed. and trans. by John Willet (London: Methuen, 1965), 67.

urges, the viewer to measure the devastating effects of governmental decision-making, and of a war launched with questionable moral and legal justification, on individual human lives. None of this is especially subtle, and we do not mean to ascribe to the play any great depth of Brechtian sophistication. Rather the point is to recognize how, through its adoption of a consistent hybrid form, the play achieves the effect not just of fostering new emotional and intellectual understanding of the lived experience of (unjust) war, but of also cultivating a mode of judgment that combines critical and affective commitments to justice.

## V. Process, Redress and Justice

Beyond this concern with illuminating and contrasting personal experiences and political arguments, the play's hybrid dramaturgy also suggests a further layer of interest that looks deeper to the institutional limitations of official procedures. Here we must be mindful that the Chilcot inquiry was not a statutory legal process.<sup>42</sup> We may, however, say with James Murphy that it took on "quasi-legal status", and that the language and forensics of proceedings placed them within a recognizable set of "legally-based, if not legally bound, activities".<sup>43</sup> Either way, what is essential in *Chilcot* is that the additional voices we encounter come from those who were not, *and could not be*, accommodated within the parameters of the official inquiry. Implicit in the body of personal testimony is thus a critical comment on the capacity of formal processes to provide justice for victims. As Coste astutely notes, the particular narrative arrangement establishes this as something of a structuring principle for the entire play. The first words we hear on stage are those of Nadia, an Iraqi civilian living in Baghdad, who recounts her thoughts upon witnessing the initial Allied air strikes from her garden: "As the bombing got closer and more intense, I felt my world crumbling down. It was like seeing death in front of me and just waiting for it to come. The siren sounded and I knew, yeah. That's war" (C, 1). This is followed by the opening excerpt from the inquiry, which begins with Sir John Chilcot reminding those in attendance that the session is being held in private due to the sensitive nature of the evidence, and a subsequent comment by the 'narrator' indicating that the first reply of the witness (Sir Mark Allen, Head of MI6) has been redacted. As Coste puts it, "[j]uxtaposing Nadia's poignant testimony with a censored one [...] highlights right from the start of the play the futility of the inquiry – the people directly affected by the war will not get any answers".<sup>44</sup> This sense of futility echoes in the final words of the script, also spoken by Nadia: "Chilcot? No, I haven't heard of Chilcot" (C, 69). By bookending the play in this way, Norton-Taylor and Woodhead pose a nagging question about the ability of the Iraq inquiry to make the relevant findings and deliver justice. In a broader sense, the inclusion of external voices "*that needed to be heard*" would seem to point to the internal limitations of the public inquiry as a means of achieving effective redress for victims.

Yet inasmuch as the play invokes the shortcomings of formal legal frameworks, this does not extend to a dismissal of law as a mechanism for addressing injustice. Like a majority of the Tricycle's tribunal dramas, *Chilcot* remains invested in the potential of the (quasi-)judicial hearing to achieve accountability and expose governmental errors or abuses. By introducing the additional testimony of victims, the text goes further than the earlier Kent and Norton-Taylor collaborations in asserting the limitations of official procedures. To construe this as a call for change to the design of the inquiry, however, would be to misread the play's positioning as an aesthetic *supplement* – as an attempt to mobilize an alternative 'jurisdiction of the stage'<sup>45</sup> that does not obtain in any strict legal or political

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<sup>42</sup> In a statement to the press on 30 July 2009, Sir John Chilcot announced: "As I have said before, we are not a court or an inquest or a statutory inquiry; and our processes will reflect that difference. No one is on trial. We cannot determine guilt or innocence. Only a court can do that. But I make a commitment here that once we get to our final report, we will not shy away from making criticisms where they are warranted".

<sup>43</sup> James Murphy, *The Discursive Construction of Blame: The Language of Public Inquiries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 4.

<sup>44</sup> Coste, "'Let's do our thing'."

<sup>45</sup> The phrase 'jurisdiction of the stage' ["Gerichtbarkeit der Bühne"] comes from Schiller: "The jurisdiction of the stage begins where the realm of secular law ends. If justice be blinded by gold and delight in the service of vice, if the crimes of the powerful mock its weakness, and human fear stays the arm of the authorities, then the stage takes up sword and scales and drags these vices before a fearsome tribune". Friedrich Schiller, "Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken? [1784]," in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert (Munich: Hanser, 1980), vol. 5, 822-823. Translation SH.

sense, but which is effective precisely because of its freedom from the restrictions of official law and politics. This allows the editors to address two epistemic gaps in the inquiry: first, by disseminating findings more widely as a matter of public accountability; and second, by providing a space that, unconstrained by narrow formal considerations, leaves room for the articulation of experiences other than those privileged in official legal settings. Tacit in the appeal to this alternative jurisdiction is the expectation that admitting the voices of the marginalized, and allowing these to be heard publicly, might not only thicken understandings of situations of injustice, but also serve as an effective restraint on future abuses of law and political authority. Thus what appears to be ultimately at stake in the play's artistic (re-)staging of public and private testimony is a claim to a more complete, extra-judicial version of justice that attends to culpability and calls into account the voice of power, but which also opens up to the subjective experience of suffering and victimhood.

## VI. Theatrical Narration and the Documentary Real

So far, we have dwelled on the play's substantive preoccupations and the kinds of intellectual and emotional engagement it strives to facilitate with audiences. Now we turn to a second vital crux for any reading of verbatim drama – namely, the question of the epistemological and ontological status of documentary. For the critical and affective power of verbatim theatre depends in large part on the tacit documentary pact that the material presented on stage will be 'objective' and 'truthful'. As Stephen Bottoms points out, the heft of this pact is strengthened beyond that traditionally associated with the genre of documentary by the use of the term 'verbatim', which "fetishise[s] the notion that we are getting things 'word-for-word'", straight from the mouth of those "involved".<sup>46</sup> Practitioners of the form have not shied from evoking this claim: Kent, for instance, remarks that the "strength of verbatim theatre is that it is absolutely truthful, it's exactly what someone said",<sup>47</sup> while Robin Soans asserts that audiences attend verbatim productions "with the understanding that they're not being lied to".<sup>48</sup> The resurgence of documentary and verbatim drama in Britain since the mid-1990s has, indeed, been attributed to a revived yearning for facts and authenticity as a corrective to not just political spin and disinformation, but also a perceived shallowness in contemporary media reporting.<sup>49</sup> Here we might again quote Kent, who considers verbatim theatre not 'art' but rather a "journalistic response to what is happening",<sup>50</sup> or Norton-Taylor, who has spoken similarly of his own work as an "extension of journalism".<sup>51</sup> Such assertions are indicative of a wider trend among contemporary theatre-makers to privilege verbatim drama as a form of reportage that promises to expose hidden truths and reveal the 'real'.

What threatens to get lost amid these claims is the dual status of the verbatim work as both 'document' and 'play'. Put differently, we might say that the clamor to authorize verbatim theatre as a vehicle to truth runs the risk of eliding the tension that is intrinsic to the genre between its invocation of authenticity and the inevitable narrativity of its aesthetic. The verbatim practitioner does not merely exhibit raw material, but rather shapes this artistically and critically via selective activity. Carol Martin addresses the point succinctly when she writes:

Most contemporary documentary theatre makes the claim that everything presented is part of the archive. But equally important is the fact that not everything in the archive is part of the documentary. This begs the critical question: what is the basis for the selection, order, and manner of presentation of materials from the archive? The process of selection, editing, organisation and presentation is where the creative work of documentary theatre gets done.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen J. Bottoms, "Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50.3 (2006): 56–68, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Nicolas Kent in *Verbatim Verbatim*, 153.

<sup>48</sup> Robin Soans in *Verbatim Verbatim*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Megson, for instance, speaks of verbatim's capacity to "retrieve a sense of the complexity of issues that have been too easily turned into digestible headlines." Megson, "This is all Theatre," 371.

<sup>50</sup> Nicolas Kent in *Verbatim Verbatim*, 152.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor in *Verbatim Verbatim*, 125.

<sup>52</sup> Carol Martin, "Bodies of Evidence," in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. by Carol Martin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 17-26, 18.



Martin here draws attention to both the constructed nature of the documentary play and the creative agency behind it. This invites two vital questions. A first concerns the extent to which the process of selection and editing is in the service of art rather than objective truth. For to be successful as a stage production, verbatim theatre requires – much like conventional play texts – an effective dramatic shape and rhythm. Not just this but it is also, as Susanne Knittel points out, “only when they are brought into some sort of aesthetic form” that documentary materials can “point beyond themselves”<sup>53</sup> – the act of artistic creation is, in other words, essential to the political and critical effect of the work. The second issue is that of the power of the verbatim dramatist to decide which statements are to be included, which are to be excluded, and how the selections will be ordered and presented. This filtering of the archival material has obvious political implications in allowing for particular shadings and accents. In the case of *Chilcot*, it is hard to miss how the attitude of the editors, expressed so candidly in the preface, functions as a crucial shaping force. The very act of distilling the 2.6 million words of the report into the 20,000 of the play text demands narrative selection and ordering, and there is an unmistakable slant to the body of evidence excerpted from the tribunal record. This leaning is reinforced by both the empathic bias of the personal testimonies and the particular arrangement of this material within the dramaturgical structure of the piece. Thus what the play produces is not an objective account but rather a distinct theatrical narrative that knowingly guides the audience towards a particular perspective that is critical of the UK government and sympathetic to the plight of those who suffered the consequences of war. To a substantial degree this is only to be expected of a work that sits within verbatim’s “broken tradition of activism”<sup>54</sup> and has a clear political point to make in bearing witness to injustice.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, it does invite charges similar to those leveled at one of the earlier Tricycle plays that the form and mode of presentation lend it a “surface sheen of objectivity”, which “feels a bit disingenuous”.<sup>56</sup> At the very least, there is an obvious need for audiences to be alert to the editors’ political motivations, and to attend the claim to objectivity with suitable caution and critical discretion.

Behind this, there lies a deeper anxiety concerning the ontologies of documentary representation. The positioning of verbatim drama as a purveyor of truth and reality seems, inexorably, to clash with the principles of poststructuralism and postdramatic theatre. If there is no absolute real but only multiple performed realities, and if, as Hans-Thies Lehmann holds, contemporary theatre can only be political by reflecting on its own performative strategies, what space does this leave for any dramatic mode predicated on an exceptional sense of factual legitimacy? Liz Tomlin identifies this as the central paradox of contemporary verbatim performance – that it is “required to rely on the real for its political authority, whilst simultaneously remaining suspicious of the very notion of the real as dictated by the poststructuralist scepticism of this particular historical moment”.<sup>57</sup> In response, verbatim practitioners increasingly mobilize self-reflexive techniques that reveal the constructed nature of the performance and thus challenge the categories of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ – while at the same time still gesturing towards the authentic documentary source. With *Chilcot*, we have scant sense of any deliberate attempt to navigate this balancing act. Like the tribunal productions at the Tricycle, the play eschews postmodern and postdramatic inflections, invoking instead an aesthetics of truthfulness that validates the reliability of its dramatic representation. Yet irrespective of editorial design, there are elements of the dramaturgical composition that offer a glimpse of the play’s own processes of construction. One is, precisely, the strict mimesis of the re-enactment of the inquiry. For the meticulousness with which the play recreates the original (quasi-)legal setting within the artistic space of the theatre invites the reflexively mindful spectator to a view of the staged nature of the production as a *performance*.<sup>58</sup> This,

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<sup>53</sup> Susanne Knittel, “Memory and Repetition: Reenactment as an Affirmative Critical Practice,” *New German Critique* 46.2 (2019): 171-195, 184.

<sup>54</sup> Paget, “The ‘Broken Tradition’ of Documentary Theatre,” 226.

<sup>55</sup> The politics of the play align in this sense with John Durham Peter’s claim that “to witness means to be on the right side”. John Durham Peters, “Witnessing,” *Media, Culture & Society* 23.6 (2001): 707-723, 714.

<sup>56</sup> Karen Fricker, “Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry,” *Variety* (18 September 2005).

<sup>57</sup> Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses of the Real in Performance Practice and Theory 1990-2010* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 115.

<sup>58</sup> Writing about *Bloody Sunday*, Patrick Lonergan comments: “[T]he aesthetic at work here is that there are no aesthetics – the production’s creators do all they can to maintain the illusion that we’re not in a theatre. This is of course highly theatrical”. Patrick Lonergan, “Speaking Out: The Tricycle Theatre’s Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry”, *Irish Theatre Magazine* (2005), 30.

in turn, licenses a meta-theatrical reflection on the re-enactment as a *performance of a performance* – as Monks shrewdly observes in her reading of one of the earlier Tricycle productions, the aesthetic commitment to realism ultimately makes visible here the performative character of the inquiry itself.<sup>59</sup> A second, much more obvious, feature is the decision to include the additional testimony of the interviewees, which points up the authored quality of the play as an assemblage from various recorded sources. Together, these two elements present space for critical reflection on both the principles that found conventional understandings of documentary truth and reality, and the epistemological instabilities of the verbatim form.

Viewed from this angle, *Chilcot* thus opens to the kind of formal analysis of the generic limitations of verbatim that has recently dominated the scholarship. As both Tomlin and Jenn Stephenson observe, such preoccupations tend to eclipse substantive issues raised by the source material – in Stephenson’s words, formalist meditations run the risk of “displac[ing] the documents entirely and themselves becom[ing] the main story”.<sup>60</sup> Yet without privileging form over content, we might consider how the two work together here to unfold a second possible ground of politics that emerges, to speak with Lehmann, in *modo obliquo*, from an oblique angle. A first step to grasping this may be to follow the lead of contemporary theorists who focus not on the indexical relation between documentary and reality, but rather on the ‘documentary real’ constituted by the “making, distributing and viewing of a documentary, as well as the reflective and self-referential reality emerging from the imaginary of a documentary and its variable reception”.<sup>61</sup> The extent to which audiences approach documentary material with expectations of learning the ‘truth’ about sensitive political matters and/or an awareness of its mediated form is difficult to ascertain, and a point upon which scholarly opinion remains divided. Either way, the shift towards the ‘documentary real’ opens up the possibility for alternative modes of audience response that are variously rooted in acceptance of the play’s own claim to truth and an appreciation of the aesthetic complexities that put this into question.

It is in this latter, more reflexive register that the play evinces a second political dynamic – namely, that which Tony Fisher terms a “critical politics of the visible”.<sup>62</sup> This chimes with Lehmann’s concept of a “Politik der Wahrnehmung” [politics of perception] that irritates conventional modes of seeing and encourages an actively critical stance towards the events depicted on stage. Following Alan Read, Fisher identifies the critical locus of this politics in the act of “making visible something otherwise obscure in [the] perceptual field”.<sup>63</sup> In *Chilcot*, this manifests most apparently via the inclusion of marginalized voices – a decision that raises fundamental questions regarding representational choices and their ethical implications. On a deeper level, meanwhile, the play gestures, however implicitly, towards the constructed nature of *all* representation, and so accommodates an ethos of affirmative critique that challenges epistemological and ideological authority, and acknowledges the spectator’s own complicity in the very act of representation.<sup>64</sup> Through its specific grammar of performance, moreover, the piece admits an extension of such critical perspectives beyond notions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ to the particular claims of law and justice. On the one hand, the implicit citation of the inquiry’s performative character underlines how its inquisitorial procedures produce not a definitive version of

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<sup>59</sup> Monks, “‘This Painful Chapter’,” 353-354. On the performative ‘dispositives’ of courts and tribunals see Cornelia Vismann, *Medien der Rechtsprechung* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> Jenn Stephenson, *Insecurity: Perils and Products of Theatres of the Real* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 92.

<sup>61</sup> Frederik Le Roy and Robrecht Vanderbeeken, “The Documentary Real: Thinking Documentary Aesthetics,” *Foundations of Science* 28.2 (2018): 197-205, 201.

<sup>62</sup> Tony Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the Agon,” in *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance and Radical Democracy*, ed. by Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 1-24, 17.

<sup>63</sup> Fisher, “Performance and the Tragic Politics of the Agon,” 17; citing Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 187.

<sup>64</sup> We use the term “affirmative critique” in the sense suggested by Knittel: “If negative critique entails judgment or evaluation of an object and grants a position of aloof superiority to the critique, affirmative critique, by contrast, entails an openness and a willingness to engage with the object on its own terms. This is not the same as taking it at face value or naively assenting to its premises and demands; it is rather a form of critical questioning that also puts the subject into question”. Susanne C. Knittel, “The Ethics of Discomfort: Critical Perpetrator Studies and/as Education after Auschwitz,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

'true' events, but rather a plurality of overlapping and competing narrative representations. On the other, the introduction of the additional witnesses reframes the testimonial act as a site of conflict, and so fosters a sense that the play's own vision of justice is similarly characterized by the disputed re/presentation of narratives. Thus inasmuch as the intended agency of the play appears firmly grounded in the editors' own distinct political and moral convictions, a second – admittedly much more oblique – response to emerge from its 'documentary real' may be a critically reflective view of law and justice not as settled concepts, but rather embattled spaces of (narrative) contestation.

## VII. Verbatim and Democracy

In lieu of a full conclusion, we would like to finish with a few short reflections relating the above to claims for verbatim's particular democratic credentials. The principal focus here must be – in the first instance, at least – the play's primary mode of address as a deliberate political intervention. As Michael Chanan submits of documentary film, so we might say of documentary theatre that it is a form with "politics [...] in its genes".<sup>65</sup> Just as the documentary camera invariably points at spaces "controlled and shaped by power and authority",<sup>66</sup> so much documentary theatre casts its gaze in the same direction, urging attention to fundamental issues of justice, politics and violence. This means, moreover, that documentary productions address themselves to the spectator in a particular manner – "as citizen, as a member of the social collective, as putative participant in the public sphere".<sup>67</sup> The contemporary wave of verbatim plays in Britain attests to such civic aspirations, as playwrights and directors have sought to revitalize the political function of theatre as a forum for participatory democracy. In the preface to *Chilcot*, Norton-Taylor and Woodhead assert precisely this role for verbatim theatre as a means of "contribut[ing] to the democratic process" (C, vii). Through its overt political commitments – giving voice to victims, spotlighting injustice, speaking truth to power – the play performs meaningful democratic work. The same holds for the manifest ambition to contribute to public discourse and foster discussion on issues of collective significance. Thinking this in relation to matters of specific legal or legal-political import invites a connection to William MacNeil's advocacy of a 'popular jurisprudence' that can and should "play a signal part, *indeed a profoundly democratising role*, in the ongoing battles over the 'politics of law' and the law in politics", and which "holds out the prospect of effecting social change by soliciting broad comment and input into the juridico-political issues of the day".<sup>68</sup> Clearly, *Chilcot* is not 'popular' in the same sense as the bestsellers and Hollywood blockbusters that MacNeil considers in his study. By the standards of contemporary theatre, the play may have been – like the Tricycle productions – widely viewed, but the numbers pale when compared to those accessed by other media forms.<sup>69</sup> There is, moreover, an obvious difference in the nature of its political involvements – where MacNeil observes in 'mass' cultural texts the potential to elicit discussion on questions of law, rights and justice, *Chilcot* constitutes a much more deliberate attempt to enter the fray of public debate via recourse to the field of factual reference. These caveats notwithstanding, the concept of 'popular jurisprudence' provides a useful model for perceiving how the play creates and occupies a proxy public space in which contentious issues of law and politics can be raised and negotiated. Considered in this perspective, we can justly recognize in the play – and in the verbatim form more broadly – a potential not merely to close a democratic deficit in political culture, but also to effect a positive democratization of law. In its reflexive mode, meanwhile, the play nourishes an alternative impulse to critically question and refuse ideological responses, which might similarly inform – albeit in a quite distinct manner and register – its own project of democratic civics.

With this said, we should nonetheless be careful to avoid too uncritical a celebration of verbatim's democratic promise. Thus in closing we wish to note briefly four considerations that might limit, or at least trouble, such claims. There is no space here to discuss these in detail, and so we simply leave them as points for further reflection. A first concerns the ethics of representation and whether, in presenting personal narratives on stage, theatre-makers speak *with* or *for* the marginalized 'other'? For however

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 16.

<sup>66</sup> Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> William MacNeil, *Lex Populi: The Jurisprudence of Popular Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 157. Emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> Though it is interesting to note here Kent's claim that the tribunal plays drew in "an awful lot of lawyers" and "a lot of opinion formers". Kent in *Verbatim Verbatim*, 150.

genuine and laudable the attempt to mark 'absent presences', there persists the risk that, by interceding on behalf of 'voiceless' victims, theatre practitioners may deny individual agency and reproduce dominant strategies of representation. A second has to do with the restricted resonance of political verbatim in the current cultural and political context. In part, this fits the point already made regarding theatre's narrow reach compared to other, more 'popular' media. Yet it also speaks to the particular capacity of contemporary verbatim theatre to create and sustain a space of interest, debate and attendance. For despite their formal innovations, a majority of the plays within this tradition are fairly conventional in terms of spectatorial and public engagement – certainly when set against other, often more deliberately provocative, productions that do more to move debate from the aesthetic realm of the theatre into the wider public sphere via intermedial performances or the use of digital technologies.<sup>70</sup> Thus political verbatim is perhaps prone to remain, in Duncan Kennedy's phrase, a "cul-de-sac off the Infobahn",<sup>71</sup> with only limited public impact. This leads on to a third issue, which is the self-description and self-identification of contemporary verbatim as a progressive genre. Martin addresses one aspect of this when she remarks on how, insofar as documentary theatre can "make a generative and critical intervention in people's prejudices and the limitations of public understanding", it may equally "oversimplify, inflame prejudices, and support one-sided perspectives".<sup>72</sup> Given how contemporary political verbatim theatre communicates with the public, we might go further, however, to ask whether its critique does not amount to a kind of preaching to the converted, tending to reaffirm prevailing values and outlooks, precisely in the critical mode. In the case of *Chilcot*, for instance, it is difficult to imagine that many of those who attended a performance were not already critically disposed towards UK foreign policy. Perhaps this means only that hopes for the practical effectiveness of these plays rest with their ability to amplify issues rather than to change minds on a large scale. Be this as it may, it would still seem to demand a deeper, critical meditation on the politics of the form. Lastly, and still related, we might return to notions of spectatorship and participation, with an eye both to the manner in which many of these works cajole audiences into accepting a particular narrative stance as the 'truth', and how they uphold the conventional distinction between spectator and performance – and thus fall short of proposals such as those of Rancière for a more radical democratization of theatre conditions. None of this, we hasten to add, is to deny political verbatim its democratic qualities. Nor is it our purpose to set out any kind of comprehensive foundation for a critical appraisal of such. Rather, we mean only, via a few fleeting observations, to remind that this particular brand of theatre represents a rewarding but imperfect response to urgent concerns, and thus demands continuous critical and analytical attention. Such an approach may even allow us to more fully appreciate the democratic potential of these plays, providing a standpoint from which we might read them not just for the democratic work they perform in the legal and political realm, but also as a testing ground for the very workings of democracy – as a space in which to critically reflect on the structures, processes and institutions of political representation and participation.

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<sup>70</sup> For a range of views on intermedial artistic and theatrical practices within contemporary public spheres, see Katia Arfara, Aneta Mancewicz and Ralf Remshardt (eds.), *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). On theatre specifically, see Christoph Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>71</sup> Duncan Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 154.

<sup>72</sup> Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 120.

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