

What Happens Now?

**An exploration of isolation and loss in theatre during the
coronavirus pandemic**

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Date of Resubmission for examination: 1st February 2023

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Abstract

This thesis is a Practice as Research Masters in Theatre Studies; the work in this paper follows the process undertaken, which led to the creation of a play for stage, entitled *What Happens Now?* During the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, I decided to research theatre which had gained my interest during the period of national lockdown, and in turn developed a new piece of theatre which spoke of experiences during this time. In doing this I am to consider whether theatre created during the pandemic can encapsulate the feeling of isolation and loss that many felt during this time.

In this thesis, I explore theatre which sparked my interest during the pandemic, considering how they reflect isolation and loss, often by means of a solo performance, such as *Death of England: Delroy* (2020) and *Three Kings* (2020). Research is, then, developed by comparing qualitative content collated by means of an ethically approved survey and one-to-one interviews, with experiences of others in the arts industry, during the pandemic. I, then, investigate the form of verbatim theatre, considering the possibilities, and limitations, it could offer me in my own verbatim writing, through exploration of verbatim plays such as *London Road* (2015) and *Blackwatch* (2010). This then leads me to the final chapter where I use the previous chapters findings to build the playscript *What Happens Now* and the creation of the play for a first scratch performance.

Introduction

Art and Culture offers us a unique way to understand ourselves and the world we live in. It opens our eyes to difference, widens our perspectives on ideas of society and community and inspires new thinking on how we can change ourselves and the world around us. There is a freedom gifted by arts practice to transport ourselves into different lives and to shrug off ingrained social constructs, for a while at least.¹

On 23rd March 2020, the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the first of a series of “lockdowns” which would restrict the lives of the entire UK population and change the face of the arts industry in the UK. Theatres closed their doors, rehearsals ceased, and schools and universities had to adapt to remote learning.

As a result of these testing times, theatre and culture were forced to adapt to the circumstances, which it found itself up against. The most obvious adaptation in theatre was the spotlight on monologue performances, to fall in line with the limitations brought about by social distancing, but also a shift in content which shows what seems to be an exaggerated isolation and distrust for the world that we are living in, as well as an over-arching feeling of loss from the focal characters, for loved ones or moments missed. Some of these changes were already happening, but the pandemic increased visibility, especially due to the widespread use of home screenings, bringing writing to the masses, and not simply those able to afford a seat at the National Theatre in London.

This research brings to question whether theatre created in such significant moments can encapsulate the feelings of many in that time. It examines this event, and the loss and isolation it caused, with a specific focus on the arts industry, creating a lasting investigation and creative exploration that highlights the

¹ Svich, C, (2021) Interview with Jason Crouch, *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic*, Methuen Drama, London. Ebook - <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6766644> , p. 117.

importance of theatre throughout a time of crisis, with a particular focus on the 2020-2021 government enforced lockdowns. The project gives insight into the changing landscape of theatre and includes a creative element which draws on people's experiences throughout the crisis (attained through an ethically approved survey and interview process). I hope this can be a lasting piece of theatre, which acknowledges the challenges faced by individuals and companies alike.

Throughout this paper, I will refer to terms created during or as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Terms such as: *lockdown* – meaning the closure of all non-essential businesses in the UK, and a government order to stay at home, only making essential trips for food, supplies and exercise; *bubble* – a group exempt from the social distancing and mixing rules throughout the government lockdown. I also refer to *Zoom interviews* – *Zoom* is the platform used by the University of Essex for all video conferencing calls, during virtual learning and socialising, but also a key form of communication used during the pandemic by the public, to allow friends and family to 'see' each other when they were not able to be with each other.

For clarity within my research, I will outline the definitions of the terms isolation and loss which are largely focused on in this paper. As outlined in the Cambridge Dictionary, the term isolation can be defined as “the condition of being alone, especially when this makes you feel unhappy”, and also “the fact that something is separate and not connected to other things.”² In a philosophical viewpoint isolation, which is often intrinsically linked to loneliness, can be viewed as such that “it is the inevitable consequence of a self-awareness that arises prior to and thus independently of intersubjective development.”³ During the coronavirus pandemic, isolation became a key term and method used to

² Definition Cambridge Online Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/isolation> (Accessed: 22/8/22).

³ Lazare Mijuskovic, B , (2015) *Feeling Lonesome: The Philosophy and Psychology of Loneliness*, Praeger, p. 203.

reduce the spread of the virus, with those who had tested positive, or come into contact with a positive case having to “isolate” in their homes for 14 days.⁴ For this paper, although conversations may refer to the term isolation in relation to the government guidelines, largely isolation will be explored in relation to the individual's feelings and not connected to other things and people.

The term loss can be defined as, “the fact you no longer have something or have less of something”.⁵ This can relate to things, but also to people. Jan Zwicky comments on loss being the ultimate philosophical problem because, “The more precious a thing is, the greater becomes the power to hurt us by simply being absent.”⁶ Historically, the definition has remained the same over time, and it is the definition given above which will be underpinned in my research.

This project includes the following chapters that are organised according to the questions I will address in this dissertation:

- 1) How did the exploration of selected works, during the pandemic, influence the creation of the playscript, *What Happens Now* and how did these pieces establish models for my own practice?
- 2) How can the process of interviewing those working in the arts industries reflect the themes of isolation and loss? What do their experiences say about isolation and loss as related to the state of theatre during and post-pandemic at a micro-level?
- 3) What are the limitations of verbatim theatre, and how can verbatim theatre be used as a tool to present current situations in particular loss and isolation in relation to the coronavirus pandemic?

⁴ Information from NHS Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-and-treatment/when-to-self-isolate-and-what-to-do/> (Accessed: 22/08/22).

⁵ Definition from Cambridge Online Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/loss> (Accessed: 22/08/22).

⁶ Zwicky, J, (1992) *Lyric Philosophy*, University of Toronto Press, p. 164.

- 4) How has the research from the previous chapters informed the creative and informative process of the playscript, *What Happens Now?*

Throughout history, theatre has been used as means to voice the experiences of those that have lived through a crisis; one example being the theatre which came to existence following the two world wars. Following the circumstances of living through the Nazi regime, playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett reflected a scepticism and disillusionment in their dramaturgy, for the world they lived in (Beckett's, *Waiting for Godot* (1949) and Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1939) are just two of many that seem to reflect this). Brecht suggests that:

In times of upheaval, fearful and fruitful, the evenings of the doomed classes coincide with the dawns of those that are rising. It is in these twilight periods that Minerva's owl sets out on her flights.⁷

This allows us to consider (as similarities can be drawn from this statement, in the dramatic changes enforced upon daily lives, and the fear the virus created) that although individuals and theatres in the UK have faced some of the darkest times during the pandemic, there is, for most, a light at the end of the tunnel. Chris Goode writes in *The Forest and The Field: Changing Theatre in a Changing World* (2015) that:

[...] Theatre cannot always be the same; that it changes not, or not solely, through the efforts of innovating artists or in response to the pressure of audiences' shifting tastes and the current fashion, but in response (and by contradistinction) to its social, cultural and political environment.⁸

This highlights how theatre is a changeable construct, which adapts and moulds to the world it exists in. Ultimately, in times of crisis it allows a sharing of knowledge and understanding and offers alternative viewpoints. In the case of this dissertation and creative work the viewpoint presented will be of those

⁷ Brecht, B, trans John Willet, (1964) *Brecht on Theatre*, Methuen Drama, London, p. 277.

⁸ Goode, C, (2015) *The Forest and the Field: Changing Theatre in a Changing World*, Oberon Books Ltd, London, p.35.

working in the theatre industry, whose lives were altered by the pandemic; bringing into the spotlight the isolation and loss they felt because of the shutdown of the theatre industry. It is important to highlight that this dissertation focuses on work created for the theatre, and live performance, not work created for the digital space, which was largely the main form of theatre many theatre practitioners resorted to during the different lockdowns in the UK and globally. Barbara Fuchs explores this in *Theater of Lockdown* (2021) and although this work may be considered in the same canon, I only became aware of this new publication in later stages of my dissertation writing, and therefore it does not feature in my chapters and ideas.

This is not the first time that theatre has experienced upheaval; an article in *The Stage* looked at the current crisis, and compared to others, stating that:

It is clear from the present prohibition that theatres are seen as high risk when it comes to the spread of infection. Much like current prime minister Boris Johnson initially leaving the decision to close to the theatre managements last month, during the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1919, in which 50 million people died worldwide, there was no mass closure order instituted for theatres.⁹

The notion that theatres seemed to have a “show must go on” culture during the Spanish influenza outbreak, reflected the resilience of the population who had lived through the turmoil of the First World War. Although over a century later, the support given to the industry during the coronavirus pandemic was limited, and although mass closure was eventually introduced on the 16th March 2020, theatres had to deal with cancellations and loss of income from the first confirmed case in the UK on 28th February 2020.¹⁰

⁹ Clark N, Smurthwaite N, (2020), From pandemics to puritans: when theatres shut down through history and how it recovered, *The Stage*, 1st April 2020: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/long-reads/from-pandemics-to-puritans-when-theatre-shut-down-through-history-and-how-it-recovered> (Accessed: 15/1/21).

¹⁰ Internet Resource: <https://solt.co.uk/about-london-theatre/press-office/one-year-on-uk-theatres-mark-a-year-of-covid-shutdown/> (Accessed: 15/06/22).

During the pandemic of 2020, despite the forced closures of the building themselves, many theatres did not simply shut down. This is a poignant element to explore, although it is not central to my research. Because of advanced communications technologies, the use of video calling, emailing, live streams - theatre continued to be prominent. In 2020, The National Theatre, became a hub of education and enjoyment during the first national lockdown, enabling the entire population to stream productions for free each week, such as Danny Boyle's *Frankenstein* (2019). Following the easing of restrictions there are also plays such as Roy William's *Death of England* (2020) and Stephen Beresford's *Three Kings* (2020) which were performed during the height of the pandemic in the later part of 2020 but ultimately seem to reflect changes in theatre - their monologue forms, the thoughts that are revealed and the isolation and loss they experience in their life, a central theme throughout.

Although theatres did endeavour to continue during this time, the sense of community which comes from visiting the theatre was largely lost in the long months of closure. I use this as a starting point to explore the themes of isolation and loss, and how this manifests itself into a theatre performance post-pandemic. This is then examined in the creative element of my research, in a verbatim style piece entitled *What Happens Now?* The piece draws on experiences from those working in the arts industry in the UK who had to 'stay home' during the first lockdown, showing how they experienced isolation and loss in several ways; from loss of freedom, work, options, or opportunities and isolation from the things which they felt secured their identity; work, friends, family and hobbies. In an interview with Caridad Svich, Michael Garces says, "The pandemic is one that everyone in the world has experienced collectively, yet each of us is having such a highly individual experience. There is a dissonance between the self and the existential threat we share in common."¹¹ Referring to the third research question of this project - What

¹¹ Svich, C, Interview with Michael Garces, p. 22.

are the limitations of verbatim theatre, and how can verbatim theatre be used as a tool to present current situations in particular loss and isolation as related to the coronavirus pandemic? - It is this dissonance between the collective and the individual that affects the effectiveness of verbatim theatre. So, the question to be asked is how verbatim theatre can overcome such dissonance, I.e., how can verbatim theatre present the voice of the collective while also voicing a highly individual experience, such as that experienced during the coronavirus pandemic?

The focus on isolation in the interviews, as elaborated in these chapters and the creative element of this project, comes partly from the terms coined during the pandemic, such as ‘self-isolation’ when symptoms of coronavirus were detected.¹² However, it was also of interest due to it being a stark contrast of the community and togetherness that is required as part of theatre. Martin Esslin, who researched and analysed theatre which emerged following the Second World War (giving it the term *The Theatre of the Absurd*) suggests that theatre at this time showed communication between humans in breakdown, which reflected what they were faced with in society. He claims that, “It is merely a satirical magnification of the existing state of affairs.”¹³ In post Second World War theatre communication breakdown can be identified; yet due to the nature of the coronavirus pandemic, and perhaps our now unlimited means of communicating with those around us, it is isolation that dominates in the emerging theatre, and the interview content that I collected. In direct comparison, this could be seen to show a satirical magnification of the current situation in our society – how many have felt isolated by the society, working environments and government rule. In placing the theme of isolation at the forefront of my research, I can highlight the trauma experienced by those that have lost part or all their income due to being deemed non-essential, and those that were expected to adapt to working from home, while juggling

¹² Term *Self-isolation* comes from government advice: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-and-treatment/if-youre-told-to-self-isolate-by-nhs-test-and-trace-or-the-covid-19-app/> (Accessed: 14/05/22).

¹³ Esslin M, (1961) *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Third Edition, Methuen Drama, London, p. 409.

home-schooling and other lockdown-enforced changes to their lives – all while reflecting the state of the society in which they are living. And, although the final creative work focuses purely on those working in the arts industry, the stories shared will have universality, making it an important time capsule piece.

In this research I have assessed the individual experiences by means of a voluntary survey, which was ethically approved by the University of Essex Ethics Committee. Following this I created a verbatim piece of theatre which reflects the array of experiences that I come across; this involves conversations taken from interview transcripts, and small excerpts of news stories to contextualise some moments within the piece. The verbatim piece explores five individuals and their experiences during the pandemic and has my own experiences and conversations (also taken from the transcripts) interjected to create a sixth character, and thus turning it into a partly ethnographic piece of theatre. I believe there is originality in what I have explored and hope that it will prove a useful tool for study and for understanding the changes in theatre which will evolve following the coronavirus crisis.

My observations and findings from the survey element of my work are largely limited to the eastern region of the UK. The survey was shared within my reachable contacts (during the height of the pandemic); on my own social media platforms, to a few local secondary school teachers (from The Colne Community School, Clacton County High School and the Harwich High school), with whom I had contact due to my professional role as a teacher, and then with some academics who had a large following on Linked In, local theatre staff (for example from the Mercury Theatre and The New Wolsey Theatre), and some people within charity sectors (such as Northeast Essex Mind Charity and Clacton Amateur Dramatic Society). There are limitations to my reach, largely due to the restrictions I had on my movement and ability to network, amidst the ongoing pandemic, and perhaps a fatigue felt by many from being online so much due to the ‘work from home’ order. I collected a total of 89 responses between 1st

March 2021 – 30th August 2021. Out of these responses, 59 were female, 17 were male and 13 did not specify. Out of the responses 63% lived in the east of England.

Due to the changes forced on the daily lives of the entire UK population, but also specifically on the arts industry, there is a broad area of change which simply could not be covered in my two-year time frame. As a result of this I have chosen to focus largely on the content which has emerged because of the pandemic (and the content on the creative output reflects this also). Although my research focuses on content over form, theatre form was altered in these times, due to an increase in live screenings and video performances. The project therefore cannot be entirely removed from the form, and is addressed at times and recognised in the commentary and the final creative writing, *What Happens Now?*

The full questions included in the survey can be seen in Appendix A, although I have included some below. The consent required, as part of the ethical approval process, to use the data from the surveys and make further contact with the participants for interview, can be seen in Appendix B. Survey question examples:

Q1) Describe your relationship/family circumstances (who you live with, ages etc.), and how lock down affected these dynamics. For example, were there any noticeable strains on relationships, or improvements due to increased time at home?

Q2) Describe your home, and the experience you had during lock down within your four walls (for example what your daily routine looked like)

Q3) a) What were your working circumstances during lock down? b) How did the lockdown affect your work? c) Does it continue to affect your work?

Q4) Health: What impact did lockdown have on your physical, emotional and mental health?

Q5) What kept you going throughout lockdown?

I felt these questions were broad enough to encapsulate people's experiences in the lockdowns and would enable me to find more detailed accounts through the quality and openness of their responses. I also used

some participant screening questions to allow me to have a mixture of ages and genders in my follow up video interviews. Details of these screening questions can be found in Appendix C.

Although the focus of the survey was not about theatre, with questions intending to encourage people to discuss their relationships and daily lives during the lockdowns, I found that those who had a background in theatre were able to write openly about their experiences, giving more fuel for my creative writing. I collected a manageable number of responses, to explore while I was undertaking both my studies and job as a teacher during the pandemic.

An Overview of Chapters

In the first chapter, I develop a picture of theatre which has emerged and caught my creative interest during the pandemic. I look at how this reflects the themes of isolation and loss. I have been aware of the current theatre developments since March 2020, looking at theatre which has emerged from performances made available online from theatre archives, to live screenings of performances, to new writings and discussions around the canon of theatre during the pandemic; an example of this being Caridad Svich's *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic* (2021) which I look at in detail in my reflection of the outcome of my interview process, in Chapter 2. The exploration of these pieces in my critical commentary will show how they have informed my creative work; works include Dael Orlandersmith's *Until the Flood* (2016) which was made available online in response to the Black Lives Matter movement which begun amidst the pandemic in August 2020, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2013) which gained immense popularity in 2020 following a screen adaptation on the BBC, and the previously mentioned *Three Kings* (2020) and *Death of England* (2020).

After addressing theatre which sparked my creative interest in relation to isolation and loss during the pandemic I, then, move on to an exploration of the interviews which were carried out as part of my ethically approved survey in Chapter 2. In this chapter I explore points of interest within the interviews and use the recent previously mentioned *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic* (2021) to contextualise the responses, highlighting how although these experiences are unique, they are a shared experience. This chapter is a thematic analysis of my qualitative data, focusing on the dominant themes of isolation of loss in the conversations I had.¹⁴ This element of my research was essential in my understanding of the power of the interview content I gathered. It encouraged me to see how the interviewees, and in turn the characters in my play, were able to encapsulate feelings of isolation and loss, which many had felt during the pandemic. Their stories showed a universality of experience, which could be felt when an audience came together and were able to reflect on their own circumstances in the pandemic.

As the interview content reflected a universal viewpoint, despite being on a micro-level, the decision was made to explore verbatim theatre as a form, to bring their voices to the spotlight. Therefore, in my third chapter, I consider the opportunities verbatim theatre creates, and yet also the limitations it presents. The form of taking individual accounts and presenting them to an audience – thus showing their isolation in a communal space, is a powerful tool, only possible in live theatre. Catherine Love speaks of verbatim in an online article (2018), stating that the increasing popularity of verbatim theatre, “might be interpreted as indicating a desire among audiences for reality and authenticity.” Audiences are keen to have real life accounts presented to them to allow them to have a greater understanding of circumstances often far removed from their own. In contrast to this suggestion that they are real life accounts however,

¹⁴ Braun, V & Clarke, V (2006) *Using thematic analysis in psychology, Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2, 77-101, DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Love goes on to suggest that, “verbatim has also shifted understandings of reality and fiction on stage. Far from simply staging the truth, it poses difficult questions about what truth really is and whether theatre can ever faithfully present reality”¹⁵ I explore the concept of whether the verbatim style is indeed staging the truth – therefore raising the following questions: are the viewpoints of the individuals represented in the plays wholly authentic? Is the presentation of these accounts on stage too far removed from reality to present the real voices I have encapsulated in the creative work? Does the representation of isolation on stage remove them from the idea of being isolated, or having lost parts of their normal lives, due to the communal nature of performance?

My particular focus in this chapter, and as a key development of my writing, are the works and writings of Alecky Blythe; her insights in *Verbatim Verbatim* (2008) and her play *London Road* (2015) and more recently *Our Generation* (2022), as well as further explorative texts such as *Practicing Oral Histories – Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories* (2021) and *Telling the Truth: How to make Verbatim Theatre* (2018). To address the limitations verbatim theatre can present, I have also looked at Clare Bayley’s semi-verbatim play *The Container* (2007) and her reflections on why she avoids using verbatim. The combination of these elements in the third chapter, presents how genuine responses can make for powerful and thought-provoking theatre. It is largely from this element of my research that I was able to fuel the development of my creative work, following the distribution of the survey which gathered experiences of those that lived in lockdown restrictions.

By comparing my findings of theatre in the current crisis, and looking at verbatim theatre in this way, I believe this research will allow valuable insights into the changes faced in this time. Being such a current

¹⁵ Love, Catherine, (2018) *A Concise Introduction to Verbatim Theatre*, Digital Theatre +, Royal Holloway University of London, University of Essex Online Library, (Accessed: 11/07/22).

issue, new writing, research and reflection are emerging all the time. Theatre is still affected by the pandemic and will be for the foreseeable future (even though restrictions are now lifted, there is likely to be limits in funding/projects for the following years because of a loss on income between 2020-2022).

In the fourth and final chapter of this project, I present the journey I undertook to create the playscript *What Happens Now?* This leads to the performance of the play at the Lakeside Theatre, University of Essex on Friday 4th February 2022, and includes reflection following this. I used my research in the previous chapters to inform my understanding of theatre developments in 2020 onwards, reflected on the interview content obtained, and explored the limitations of verbatim theatre to prepare for writing the playscript *What Happens Now*. The fourth chapter explores how I developed this collection of ideas into a piece of verbatim theatre, using my findings throughout my research to create a performance which addresses the pandemic, taking content largely from the survey, which was distributed in February 2021, during the 3rd national lockdown in the UK, and the video interview transcripts which followed. Although using words verbatim from surveys and research, I felt it necessary to include my own experience, thus creating a semi-verbatim and partly ethnographic piece. From completion of this performance, I have reflected on my creation, using audience feedback to consider how the play reflects the world that has emerged because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Chapter 1

How did the exploration of selected works, during the pandemic, influence the creation of the playscript, *What Happens Now* and how did these pieces establish models for my own practice?

In this chapter, I will explore a selection of plays which spoke to me as a theatre maker, during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, and suggest how they influenced my creative writing in the early stages. The most notable pieces which I explore are Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' *Death of England* (2020), Steven Beresford's *Three Kings* (2020), Phoebe Waller-Bridges' *Flea Bag* (2013) and Dael Orlandersmith's *Until the Flood* (2019). Although these productions were not about the pandemic itself, and in most cases (with the exception of *Three Kings*) were written prior to the start of the pandemic, each was discovered by myself during the lockdown. *Death of England* and *Three Kings* were screened online during theatre closures, for a limited time, *Until the Flood* was made available online, and *Fleabag* had become popular due to an increased number of people watching the TV adaptation during the enforcement of lockdown in the UK. The plays discussed in this chapter are a selection of pieces which sparked my creative interest during the period of isolation, because they seemed to encapsulate the isolation I was feeling during the lockdowns, and in turn fed ideas to my creative work.

For the context of this chapter, I will now outline the beginnings of my research, and how the project began, in the later stages of what has become known as *lockdown 1* around March 2020. The entire first year of my research was spent under restrictions enforced by the UK government, in response to the pandemic, therefore I found myself often only able to speak in person to my work colleagues, my immediate family and my childcare 'bubble'.¹⁶ Any other contact with friends and extended family was

¹⁶ Bubble definition in relation to government guidance in 2020-2021. Site: www.gov.uk/guidance/making-a-support-bubble-with-another-household (Accessed: 25/02/22).

made via various forms of social media; such as Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook. This meant that my contacts beyond people I already knew were limited, and often points of view or experiences that I came across were edited and filtered for the social platforms. One example of this being photos of craft activities with young children and newly created ‘home school areas’ that parents I knew had created to allow their children to create work during the school closures. Although this was something they were doing to benefit their child, the reality of the use of this was not clear, but ultimately made myself feel pressured to do something similar. The article *The Effects of Social Media on the Dynamics of Identity*, uses D Chabert’s ideas, and suggests that:

...based on the clues seen on the screen, interlocutors create a representation of their environment. That is to say, they create an imagined space based on clues (linguistic, visual or auditory) that users provide. Which explains, in particular during phone calls with video, the staging of backgrounds or hiding certain details in an attempt to bring the representation of the self in line and up to date with the aims of the exchange (Chabert, 2012).¹⁷

In a time where video-calling became the main form of social interaction, many can immediately resonate with the idea of ‘staging backgrounds’, choosing to place computers in locations that would be most suited to the situation; for example a book case behind you for a work call, or simply a clear space for a social situation, which gives the impression that one is entirely on top of house-work while spending the vast proportion of time at home – even though the most likely situation is that beyond the limitations of the video screen, mess has simply been pushed out of view. The sense that individuals create a ‘representation of their environment’ can be seen across socials such as Instagram and Facebook, and one does not have to look far to find an account which only reflects the perfect or positives in someone’s lives. Even myself, as a user of social media during lockdown, was posting snapshots of my day; activities created for my children, baking or crafting, and in reflection this was perhaps a way of trying

¹⁷ Online Journal Article: *The Effects of Social Media on the Dynamics of Identity: Discourse, Interaction and Digital Traces*. Link: <https://journals.openedition.org/alsic/3004#tocto1n4> (Accessed: 1/05/21).

to convince myself that I was managing in a highly worrying and stressful time. Upon reflection, I found myself realising that my experience was very different to the one which I was suggesting I was having on my social accounts; the house was by no means tidy, activities set up for the children lasted a small fraction of time, and they were often left to their own devices – I felt completely isolated. Thus, I began to question what others were experiencing too and I also turned to examples of theatre which reflected the isolation I was feeling.

The first play I will discuss as an example of theatre I turned to during lockdown, is Clint Dyer and Roy Williams' *Death of England* (2020); the play is part of a two-part series produced by the National Theatre prior to the pandemic, which also had an additional performance performed solely for a virtual audience amidst the height of the pandemic in late 2020, after *Delroy's* story was open for just one performance, following another announced lockdown. In this research I focus purely on this *Delroy's* story, having viewed the performance in early 2021 at a free home-screening. The piece is one example that seems to reflect the isolation felt; although conceived and written pre-lockdown, and despite the subject matter largely focusing on racism in the UK, the isolation, loss and separation, and human fragility is exposed to the audience, highlighted more so by the plastic screens surrounding the stage of the transformed Olivier Theatre when it was first performed. The play has an ambiguous setting, which was poignant in the current climate, opening as follows:

Front Room

Delroy stands laughing loudly with a Guinness in his hand. He is clearly drunk.

Delroy: It was as if things weren't bad enough.¹⁸

The 'front room' setting is vague but familiar, meaning from the opening moment it is relatable. The opening line comments on the state of current affairs, drawing attention to the notion that situations

¹⁸ Dyer, C & Williams R, (2020) *Death of England: Delroy*, Methuen Drama, London, [Kindle Paperwhite Version] Loc 18.

which may have seemed bad before were in fact magnified by the experience of lockdown. The news headlines were endlessly flooded with information regarding the coronavirus pandemic, however, as the play *Death of England: Delroy* emphasises, there was obviously much more going on in the world. As the play develops, there are many moments where the dialogue reflects the form of an internal monologue spoken aloud, jumping from thought to thought, reflecting confusion and frustration at the situation:

...Am I cursed? Was Zeus looking down at me from Mount Olympus, going, Oi, Apollo, Let's fuck with Delroy today, I'm bored! Cos it bloody felt like he was, but I don't know if he knew... Zeus that is, cos I bleeding well didn't know how I'd take to be in there. In a cell... Mate... as soon as they turned the lock... well, no actually it was when he walked away... I felt like, well, like I'd been hollowed out, like all the things that had been holding me together mentally just evaporated...¹⁹

The repeated use of ellipsis to reflect pauses in his speech when spoken aloud, suggests his brain is going too fast for him to be able to keep up. Although, at first the situation of being arrested brings him much frustration, the increased pauses as this section progresses, allowed the audience to see he is beginning to realise the impact of what is happening; overwhelmed by the isolation in the cell, and recognising he is going to miss the birth of his child as a result. This frustration is the essence of the play, reflecting built up anger in a time when life is so contained (this only magnified further by the screens placed around the performer as part of the social distancing, covid-secure guidelines in the live performance, which was recorded and made available to screen in homes around the world).²⁰ This play and its focus reflect the cultural landscape which has emerged in the coronavirus pandemic - one of frustration and desire to be heard in a time when much is silenced due to the magnitude of the health situation. I felt captured by *Delroy's* story, despite my life experiences being very different from his. This led me to the conclusion that no matter whose viewpoint I put across in my own writing, if I was

¹⁹ Dyer & Williams, Loc 293.

²⁰ Performance Screening Available for Free in Spring 2021. Available at <https://www.ntathome.com/products/death-of-england-delroy> (Accessed: 01/07/22).

able to create strong and powerful characters, the audience would too be captured by their experiences, no matter how different they were to the characters portrayed.

The casting of *Death of England* is simply one actor, alone on stage, for the whole performance. The stage is mostly bare, with objects used to suggest location, rather than lavish use of setting. He is troubled when considering recent events:

Delroy: If I can? This is my kid Carly is having, and her mum is bringing out, ‘If you can?’ What de rah?
Dat woman facety, man! I turn to Elvis, trying hard not to push his head through the windscreen out of embarrassment, and I tell him to ‘Drop me off at the nearest tube, QUICK’, I jump out, nearly getting run over in the process.²¹

The frequent use of rhetorical question, use of informal language and dialogue within dialogue, really accentuates his isolation, and ultimately the sense of loss he feels from being pushed out of his unborn daughter’s life. Although spoken aloud, this is his innermost thoughts, anxieties, and anger at his own situation. I felt that this reflected the cultural landscape being carved out as a result of the pandemic – of frustration from the isolation and loss felt by so many. Therefore, I felt that the inclusion of informal language, and interrupted speech, would be essential in highlighting the individual character’s sense of isolation/loss in my own writing.

Isolation and loss can also be seen in Steven Beresford's *Three Kings* (2020), which was first performed at The Old Vic, London in September 2020, and streamed across the UK (part of the *Old Vic: In Camera* series) This was a piece created in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, but this time not intended for live audience, but a recorded one – suggesting that due to the challenges faced, theatre is being propelled, at an unprecedented speed, into a different medium entirely. The play begins:

²¹ Dyer & Williams, Loc 205.

Patrick - when we see him - is probably shabby. A lifetime of bar-hopping might be suggested. First though we just see his hands – camera over the shoulder – and 3 pound coins, spread out at equal distances in a straight line on the surface. At some point the camera moves so that he can be fully visible.²²

Location again is ambiguous – he could be anyone, anywhere, taking an individual perspective, but giving it universality: a voice representing many voices. The beauty lies in the simplicity of the setting – the emphasis that it is in fact written to be staged not to an empty theatre, but with the empty theatre as the backdrop, highlights the isolation felt by the character himself, but also that sense of loneliness that many are feeling due to missing out on experiences such as going to the theatre and having that collective and community experience. What is significant within this, (as is also the case for *Death of England*), is that although it does not strictly mention the pandemic, there is a sense of exposure in this one-hander, which could have only been achieved in a period of complete isolation. In the second act Patrick speaks:

I see them everywhere – men who love their families. I have an antenna for it.
I seem them young – pushing swings and standing outside of schools. I see them old – in booths – in restaurants – at graduation ceremonies...
My father was not such a man, I think.
And neither am I.²³

This strikes as a deep reflection, on his own experience and vision of himself – one that can be understood more so, due to the increased periods of reflection allowed by the lockdowns of 2020. This dialogue is of one having conversations with himself, left alone with his thoughts – not necessarily talking to anyone, but muddling between thoughts, indicated by the repeated caesura; arriving at realisations on matters to do with self (a dialogue of which can be clearly compared with Delroy's in *Death of England*). To me, this encapsulates the state in which we, the general population, lived our lives for the best part of a year; a state of deep thought in our own loss and isolation, and a desire to escape our current situations. *Three Kings* reflects the personal battles fought by those that lived through the upheaval and disruption it

²² Beresford, S, (2020) *Three Kings*, (Kindle Paperwhite Edition), Nick Hern Books, London, Loc 49.

²³ Beresford, Loc 222.

caused, revealing the struggles of isolation and loss to audiences, and in turn allowing those audiences to realise that despite being alone in the lockdowns, they are not alone in how they are feeling; there are others that share their emotions, giving them a sense of togetherness, despite being apart. It was my hope that I do could capture this in my creative writing also.

In further study of theatre during the pandemic, I came across one of many free screenings put online by different theatres across the county - Dael Orlandersmith's *Until the Flood* (2019).²⁴ This one-hander explores a variety of perspectives, surrounding the murder of Michael Brown, taking moments of semi-verbatim speech, and interjecting it with images and audio recording taken from the event itself in 2014. Despite being filmed in 2016, and focusing on experiences surrounding shooting of Missouri citizen, Michael Brown, the Traverse Theatre's showing of this performance, was another nod towards the Black Lives Matter movement, following the death of George Floyd. The performance forced its audience to recognise that events such as the killing of George Floyd, have been happening for decades before that fateful day in Summer 2020, and the results of these tragic events have shaken endless lives. The only character within the play which speaks in more than one section, shows a state of self-questioning: "You know – and I hate saying this – I wonder about my faith / the foundation of my faith."²⁵ This openness is reflected throughout, but it is in these moments that one gets a sense of sincerity which can perhaps only be shown in a moment performed alone and isolated on stage. She continues in this final scene:

I think what values we teach our kids?
 What society have we created?
 I think our family values
 What kind of family did Darren Wilson come from?
 How was he raised?
 How was he made to feel about himself?
 Was he also afraid?²⁶

²⁴ Orlandersmith, D, (2019) *Until the Flood*, Oberon Modern Plays, London.

²⁵ Orlandersmith, p. 111.

²⁶ Orlandersmith, p. 114.

The repeated use of rhetorical questions within this section, force the audience to think themselves about the circumstances around the murder; again, if it was not just one character on stage, this would not be the case – the audience would perhaps remain purely as an onlooker. The isolation of the character enables a deeper reflection of the loss that is being spoken of, as it seems to have done in the previous plays discussed in the chapter, and ultimately helped me to confirm that my own writing would show the experiences of separate characters, rather than multiple characters in the same scene.

Phoebe Waller-Bridges' *Fleabag* (2013) is another example of how characters showing an existence which is isolated, makes for a situation which is reflective of many people's lockdown experiences. Originally a play written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* premiered as a TV program on BBC3 in 2016, gaining momentum during 2019 and into 2020. This is another story which shows the power of a single performer, which shows in a collective environment of a performance, the isolation Fleabag feels, being a newly single woman, and the misjudged choices she makes to avoid dealing with the loss of her best friend:

FLEABAG (*drunkenly*). Okay... I don't... yeah... uh... what? It's a... hm... okay fuck it. Okay.
 I have a horrible feeling I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, mannish-looking, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist.
 He looks at me.
 DAD. Well... you get all that from your mother.
 FLEABAG (*to DAD*). Good One.²⁷

Although this section appears as if in conversation with her father, in the original production at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, and later performances at the Soho Theatre in London that year, the other voices were voice-overs, meaning she was alone on stage during this moment. Being alone in the performance space, being in such a vulnerable drunken state, and revealing her worries about what she

²⁷ Waller-Bridge P, (2013) *Fleabag* Nick Hern Books, London, p. 21.

has become ('greedy, perverted, selfish' etc), lays bare her isolation to the audience, making it clear that she has very much buried the loss of her friend, rather than dealt with it. This vulnerability is then brushed off with the offhand line 'good one' inferring that she is continuing to avert herself to her genuine feelings. Although *Fleabag* has some moments of comedy and is undoubtedly enjoyable to watch, it magnifies the issues caused by poor mental health, because of isolation and loss in the present day. A report entitled *Covid-19 Understanding inequalities in mental health during the pandemic* (2020) from the Centre for Mental Health found that, "the unequal impact of the virus and the lockdown are putting greater pressure on groups and communities whose mental health was already poorer and more precarious before it hit the UK."²⁸ The isolation shown in theatre such as *Fleabag* reflect a generation that have seen a large variety of issues around mental health, and the popularity of the piece, from the stage version to the TV adaptation, making it clear that it is something which is relatable and necessary. Considering that the virus had such an unequal impact on certain groups and communities, this stark and exposing theatre is something that is even more integral to our culture following the pandemic, as the raw contact creates a talking point for those who may also be struggling with their own issues; it was my hope, in my own writing, that I would be able to create a starting point for conversations around people's experiences of the pandemic.

Ultimately, the play studied during this chapter really helped to shape my ideas for the structure of my own writing; plays which have been created or popularised during this time, such as *Death of England*, *Three Kings*, *Until the Flood* and *Fleabag* show the human experience when dealing with loss and isolation. It is in showing these individual experiences, in the communal form of theatre, that audiences can perhaps see glimpses of their own lives and experiences, and collectively understand how others'

²⁸ Weblink: <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/news/covid-19-could-widen-mental-health-inequalities-generation-says-centre-mental-health-report> (Accessed: 22/07/22).

lives can be so affected by their challenging circumstances. From the analysis of these plays, I was able to understand the importance of representing individual voices on stage, as it is in these moments of isolation, endured by these characters, that that an audience can become enraptured by the parallels of their experiences. Thus, I began to understand how my own creative writing would be able to encapsulate the feeling of isolation and loss that many had felt during the pandemic.

Chapter 2

How can the process of interviewing those working in the arts industries reflect the themes of isolation and loss? What do their experiences say about isolation and loss as related to the state of theatre during and post pandemic at a micro-level?

The following chapter will look at the interviews that I conducted as part of the research process into experiences of individuals during the coronavirus pandemic. In these interviews, conducted virtually between March-September 2021, the themes of isolation and a sense of loss were dominant throughout, however through each individual experience, I believe there is a collective narrative which speaks of togetherness, community and ultimately the need for the arts industry to better look after those working in the sector. In the previous chapter, there are strong voices with stories to tell in each of the plays I have explored, and in exploring the voices discovered in these interviews, and pulling them together to create a piece of verbatim theatre (explored specifically in the following chapter of this paper), I too will be able to create a story which will speak truths about the feelings of isolation and loss that many experienced during the coronavirus pandemic.

To develop my verbatim play script, I conducted interviews over Zoom video conferencing. I used this online platform, due to government restrictions being in place, preventing me from meeting with anyone out of my own household. I sent thirteen requests for further interviews based on responses, with eight agreeing to meet. In arranging these meetings, chosen from the responses which had the most depth or interest to me, I realised that many who had responded to the survey, and to my emails for further interviews, were in the arts industry, such as performers, technicians or in amateur theatre.

The collation and editing of these interviews were key to the creation of the playscript *What Happens Now* which encapsulates an alternative experience of the coronavirus pandemic, in the form of verbatim theatre. As Clare Summerskill explains in the Introduction to *Practicing Oral Histories: Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories* (2021):

The commercial success and general popularity of plays based on interviews has come about not only as a result of an ongoing interest by the public in the ‘real-life’ stories of individuals, but also because verbatim theatre has been seen as filling the gap of reporting in the mainstream media. These two matters are, of course, related, since personal narratives often reveal previously under-documented version of events. Over the last two decades, particularly in the UK, there has been a rising level of distrust from the general public towards media outlets [...] which were previously regarded as reliable sources of information.²⁹

Summerskill suggests that that is interest in hearing ‘real-life stories of individuals’, which is the reason behind the popularity of verbatim theatre; the interview transcripts that I gather will provide a snapshot into lives of those in the arts industry without household names – they are most certainly what Summerskill describes as ‘previously under-documented’. What I discovered in these interviews was just that; stories usually unheard of; those who work behind the scenes in the arts industry. They reveal the isolation and loss each person experienced during the pandemic and in some cases, reveal how it was devastating to their careers. Throughout this chapter, I will only refer to the interviewees as a collective, or by the character names that I adopted in the play itself to anonymise their identities.

There have been other such interviews which have taken place during the pandemic, notably a collection entitled *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic* (2021) by Caridad Svich, some of which I will be drawing on in this chapter as a parallel to experiences. In the introduction

²⁹ Summerskill, C, (2021) *Practicing Oral Histories – Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories*, Routledge, New York & London. E-book edition via University of Essex Library: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/reader.action?docID=6326241> , p. 20.

to this collection of interviews, Svich highlights that there is a “problematic nature [for] those in-and-against the system...” and acknowledges that, “The time capsule aspect of [the] book also exposes the fragility and mortality of theatre itself – the seemingly indestructible beast that has been part of cultures for centuries. Is theatre dying? Or better yet, is theatre always dying to be reborn?”³⁰ In this collection, the issues that those in the arts industry (not just in the UK in this case) face are forced into the limelight. And similarly, as in the results of my own interviews, the ‘fragility’ of theatre – with the many roles needed to keep theatre alive – is exposed and put into question.

The most central interview in my own work, was the contributor for the character ‘Richard.’ His openness and willingness to share his experiences was a turning point for the focus of my writing. What stood out in Richard’s interviews was the way that the pandemic had magnified other issues that he was facing – most notably, loss. He explained:

I wasn't supposed to be working from the first of February until possibly...
 A little bit in May and they wanted me to take all my annual leave, and everything to so they could have all my hours, when we were moving back into the theatre.
 Do a lot for a month and then I didn't do anything for two months, and then my mother died and I didn't do anything for three months and...
 And I was and... you get into a kind of a brain fog and I got depressed and then we buried my mum and then...
 I thought and I got really...
 Yeah I was very depressed in the summer.³¹

This highlights how the pandemic, and the complications that came with it, magnified the other issues he had in his life at this time. It was the enforced break that meant he was sedentary for some time, and this was then increased by the loss of his mother. It was this collection of events that caused him to

³⁰ Svich, C, Introduction, pp 3-4.

³¹ Interview Transcript with ‘Richard’, p. 12.

recognise that he was feeling depressed. A similar story is shared in *Towards a Future Theatre* (2021) by Stephanie Ybarra, a theatre maker who was interviewed by Svich:

My anxiety and depression have escalated and pressure to perform – to show up as a ‘leader’ - is almost too much to carry sometimes. All of this compounded by the grief of losing my father last October – that heartache has dulled a bit but is still with me constantly. The more I read about how we humans respond to crisis, the more I understand just how normal my struggles are. The more surprising challenge is that my creative energy is completely depleted.³²

It is clear in the parallels of these stories, that the pandemic increased the sense of loss felt in this time for these individuals and likely many others, when rules were that the population had to either stay apart or be socially distant. The mention of loss of ‘creative energy’ and ability to sustain focus in Ybarra’s comment also shares parallels later in the interview when ‘Richard’ speaks about a period when the theatre he worked at was unable to open, and contractors had been working in the space, rather than creatives. After describing an argument with his manager, he went on to say:

R: he was saying, [Richard] this isn't you you're not like this, this isn't you what's, what's behind all this? What is behind all this? And I don't know but I guess it's the fact that you know, since November we've not been allowed to have annual leave and, you know it's been unpleasant working condition. And it's not thought about.

RW: You work in a theatre because of their kind of excitement of a theatre at the end of the day, with the you know the journeys of productions from kind of the beginnings to kind of final show and all at the company in between working in construction sites are very different job isn't it.

R: yeah and, and we've, we've made the theatre. A working place for everybody else.³³

In ‘Richard’s’ experience, he has worked in a creative environment in which for a substantial time, did not have the creative element which he was used to. In my conversation with him (indicated by RW) I refer to the journey and excitement that theatre entails, and the loss of this is impacting upon his mental

³² Svich C, Interview with Stephanie Ybarra, p. 60.

³³ Interview Transcript with ‘Richard’, pp 18-19.

health. The content created in conversation with ‘Richard’ reflects loss and isolation in many different elements of his life; these experiences in turn show that the state of theatre during the pandemic put immense pressure on those working in the industry, due to the massive changes that the closure of theatres created, and although this interview shows the effect on theatre at a micro-level, the parallel between this and the interviews conducted by Svich, make it clear that these characters created for *What Happens Now* from these transcripts, speak for others in the industry.

The next character which was created from the interviews for *What happens Now* is the character ‘Olivia’. Being the only interviewee out of the eight original interviews that I knew on a close personal level, the conversations that I had during the interview process, flit quite fluidly between work and personal life. In doing this, at times, shows an avoidance of discussing things – perhaps a subconscious way of avoiding coming to terms with what had been lost during the pandemic:

You essentially, you know, I always work or lose money, the company loses money because they have to pay out twice and, you know and it's, it's that kind of, yeah that, that and then, once you're into that period of isolation, I realized I'd kind of I guess been holding... you're holding your breath.³⁴

The inclusion of the repeated informal elements of speech such as ‘kind of’ and ‘you know’ show a keenness to get her point across during the interview, however the repetition of ‘holding’ and the pause in speech at the end of the sentence shows a vulnerability – a sense of dread of how much there has been at stake each time she encountered the virus. This section of conversation is also key to recognising the struggles that many arts businesses felt, the cost of the pandemic; despite some support being in place, many businesses in the arts had to struggle to decipher how to pay for projects which were already underfunded, when practitioners had to isolate. Walter Merierjohann speaks on the matter to Svich suggesting that, “This virus is like an x-ray of society and all structures. Everything that was bad before

³⁴ Interview Transcript with ‘Olivia’, p. 3.

is even worse in a way because the virus is like a magnifying glass on all the inequalities.”³⁵ The conversations which I had with ‘Olivia’ and the other interviewees opened my eyes to the struggles many faced during the pandemic in the arts industry, and in taking these from interview to performance will allow for more to see the industry through this ‘magnifying glass’ and ultimately highlight how the industry has and has continued to suffer. In including such content in my play, I believe I can encapsulate the feelings that many creatives felt during this time.

In addition to revealing the issues already present in the industry, Olivia speaks of how lucky she felt to have had ‘some’ work during the lockdown:

I'm lucky that I'm, what? A decade into my career? Because I have a very strong relationship with a few organizations that I am kind of associate for now so being able to maintain or have that line of communication, so I could push for programs to continue to run or that I could be there as soon as it opened to pitch the next project, you know, is really useful. I don't think I would have been able to sustain that, you know, as someone just starting out. If you didn't have that, if you weren't going to be at the top of somebody's school list, I don't know how you could [cope].³⁶

This section of conversation taken from the interview shows how she was grateful to have just some work, even if a large majority had been lost, yet it also shows how the loss of projects may have been completely career ending for those just starting out. Anthony Simpson-Pike also discusses this matter with Svich. Although he was able to work part-time at a theatre during the closure, giving him some stability, he was very much aware that the was not the case for most people in the industry:

The pandemic has made it clear how precarious the working conditions are for freelancers. Many people have been faced with impossible choices and pushed out of the industry altogether. It is incumbent on institutions to stop this from happening and change working conditions now so it can never happen again.³⁷

³⁵ Svich C, Interview with Walter Merierjohann, p. 145.

³⁶ Interview Transcript with ‘Olivia’, p. 5.

³⁷ Svich C, Interview with Anthony Simpson-Pike, p. 97.

Although my own interviews were reflective of the effects of the pandemic on the arts at a micro-level, there were common issues across the country, with people being ‘pushed out’ of the industry forever, due to work just simply disappearing and leaving them no other option but to pursue other avenues to survive. Although isolation felt by those interviewed is clear due to them being unable to go about their normal lives, the loss they have endured as a result of their careers being put on hold is momentous. Again, although my interviews reflect these issues on a micro-level, the feelings they express are easily understood by those both in the arts industry and in other industries (shown in the final chapter of this paper where audience feedback is reflected upon). This, therefore, supports the idea that theatre created during the pandemic can encapsulate the feelings many felt during the time; the use of these interviews in my creative work would allow for an individual portrayal of circumstances, which the audience would be able to relate to.

In continuation of the recognition of how many people were without work entirely during lockdown, the third character to discuss is ‘Sarah’. The interview highlighted the complete upheaval some had experienced due to their industries being completely shut down the moment lockdown was announced. As a cruise ship singer, she immediately found herself unemployed as contracts were cancelled, openly sharing her worries in the words, “...panic sets in. It was right what're going to do with... rationalize. This is all this is over, the arts is dead. It's a wasteland. There's gonna be no culture what we're gonna do?”³⁸ The exaggeration of the situation shown in her metaphor of the arts industry being a ‘wasteland’ and being ‘dead’ shows her fear for what is to become of her well-established career. She went on to discuss how she managed this loss and revealed that she ended up working in recruitment instead to avoid losing her home. James Graham discusses the loss of so many in the industry stating that he feels, “demoralized

³⁸ Interview Transcript with ‘Sarah’, p. 8.

and broken at the thought that we are losing so many skilled people who can't survive without income and will go to work somewhere else.”³⁹ Not only will those affected by the pandemic lose careers they are passionate about, but the industry itself will suffer as it loses its talent. A survey undertaken by the Association of Lighting Designers and mentioned in *The Stage* (June 2020), for example, found that “More than 40% of lighting professionals say they are not sure they will return to the industry following Covid-19.”⁴⁰ Being such a significant percentage, it is clear the enforced pause has made those in the industry really reflect on the benefits and downfalls of their careers, which often have demanding schedules.

One Lighting Technician who did indeed question whether he would return or not, is my fourth interviewee ‘Mark’. Although he spoke at great lengths about the job and the struggles that the theatre had during the period of closure, it was the insights into the effects on his family life that made him question whether the industry was going to be something he would remain part of in the future. When asked about his family he said:

It was it was great being there with them, I got to see more of my son my daughter when she was that age, because obviously I was just working. And I was already a bit more of all of my son anyway, just because of with, with how he is born and everything like that, and so I've seen, yeah I've seen him grow in them in the time that we've been in lockdown you know from him crawling and then walking and babbling and all the stuff like that I wouldn't have seen, but I wouldn't have you know, seen as much of it as, as I have, and I don't know if it's improved my relationship with my daughter probably not really made it worse, we argue like cats and dogs - she's a five.⁴¹

³⁹ Svich C, Interview with James Graham, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Web Resource: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/coronavirus-41-of-lighting-workers-unsure-if-they-will-return-post-covid> (Accessed: 23/07/20).

⁴¹ Interview Transcript with ‘Mark’, p.20.

His listing of what he got to see ('walking and babbling' etc.) shows his increased awareness of the intricacies of family life which he missed out on with his elder daughter, who he suggests he does not have the best relationship with. These extended moments of discussion about his family, following the discussion about work in the earlier parts of the interview make it clear that he is questioning whether he could find a job which would better suit his family situation. It was the pause in his working life that made him realise this. Miranda Haymon, a writer, director and curator reflects on this in conversation with Svich, highlighting that:

I don't think that the life I was living before this was sustainable in any way and that's because of the industry and that's because of how I was living and that's how I viewed success and forward movement and growth. Although I hate to say it, quarantine was the intervention that I never knew I needed. It took a pandemic to slow me down and I want to make sure that I am giving myself the opportunity to slow down at other times.⁴²

The change of pace in life, and particularly the lives of those who had worked in the industry for years, caused some to question their place within the industry, thus further supporting the previous statistic of 40% of Lighting Technicians leaving the industry altogether. 'Mark' did indeed become of these 40% as when I spoke to him again around the time of the performance of the play in February 2022, I discovered he had left his job for new ventures. Additionally, this shows that although at a micro-level, the interviews and in turn the playscript that has been created show how the isolation caused by the lockdowns have caused many to reflect on their quality of life and make dramatic changes as a result.

The final character included in my playscript, taken from interviews, is the character of 'Jane'. This character was slightly different from the others, as she had never worked in the industry professionally, however had played an important role in the running of a local community theatre group for many years.

⁴² Svich C, Interview with Miranda Haymon, p. 33.

Although it was not her work that was affected, it was clear from conversations that the reduction in time she had engaging in arts-based activities was a great loss for her:

I think it affected me a lot more, you know, I was always going out seeing friends, I have you know those cans, there was singing, I did this wonderful thing called 'At five' which is theatre-related activities at the Headgate theatre. I used to go to London and see shows and theatre and go to the globe and all that sort of thing, very, very active life and then suddenly, suddenly reduced to just with my husband so, We got to know very well.⁴³

The listing of activities emphasises the importance of theatre-related activities in her life. The importance of arts in the UK goes far beyond 'putting on shows' as some may believe, but they provide an excellent social environment for many different groups. Michael Garces comments, "What lockdown has reminded people is the value of physical community, collective action and communal sharing."⁴⁴ It is the physical community that 'Jane' relied on to keep herself busy and maintain her 'very active life' and although again at a micro-level, I think her insights into all these activities that she was really looking forward to returning to, prove how valuable the arts are for so many people.

It is starkly clear from this chapter that the interview content collected reflects the themes of isolation and loss, for those working in the arts industry. My interviews reflect the state of theatre at a micro-level, highlighting how the participants struggled to cope in isolation; with changes in working lives, and the loss of their interests and freedom. The links made between these experiences and those collected in interviews conducted by Caridad Svich, show that although isolated, there is unity - other creatives felt similarly at the time. Ultimately, they are not alone in these experiences. By collating these interviews together, into a verbatim piece, which will be discussed in the next chapter, I am able to give voice to

⁴³ Interview Transcript with 'Jane', p. 9.

⁴⁴ Svich C, Interview with Michael Garces, p. 22.

those who felt a great sense of loss during the pandemic. The collation of these interviews created a piece of theatre, which encapsulates the feeling of isolation and loss that so many felt during this time.

Chapter 3

What are the limitations of verbatim theatre, and how can verbatim theatre be used as a tool to present current situations, in particular loss and isolation in relation to the coronavirus pandemic?

In the previous chapter the interviews which are discussed show a communal message of an industry struggling to survive in a global pandemic; I felt it necessary to present the stories as clearly as I was able, to ensure their stories were heard, and therefore turned my attention to verbatim theatre. As a reflection of significant events and the circumstances that follow, verbatim theatre is a powerful way to allow audiences to see a genuine account of experiences Summerskill explains in *Creating Oral Histories* that, “Verbatim literally means ‘in exactly the same words as were used originally’, and verbatim theatre refers to theatre processes in which narrators’ stories, linked by universal themes, are gathered in the form of interviews, excerpts of which are then included in a script.”⁴⁵ Although a powerful form of theatre, when acknowledging the notion that the writing itself should consist of ‘the same words as were originally used’, it is clear there are limitations in the form – some of these limitations will be discussed in the following chapter by comparing samples of verbatim theatre with my own examples taken from the transcripts used to create my creative work, *What Happens Now?*

Verbatim theatre is a relatively new style of theatre, and as is explained in the introduction to *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary documentary theatre* (2008), “instead of adapting or repackaging experiences or observations within a fictional dramatic situation, a verbatim play acknowledges, and often draws attention to, its roots in real life.”⁴⁶ When considering the nature of my research, which is

⁴⁵ Summerskill, C, *Introduction*, p.4.

⁴⁶ Ed. Hammond, W & Steward, D (2008), *Verbatim, Verbatim: Documentary Theatre*, London, Oberon Books Ltd, Kindle Paperwhite Version (2012), p. 6.

looking to reflect upon an experience which the entire UK population has lived through since March 2020, the verbatim form was an obvious choice within my writing; this is because I had content available to me in form of the video interviews I had conducted, but also felt it a form which could reflect the experiences others had during the pandemic. To develop my knowledge of the verbatim style, I felt it necessary to learn how to manipulate the text to create dialogue, direction, and revelation within the piece with limited amount of material. This led me to explore a collection of verbatim plays, created since the turn of the century: plays which I have explored are as follows: Alecky Blyth's *London Road* (2015), Gregory Burke's *Blackwatch* (2010), and Blythe's *Our Generation* (2022). I have also looked briefly at Clare Bayley's *The Container* (2007), which is semi-verbatim.

Although verbatim is suggestive of being true to the words spoken, there is not fixed way of creating it.

Summerskill explains:

[...] every individual playwright or theatre practitioner decides on their own method of how to source interview material and then present it dramatically. While some plays cover subject matter which may prove of interest to a wider general audience, it is also the case that much verbatim theatre work has a goal that is closer to the community in which it takes place. In such pieces, interviews are conducted and dramatic productions created for the benefit of the community, perhaps for the purpose of collective healing, a call to action or simply to celebrate.⁴⁷

When considering this in relation to the work that is created as part of this research, I believe that my piece will benefit the community of those in the arts industry, because it enables them to share their experiences. By presenting the characters interviewed in a verbatim piece, I encapsulate the feelings of isolation and loss many felt, because the words come directly from those who had experienced those feelings also.

⁴⁷ Summerskill C, pp 9-10.

In *Verbatim, Verbatim* Alecky Blythe discusses the form, commenting that “you can gain access to many hidden worlds by giving a person the opportunity to speak.”⁴⁸ I feel this is reflective to the content which I have recorded in my interviews and transcripts following the release of my survey, as although the content has taken a different direction to what I had initially thought it would, we learn of many hidden realities of the arts industry during the pandemic. Blythe continues in the same paper: “the idea for the play is merely a starting point and you have to be open to wherever it may lead.”⁴⁹ Although true to many forms of writing, this particularly resonates with the approach I had taken to allow my writing to develop. An example of this, is that fact that when I began the process of creating the survey and in turn planning for the interviews, I had originally intended to have a focus on relationships (such as co-habiting couples, families, or those living alone) within my writing, however due to the reach of the survey, which was largely limited to the eastern region of the UK, specifically local theatres and charities, and perhaps the willingness of those within the arts industry to talk for projects such as mine, I soon realised as I begin looking at the transcripts of my interviews that the focus would largely be on effects of the arts industry in the east of England. Although there are conversations about home life and relationships, the underlying narrative is about theatre, and the many ways that the pandemic has affected arts professionals. There lie limitations within this regarding content which reflected a collective experience across the country. Nonetheless, when it comes to the verbatim style, you can essentially only work with the material you have; although pleased with the content which arose from my interviews, I was left with little choice but to pursue the avenue presented to me.

Having contextualised the need to write my play in the verbatim style, I will now begin to reflect on other verbatim work, considering the structure and content of the writing discussed, and will also

⁴⁸ Blythe, A, Ed. Will Hammond & Dan Steward, p. 64.

⁴⁹ Blythe, A Ed. Hammond & Steward, p. 66.

reflect on the possible limitations and opportunities that the writing presents for current day situations. Alecky Blythe's *London Road* (2015) is an account of the experiences of residents of London Road in the Suffolk town of Ipswich where there were multiple murders of prostitutes and uses verbatim accounts of residents to show the aftermath of the events. Because it is verbatim, the dialogue is assumed to reflect genuine conversation:

It was – It was absolutely awful. Cos of the children. I've got – I've got teenage girls. I've got a twenty-year-old and a seventeen-year-old and I've got a fourteen-year-old boy. So yeah they were havin' to erm (*Beat.*) make sure they got their mobile phones on them. Erm. My middle daughter works at Next and Next were very good erm they weren't allowing any of their work staff leaving the **store** (*Beat.*) un-less there was an adult there to pick them up. They weren't letting them leave them. If they couldn't have find anyone to bring 'em home, they'd book them a taxi t' bring them back home. So yeah it was all – it was all of that worry.⁵⁰

This section spoken by the character, Julie, has multiple pauses (indicated by the hyphen) which are natural in unplanned speech, when someone is perhaps a little uncomfortable, or what is being said is entirely unrehearsed – simply normal conversation. There is also repetition of certain words which suggest the train of thought developing; there is frequent use of 'So yeah' and 'Erm' throughout the section, and the rest of the text, which is a common informal use of speech. Blythe comments on this stating that, "There is always a specific reason why a person stutters on a certain word and it is this detail that gives the characters such starting verisimilitude."⁵¹ This indicates to the audience that these accounts are from real people, describing real experiences; ultimately the organic form highlights that this could have happened to anyone, on anyone's doorsteps.

⁵⁰ Blythe, A, (2015) *London Road* : Bloomsbury, Online resource, University of Essex Library Collection (Catalogue), Act 1, Section 2, p. 10.

⁵¹ Blythe, Ed. Hammond & Steward, p. 74.

In contrast to this, when considering how the dialogue has been changed from interview material to performance dialogue, the validity of it being verbatim is put to question; one must ask if dialogue has been adapted to fit the mould of a play, or in this case a musical and spoken by someone who is entirely removed from the situation itself, is it truly authentic? Ultimately, there are limitations to the verbatim style, purely in the way it is dramatised and carefully selected by the playwright for ultimate impact. Evidence of this can be seen in the following paragraphs where I discuss the challenges I faced when editing transcripts for my own creative work.

It is due to Blythe's comments on the need for these natural pauses (referenced in the previous paragraph of this chapter), that I endeavoured to include them in my creative work. I also wished to include the naturally flowing speech (although it may not read in a grammatically correct way) within my verbatim accounts, although this did create some issues. The interviews I conducted provided some excellent transcripts which I could use as direct content for my writing, however there were challenges, due to limitations a Zoom interview creates, when coupled with someone's fluid speaking and natural pauses. Some elements of transcripts were almost impossible to decipher - even once I had tried to put into clear text, removing time signatures and turning it into a flowing paragraph of speech, it became incredibly difficult to read, a fact highlighted during the first reading of the piece in November 2021. An example of this is below, taken from the initial interview and used in the play for the first reading:

I thought it's important that we established a routine and that's what we did we'd had our own little routine you know, which we sort of continue to them life's getting a bit busier but you know he we - we have this routine where we - we have you know, a morning coffee together and we do a crossword and a quiz and words being and that's the to keep the old brain cells going we do that again after our lunch. You know I'm sure to regular times to have our meals and got really sick of cooking I have to say.⁵²

⁵² Appendix B, 4.1, VT.

Due to the continual flow of writing, the unedited speech was very hard to read, with very few indications of pauses, and a repetition of ‘you know’. Although this is natural to normal speech and local dialect, it made for uncomfortable watching during the online read-through. Although I was determined to stick to the original transcripts, to maintain authenticity, I realised it was essential to make some changes to allow the stories of the characters not to be lost in dense dialogue, which would cause an audience to undoubtedly lose interest. The edits made resulted in the following text:

Lots has changed I suppose, but we have kept our little lockdown routine, even though life's getting a bit busier. We have this routine where we have, a morning coffee together and we do a crossword and a quiz or a sudoku, is that how you say it? And that's there to keep the old brain cells going. So, we do that in the morning, and we do that again after our lunch. I make sure we had regular times to have our meals and I've got really sick of cooking I have to say.⁵³

This flowed more than in its raw state and was comfortable for the actress to learn and deliver. Ultimately, collecting the stories through Zoom had great impact on the writing itself, resulting in heavy editing to make the dialogue flow – a direct consequence of doing verbatim theatre in a pandemic, when government guidelines advised limited face to face contact for our own safety. As mentioned above, this proved how there can be limitations within verbatim theatre; as soon as the dialogue is adapted to create ‘a play’, a sense of authenticity is lost. However, without this editing, the audience would inevitably lose interest, and the play would not be successful in encapsulating the feelings of isolation.

When considering the concept of authenticity in verbatim writing, it is also important to consider the journey in which the conversations went on, to create the final performance in February 2022. The original text was taken from Zoom transcripts; I then edited them, not only editing the structure of the text itself but also separating the text by themes to create a coherent flow of ideas between each of the

⁵³ Final Draft *What Happens Now?* Part 4, p. 24.

characters; this was then learned by the actors, and in turn made into a live performance. This journey meant the text was completely different from its organic state, but I strongly feel in unifying their voices, showing them together but apart, best represents the challenges faced by those involved in the arts industry during the Coronavirus pandemic. To capture the main ideas taken from the interviews, the final playscript of *What Happens Now* is separated into five sections:

- Part 1: The Consequences
- Part 2: Coping
- Part 3: Family
- Part 4: Understanding
- Part 5: Reflection

These sections were created to group together significant points of the conversations which were gathered, but also to create more interest within the text, rather than a collection of continuous monologues; this meant the text was heavily manipulated for means of ensuring the piece was interesting and engaging for an audience. Manipulation of text is commonplace in verbatim theatre. One particularly significant example of this is Blythe's *London Road* where verbatim accounts were turned into songs, turning the piece itself into a musical, rather than a straight play. Such as:

All: Everyone is very very nervous
And very unsure of everything basically.⁵⁴

These two lines form the chorus of a song but emphasises the general feeling of the community at the time of the incidents. The grammatically incorrect repetition of 'very' shows how the person who originally spoke the words wanted to get across the general feeling felt across the town, and the general informal tone highlights the normality of people whose lives were indirectly affected by the murders which happened in the area. Manipulating text, to highlight the point of a piece, is a necessary act in the creation of verbatim work. In my own work, I take lines of interest and significance, and highlight them by including in the prologue and epilogue:

⁵⁴ Blythe, *London Road*, Act 1, Section 2, pp. 11-12.

SARAH: This is all, this is over, the arts is dead. It's a wasteland.
There's gonna be no culture, what're we gonna do?

RICHARD: That was always in your head, was 'the show must go on', so if you've got the flu or a cold you carried on. What happens now?

RACH: Is it going to be a distant memory, we can all remember when it was like that and it'll be back to normal? I don't know. It's hard to tell isn't it.

JANE: It's really, really hard I think that's the hardest thing, you know, it's not seeing your family. Really that's the hardest thing of all.⁵⁵

By placing these lines in such significant places within the structure of the play, I can not only avoid the monotony of the larger chunks of dialogue but use them to emphasise the general feelings of the characters, as the lines in Blythe's work do. They serve as a means of highlighting the stark effects that the pandemic has had on those in the creative industries, turning their individual experiences into a collective voice, and thus highlighting more clearly the isolation and loss felt during this time.

This idea of a collective voice, created from individual accounts, is one which is prominent in many examples of verbatim theatre, which give light to an alternative perspective of significant events. One example is Gregory Burke's *Blackwatch* (2010). The play explores experiences of soldiers of the Blackwatch, following their experiences in the Iraq war. Interestingly, it also includes extracts from televised news interviews to intersect with the dialogue and enforce the opposite side of the story to what is being presented; the mainstream verses the unconventional. The following dialogue follows immediately after a section taken from a news interview:

Kenzie: D'you think it's got Sky?
Fraz: I hope so. We'll be able to watch the news and find out why the fuck we're here.⁵⁶

This gives a broader insight to the stories which are being shared and makes it clear quite how different the mainstream media present the focus, in comparison to those that lived and experienced the actual

⁵⁵ Playscript, *What Happens Now*, p.1.

⁵⁶ Burke, G, (2010) *Black Watch*, Faber & Faber, London, E-book Drama Online Library Edition, p.9.

events. Summerskill refers to this in *Practicing Oral Histories*; she suggests that there was a disenfranchisement with the media around the time of the 9/11 attacks. She suggests:

During this period, some members of the public realised that that media did not always convey the full scope of political information and social arguments on the matters discussed. Verbatim Theatre became a means to address this information gap and reflect a more authentic form of personal experience to theatre audiences. Whether or not the plays created in this way offer more accurate information is, of course, debatable. Memory is undeniably fallible, and the playwright is ultimately in the position of selecting which content appears in the script.⁵⁷

Verbatim theatre allows the ‘information gap’ to close somewhat, and in the case of *Blackwatch* gives us a clear reminder that those who are fighting in the Iraq war are individual human beings. The soldiers lack of knowledge of what is happening, propels the soldiers' experiences firmly in front of the audience, and ultimately creates a starker piece of theatre. The news interviews are also interjected with conversation which comes explicitly from the original interview material, clear because there is conversation about ‘writing a play’ and conversation which is off topic from the focus of the play, an example being the following from the scene entitled ‘Pub 2’:

Writer: What was training like?
 Cammy: What was training like? Never mind that.
 Beat.
 What's shagging Sophie like?
 Writer: What?
 Cammy: You must be shagging her ay?
 Granty: Aye.⁵⁸

This again makes the text purely about the experience of the individual, rather than the War as a whole. The importance of these domestic details is addressed in *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre (2008)* by Robin Soans, where he highlights that, “The incidental domestic details which dovetail an interview are important because they humanise the situation. They are the common

⁵⁷ Summerskill, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Burke, *Black Watch*, p. 22.

link between the interviewee and the audience; they make the audience care.”⁵⁹ Although the topic of conversation is disrespectful towards the young lady they are discussing, it makes it clear to the audience watching, that it is young, and somewhat immature men that are speaking about their experiences. This is further emphasised in the scenes in the play entitled *'Officer Emails'* in Burke's play, where the character of 'Officer' speaks aloud emails which were originally sent to his partner, suggested by the opening “my darling” in each one.²³ The character speaks about the soldiers: “I know it unsettles the boys. And they are for the most part boys, when we get hold of them, although they have to grow up quickly out here. The suicide-bombers are recruited as boys too, by all accounts.”⁶⁰ Again, the tone of this section, and the contrast between this section and the verbatim dialogue of the soldiers in the 'Pub Scenes' shows a much broader perspective into the experiences of War: we do not usually bear witness to the individual experiences of soldiers or officers. And it is for this reason that verbatim writing holds so much importance in modern theatre. As Soan's suggests, “To provide a setting, the stage, where his voice can be heard, is to provide an amplification of an otherwise lost voice.”⁶¹

As a result of this research, linked to *Black Watch*, I felt compelled to ensure that I kept some 'off topic' moments in my writing, from the video interviews, to ensure that there is a common link between the audience and the actors. Although the topic of my writing, which now leans heavily towards experiences of people within the theatre industry, during the pandemic, is specific for the characters whose words have been created from the verbatim transcripts, it is these interludes of 'off topic' conversation about the general experience, which give an individual account of the experience – it highlights that they are real people, who have lived through and had their lives affected by the topic being discussed. In the case

⁵⁹ Hammond & Steward, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Hammond & Steward, p. 57-58.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

of the character of ‘Olivia’, she is incredibly focused on discussing the pandemic with passion and vigour, however when the weight of discussing it becomes too much, she changes topic:

And then we say that out loud you think, it’s fucking mental. But I think you just accept and keep going.
(Changing topic, as if to avoid building emotion) That New ‘Amelie’ is very good, by the way, I saw that the other day. I really loved it. I’m not sure that it’s on for that much longer, but you should try and get to see it – it is really, really good.⁶²

This showed how the talking about it could be difficult. In this instance, the interviewee rapidly changed the subject to something more positive, highlighting her desperation for positivity within conversations – something many watching may relate to.

In contrast to these ideas, I believe that to explore verbatim theatre fully, it is important also to consider other forms. This will allow me to consider its limitations or risks as an art form. Verbatim can be very restrictive in the writing process, but also exposing to the communities that it represents. Writer Clare Bayley, who wrote *The Container* (2007) chose to use interviews based on her subject matter, and then write in her own words instead of adopting the verbatim style. *The Container* presents a migrant journey inside a container across Europe. It has been of interest to me, because being originally taken from interviews with some that had taken the journey to the UK, it deals with a lived experience that some have endured in recent times. Bayley made an explicit choice not to write in the verbatim form, due to an experience with her mother; she retold a story that she had learned focusing on her mother’s experience of evacuation in the Second World War, and when this was not celebrated, but shunned, by her Mother, she realised the fine line you can travel on when using others’ words:

Only much later did I realise that I’d appropriated her story, without permission. I have always been very aware of the dangers ever since. So, on one level, there is a simple question of ethics and methodology when writing about stories that aren’t yours. You have to make sure you ask

⁶² Final Draft Play Script *What Happens Now? Part 3*, p. 18.

permission, and that the person whose story you are using is happy for you to use it.⁶³

Although the writing process of a verbatim play would undoubtedly go through an ethics process (for example a compulsory form of consent and explanation of the usage of their contributions to the work itself), there are still risks of the participants not being entirely comfortable with the content. This raises her to ask whether such writing is “appropriation or representation”.⁶⁴ Appropriation can be defined as the act of setting apart something for one's own use, suggesting a benefit for the writer and any other parties involved in the creative process; even with a contributor's permission, is this ultimately exploiting their experience? Or is the fact that their story is being told, allowing them to be represented and therefore useful to the plight of ensuring their voices are heard? Due to being based on detailed and careful research, taken from experiences of those who Bayley interviewed, there is truth to *The Container*, and by giving different ages, genders and nationalities of the characters, there is a universality to their story, highlighting how many go through such an ordeal in the modern day. The play ends:

FATIME: Soon our journey will be over.
 AHMAD: Are we moving?
 ASHA: Are we there?
 Do you think we have arrived.
*Nobody Answers.*⁶⁵

This section marks the ending of the play and presents uncertainty in their journey. The questions themselves leaves the audience unsure if they have arrived, and whether it will ever end for them, and ultimately springs into the spotlight the risk that many take to reach certainty, without anything concrete but hope that better days are coming – a perspective not always shown. In support of this, Bayley goes on to say, “You can read about all kinds of suffering and injustice in newspapers, but the difference between journalism and theatre – and I speak as a former journalist – is that journalism engages the

⁶³ Bayley, C, (2016) Blog: *Appropriation or Representation*: <https://bayleyclare.wordpress.com/2016/10/03/appropriation-or-representation/> (Accessed: 05/04/22).

⁶⁴ Bayley, blog.

⁶⁵ Bayley, C, (2007) *The Container*, Nick Hern Books, London, p. 45.

brain, but theatre engages both the brain and the emotions. Theatre is an empathic artform.”⁶⁶ It occurred to me when reading the play, that ending with unanswered questions forces the audience to think further about the subject of the play, even after the curtain has fallen - putting the topic into conversation, removing perhaps previous ignorance, and highlighting the plight of the story being told, all while highlighting emotions of the story, not just stating facts. This ultimately led me to consider the way in which I would end my own writing – would I perhaps encourage them to reflect on the pandemic itself, or what they have lost or gained throughout.

Verbatim theatre is a powerful means of presenting events which occur in society. Robin Belfield explains in *Telling the Truth: How to make Verbatim Theatre Seriously* (2018):

Whether provoked by a specific event of a wider theme, the beauty of verbatim theatre is its capacity to capture and document a subject with more clarity and precision than a play invented by a playwright. As a consequence verbatim theatre often needs to be produced quickly, while that subject is still current or topical. Perhaps this is simply because verbatim theatre brilliantly offers the opportunity for investigation and interrogation of subjects that have a sense of social importance. That said, the obvious disadvantage of this is that verbatim plays can soon become out of date and irrelevant, as most seem to live and die with the public consciousness surrounding the subject.⁶⁷

One verbatim play which comments on the specific coronavirus pandemic is Blythe’s most recent work *Our Generation* (2022). The project which evolved during the creation of *Our Generation* spanned the length and breadth of the country; Blythe enlisted five new verbatim theatre practitioners to assist in gathering accounts for the piece, ensuring that the play realistically represented young people in the UK, coming of age in the 2020s:

It was extraordinary to be documenting these teenagers for such a long time, expecting – like they were – for their futures to be moving forward to the next stage of development when suddenly the world stopped. Of

⁶⁶ Bayley, blog.

⁶⁷ Belfield, R, (2018), *Telling the Truth : How to Make Verbatim Theatre*, Nick Hern Books, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/universityofessex-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5286795>. p. 16.

course Covid has had a major impact on all our lives, but I think the disruption it has had on teenagers has been immeasurable. I hope the play goes some way to expressing not only how they have suffered but also how impressively they have found hope and resilience through it.⁶⁸

Due to the five-year parameters set for the *Our Generation* project, the final act of the piece centres particularly around the pandemic in 2020. It is no surprise that the perspectives shown in this section of the play really paint a picture of the struggles young people faced in the lockdowns throughout the UK, and it is the uniqueness of the verbatim form that allows these to come across so clearly. In this last section many of the participants turned eighteen years old. The play has followed their lives for five years, and as a result the audience get to know the key characters throughout each Act (which represents each year). By this final act it shows the stark reality of how the Coronavirus pandemic altered their lives at such a crucial time. Blythe gives reference to the nature of communication in this time, by beginning the section with just video projections of actors talking, rather than having them on stage – a powerful way of highlighting the isolation they were all going through in this time:

JEN: Hello (*laughs*) Different world isn't it from when we last met.
Change to the plot, a twist in the plot.

JEN *enters* EMILY's bedroom

Yep I shall er pass you over. (*Beat*) Oh dear she's crying, she doesn't want to talk to you / sorry okay I'm leaving her room she's umm / oh she doesn't want to talk to anybody at the moment so I don't know what's up with her.

EMILY: There's no point.
I don't want to talk to you.

JEN: Yes, not in a good mood at all. Oh dear. (*Beat*) Oh dear. Funny old world isn't it now.⁶⁹

Even in this open section, Blythe highlights the struggles that young people faced during this time. Emily's reluctance to talk to the interviewer, and Jen's (her mother) lack of understanding for why she

⁶⁸ Blythe, A, (2022) Introduction to *Our Generation*, Nick Hern Books Ltd, London. P.7.

⁶⁹ Blythe (2022), p.146.

is upset shows how difficult this character (and ultimately all the other young people her character represents) found the early days of the pandemic, when they felt like their future had been ripped from beneath their feet; exams cancelled, university places in jeopardy and a lack of ability to socialise and enjoy their freedom in a time where they want it most. As Emily exclaims ‘there’s no point’ we realise how she feels like carrying on is no longer worth it, and the feeling of hopelessness she has comes through powerfully. Additionally, the repetition of ‘oh dear’ when Jen speaks, shows how ill-equipped families were to deal with the barriers this created for young people, and therefore this section along creates a powerful snapshot of the challenges the pandemic placed on families.

The examples of verbatim theatre presented in this chapter have all shown an important moment in our history on to the stage, creating important time capsule pieces which help audiences to understand those moments in time, even years after. Even though these pieces speak of important moments in history, as Belfield explains, it is this very fact that makes verbatim a limited form, as the plays often only speak for moments in time, rather than encapsulating themes that can be reimagined years later. With regards the themes of loss and isolation, it is clear from both Blythe’s example in *Our Generation* and the development of my own piece, that the verbatim form, largely explored on Zoom during the pandemic, is a powerful tool for expressing the lives lead by the entire UK population in 2020-21; it highlights the loss many felt for their lives, which were in many cases put on hold, and the video footage taken from Zoom interviews shows the isolation in a different, but entirely relevant, way considering the rules in place in this time. James Graham reflects on the need for theatre during the coronavirus pandemic:

If you believe that art and plays can help us make sense of the world, and ourselves, that it can both provoke and unite, and that the simple of act of getting people together to tell a story, watched by other people, is a deeply moving thing to happen... then I suppose you could argue there’ll never be a more important time for drama. People need to heal, society needs to be

rebuilt, a new purpose and sense of collective need to be attained. Let's go to work and start telling stories about ourselves.⁷⁰

It is the isolation itself that makes us aware of what we crave as human beings – in placing real life stories together in verbatim playwriting, even if in doing so you remove some of the ‘truth’ from the circumstance in which the material was collected, you create a collective voice which can be heard by many others, which can provoke thought into the need for change (in this case in the arts industry) and unite people by making them realise they were not alone in a time when isolation was a legal requirement.

To conclude this chapter, although by using the verbatim style to create my piece, some powerful viewpoints came across, the ‘creative’ in me also felt like I wanted to include my own input into the writing in the writing process. This could also be seen as a limitation within the style of verbatim, as ‘writers’ are more often more so ‘editors’ sifting through material. I found myself recognising a desire to make my own viewpoint on the experiences heard within my work, and therefore include some of my own experiences – ultimately creating more of an ethnographic piece. As Alison Oddey suggests in *Devising Theatre*, “The most fundamental requirement for devising theatre is a passion or desire to say something, a need to question or make sense of a starting point that encourages you to investigate further through a variety of processes and close enquiry.”⁷¹ I made the decision to explore theatre that has arrived in the pandemic, as mentioned previously, because I recognised quite how much I was sugar-coating my experience of lockdowns on social platforms (as discussed in chapter one), and therefore it felt right to intersect the experiences of others with my own. My own experience, and my own words could also act as a natural bridge between characters. This involved extracting moments where I share insight in the

⁷⁰ Svich C, Interview with James Graham, p. 31.

⁷¹ Oddey, A, (1994) PROCESS: Ways of Making Theatre in *Devising Theatre, a practical and theoretical handbook*, Routledge, London p. 42.

video transcripts with those that I was interviewing on Zoom, and also writing some new text in response to the conversations which were emerging.

As I have outlined in this chapter, there are limitations within verbatim theatre, often due to the nature of the topics being focused on, being specific to a certain point in time; however, these limitations are also the styles' strength as they encapsulate a period in a way which can be reflected on and shared even years after the event, giving the voices of those who are not usually heard, "opportunity to speak".⁷² This is seen in *Blackwatch* and *London Road*, and also in *What Happens Now* whose voices are of creatives not always taking centre stage in their theatre and arts industry roles. Additionally in a sense, verbatim pieces are isolated in general as they speak of one time and circumstance, but without such theatre, the different perspectives would be lost; in case of this research the impact of isolation, and the sense of loss those interviewed felt would not be highlighted. There is also a risk of limitations within the quality of the writing itself, as you can only work with the content you have, if you wish to be as close to verbatim as possible. Edits are also necessary to ensure the dialogue is accessible for the actors, but this can ultimately result in lack of authenticity. However, every playwright or practitioner, "decides on their own method of how to source interview material and then present it dramatically", and there is not fixed way of doing things, so although some may argue that this stops the verbatim form being authentic, it still presents voices which are not usually heard, edited or otherwise.⁷³

As a final note within this chapter, despite the challenges faced when exploring and in turn creating verbatim theatre, I believe that it is the most poignant and powerful way of capturing the isolation and loss felt by those in the arts industry during the pandemic and I will now seek to encapsulate the final

⁷² Blythe, *Verbatim, Verbatim*, p. 64.

⁷³ Summerskill, p.10.

stages of this process in the final chapter of this paper. The play *What Happens Now* is unique as it was created during the coronavirus pandemic, and although limited by circumstances and geographics has given a voice to a group of people whose lives were affected by it all.

Chapter 4

How has the research from the previous chapters informed the creative and informative process of the playscript, *What Happens Now?*

In the following chapter I will outline the process of the final stages of creation of the playscript *What Happens Now* leading up to, including and reflecting on the performance in February 2022. In the previous chapters I have outlined how theatre created and made available during my time of writing influenced me. I have also explored the impact the pandemic had on the lives of myself and many others, particularly those in the arts industry. I have then explored the impact verbatim can have, and how this research leads me to creating my own verbatim piece of theatre. I will look at the way the final rehearsal process allowed for refinements and reflection, including how my role of director in the final rehearsal stages developed the piece.

As mentioned in the second chapter of this paper, most people whom I interviewed were of an arts background. This meant that when I interviewed them further on Zoom, despite my questions not being directly about theatre, most of my responses gravitated towards their experience of having an arts sector job, in a country where most arts jobs had been brought to a standstill. This resulted in my creative work no longer being focused on relationships, but the theatre industry itself. In taking their responses, and creating a performance using transcripts, I created a small snapshot of what it was like for some people working in the arts sector during the coronavirus pandemic, and in turn could encapsulate the feeling of isolation and loss that many felt.

As the creative work had begun to show a clear link to the arts industry, I sought out other work that focused on the industry in this time. I came across *In a Nutshell* (2020) by Lost Dog, a short film

uploaded to YouTube in September 2020 which spoke of live theatre, and the longing to get back to it.⁷⁴ It has stark reminders which highlight how the roles of those working in theatre have changed during the pandemic – reminders which are exaggerated more so by the fact that Ben Duke is sitting alone in an auditorium, with the many empty seats in shot. Garces says that, “Theatre works best when the critique of whatever is happening on stage is one that the audience is hungry for and for which they might not agree with the answers. Right now, we’re all very open for the critique, and we’re also very open to celebrate together and mourn together.”⁷⁵ When watching *In a Nutshell* (2020) I felt a keen desire to ensure that the stories of people whose working lives had been so dramatically changed by the pandemic were heard – it was a clear critique of the loss of community in theatre, and although Duke focuses largely on the audiences experience of theatre, I felt that I could show the mourning much of those in the arts industry were going through in this time.

As mentioned in the first chapter of this paper, the work which I discovered while in lockdown played a large part in the development of my piece. I will discuss my influences in the following pages of this chapter. With regards to the structure, there was a risk that when the performance date approached, that there would still potentially be restrictions in relation to the rehearsals process and performance itself within the government guidelines for theatres and meeting in groups. This led me to draw on some of the theatre recordings I had been watching even more so, to consider how this piece would evolve.

A performance which helped greatly with my decision with regards to the structure of my play, was Dael Orlandersmith’s *Until the Flood* (recorded at the Traverse Theatre Festival, Edinburgh in 2019) – previously discussed in chapter one of this paper.⁷⁶ Each character is introduced, with their name, age,

⁷⁴ In a Nutshell, Lost Dog – youtube link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiMX1_bE7U8 (Accessed: 27/12/21).

⁷⁵ Svich, p.20.

⁷⁶ Live Performance Recording: <https://www.traverse.co.uk/whats-on/event/until-the-flood-1> - (Accessed: 26/02/22).

ethnicity and job title, giving the audience an opportunity to recognise the differing viewpoints across demographic she represents. Some examples of this being:

*Louise Hemphill: black, early seventies, retired school teacher. Talks to audience.*⁷⁷

*Paul Thompson: black, seventeen, high school student. Talks to audience.*⁷⁸

Although these characters are clearly very different in traits, they are both intended to be played by one actor. In the recording of the piece, Orlandersmiths's portrayal of each St Louis citizen was captivating. Despite playing characters which differed from herself, you were invested in them, and see that behind every newspaper headline, there are many standpoints to be taken. Her writing highlighted that the race or origins of a person does not automatically mean they are the innocent or the victim, and equally their race does not necessarily mean their views will automatically be on the side of the victim or the culprit. The play ends, with the same first character (the only repeated character throughout) reflecting on events, (in this moment about the police officer who shot Michael Brown):

What created HIS hardness?
 What made him so hard?
 What was HIS legacy?
 And
 I think of Michael Brown and Myself / What we were taught.
 I think of our legacy.
 MY God.
 The things we were taught. The things we remember...⁷⁹

This blend of monologues highlights ideas away from those at the front of the protest, brandishing placards and calling for change, The direct speech and rhetorical questions used in this moment, left me considering how I would react if this happened in my community. Although the topic area was very different to my own, the structure, outlining the different characters, all sharing their own experiences

⁷⁷ Orlandersmith, p.3.

⁷⁸ Orlandersmith, p. 85.

⁷⁹ Orlandersmith, p. 115.

of one event, in a neutral setting, very much caught my interest. Watching this was a turning point for my decision to create a piece which largely focused on verbatim monologues, taken from the transcripts of my video interviews.

Following the inspiration gained from Orlandersmith's play, and possible restrictions for performing still possible, I began wondering if a virtual performance would work for my creative work. In order to help with my understanding of this medium for means of performance, I auditioned for an amateur play which was intended to be performed virtually, with a local amateur theatre group, *Clacton Amateur Dramatic Society*, entitled *Parents Evening* by Bathsheba Doran.⁸⁰ The play was a two-hander, and required me to act in my bedroom, with the other actor performing alongside me on Zoom, in his own bedroom, as if on the other side of the bedroom. Ultimately what I found through this process was that as an actor it was incredibly hard to get myself in a frame of mind which allowed me to be ready for a performance – being in my own surroundings meant I struggled to focus, and I had no director present.

Fortunately, despite my initial concerns, most restrictions had been lifted by early 2022, so the play could be performed to a live audience. As I approached the final stages of writing, I sourced six actors to play the characters in my performance. These actors, most of whom were friends or acquaintances, volunteered to work with me on the play, alongside their full-time jobs. Although all had performed before, nearly all of these had only ever performed in the local amateur theatre scene, but despite not all having direct links or identical experiences to the characters within the play, all were able to relate to the characters in some way, because of the shared experience of the play's topic.

⁸⁰ Play Performed with Clacton Amateur Dramatic Society, March 2021, rights obtained via Concord Theatricals.

I began to turn my attention to preparing the piece for the live performance at the Lakeside Theatre on The University of Essex campus. The rehearsal process was November 2021 to February 2022. Coronavirus case numbers were on the increase again at this time, being in the height of winter, therefore I kept rehearsals to a minimum. I began the process with a virtual whole cast reading, which allowed me to make some final amendments to the script before the February performance. I was able to hear my work aloud for the first time, and I made some heavy edits to aid flow and interest in the script. One point of discussion which was raised during this was that the character of Jane did not have as clear a role in theatre as perhaps some of the others did, which prompted me to arrange a second video interview with the interviewee.

In the next two months I had one-to-one rehearsals with each actor in person or again virtually, focusing on their larger monologue sections. Again, this was highly useful for development, hearing each section aloud and removing any sections which felt unnecessary. I gave actors direction for movement, gestures or acknowledgement of other characters on stage. Perhaps most importantly to the development of the script, we also used this time to highlight any moments of the script which the actors were finding difficult to say due to the nature of the verbatim text, an issue which is discussed in the third chapter of this paper, such as removing repetitions of ‘you know’ almost entirely and changing the order or some words to make it roll of the tongue more easily.

We had one group rehearsal, a week before the final performance, where we addressed group scenes. I hired a space at Brightlingsea Community Centre. This was when my ideas as director began to take shape, as I made final decisions for where actors would sit or stand during the performance. I had initially thought that it did not matter where the actors were on stage with regards to order but hearing the stories of the actors read out loud during this rehearsal, I felt inclined to choose specific locations for each

character to reflect their journey. An example of this being having the character *Rach* sat centre-stage, as it was ultimately her insights that linked the other five characters together. I then chose to have *Matt* and *Sarah* on stage left, so when the revelation came towards the end of the play, that they had both decided to leave the industry, they would appear separated slightly from the other four characters.

Following this, I communicated with the technical team at the theatre, deciding on simple lighting choices to represent the journey of the play; at the beginning each actor would be in a single harsh edged spotlight, as if to suggest isolation. As the play progressed, the spots would begin to be accompanied by a warm wash of light across the stage and would end in the final sections with the spots gone entirely. I feel that these choices helped to show the progression of the characters, going from a feeling of isolation to a feeling of unity.

As planned the scratch performance of *What Happens Now* went ahead on 4th February 2022, to a limited audience. It was also recorded for purpose of this research. The link for the recording of this performance can be found in appendix F.

In reflection of the final performance, I was able to make some more changes to the script to create the finished volume which has been included as part of this research paper. I will now look to reflect on the performance, using my own insights of the process and final performance, but also the feedback which was obtained as part of a post-performance audience questionnaire distributed during the performance itself. The questions included in this survey are included in Appendix D. I also conducted some post show questions with myself as writer and director, and the six actors in the performance. It is worth noting that these responses are limited due to restrictions in place, and many academic staff and students isolating at the time of the performance.

My very first reflection, which links to the discussions regarding verbatim theatre in the third chapter, is the success of verbatim style that I adopted. The verbatim style was completely new to me at the start of this process – I found it both inspiring and limiting to create a script in this style, but the message of the piece speaks clearly as a result. Many stories of the pandemic will undoubtedly be told over the coming years as we reflect on what happened as a nation, but the unique viewpoint of the arts industry given by *What Happens Now* has allowed for new awareness of the experiences of some people in those turbulent times. Using the verbatim style, and conducting interviews during the pandemic itself, enabled me to successfully create a piece of theatre which encapsulated the feelings of loss and isolation that many felt during this time.

Despite the success of this piece, I think that one key issue with the play itself, which is a direct result of the way the interviews were conducted, was that there is little action within the play. I realised this in retrospect unfortunately, and it was only after an online course with Alecky Blythe, who deals specifically with verbatim theatre that I was given the advice of ensuring that interviewees are doing something during the interview itself. Because of the nature of Zoom calls, where both interviewer and interviewee are required to sit at their computers in order to be seen and heard, this was unavoidable, and being mostly monologues, the action is limited.⁸¹

In response to the first question, “Was this the first time you have seen a Verbatim play?” It was evident, with only two “no” out of 12 responses, that most of my audience had not seen a verbatim play previously, and all said they found the play engaging and informing in response to the question, “Do you think the play managed to engage and inform you?”. The concept that the rules and restrictions in place

⁸¹ Online Course, *Playwriting Masterclass with A. Blythe* with National Theatre, 08/03/22 via Zoom.

had a domino effect on the industry was acknowledged, and one stated it to be like an “insight into a hidden world”. Some were aware of the struggles the industry had faced due to being close to the industry themselves, and some responses suggested that they enjoyed “hearing real life quotes on personal experiences”. One acknowledged that although the “struggles were society related” implying that some of the things which were spoken about were relatable to any industry, they found it interesting to “give a word to the [arts] industry”.⁸²

When asked in the survey if audience members had, “gained any new knowledge about the theatre /performing arts industry during the pandemic” responses, some agreed that they had developed new knowledge from the play, not realising what those back and front of house had to deal with; the struggles some faced with regards to planning and organisation. When answering the question of relatability to their own experiences, nearly all audience members who completed the survey said they could find it relatable to their own experiences in some way; even one audience member, an NHS worker, claimed they felt they “shared common fears”.

On the final question, “Did any elements leave you feeling unsure?”, although many audience members kindly said no, one suggested that it may have been helpful to have “more context for pre-pandemic [working conditions] in the [arts] industry” and one said “some characters didn’t flow entirely through the whole [piece] and some seemed to be stuck talking about the same thing” I could understand this, however I feel that most of the characters do talk about their previous experiences; Sarah for example reminisces about her life on the ships and Mark goes into detail about the hours he’d spent working previously. Despite the fact I did not have the material from the interviews to elaborate on this further, I

⁸² Responses to survey: Appendix E.

do not feel it would be necessary to include any more detail, as the focus of the play is of that moment in time, during the pandemic.

As well as allowing an audience to watch *What Happens Now* and inviting feedback, I also sent the recording to those five that contributed the verbatim accounts, following the video interviews undertaken in the months before the writing process. The gentleman whose conversations helped me to create the character of Richard responded kindly:

I had no idea you would create something so encompassing, so inclusive, and so relevant to a body of people who are so often and deliberately overlooked, during our first interview.

Our struggles are real, and often ignored by an industry who relies upon us but usually refuses to include us, (Equity and BECTU are also partially to blame), so thank you for highlighting us.

The industry is suffering, and with our current climate, Brexit and Covid etc, I feel it is harder to envisage a sustainable lifestyle for someone contemplating a job, let alone a career in this profession. I not sure if change will happen from the bottom up, (forced by a shortage of people now willing to endure this lifestyle), or from an industry driven agenda!⁸³

His continued reflection on the industry following our conversations, and his watching of the piece, really shows the value such a piece has for the industry. As he emphasises, those that work in the industry have ‘struggles [that] are real, and often [are] ignored by an industry who rely upon [the staff] but usually refuse to include [them]’. It is clear from these comments that despite the return to a seemingly ‘normal’ life, now that all restrictions in place are lifted, with only guidance remaining he is still feeling the strains of working in the industry; this highlights the power that the play has. It shows a reflection of how these individuals feel while working in the industry but takes their individual accounts to create a collective experience, highlighting what work needs to be done in the arts industry to create a ‘sustainable lifestyle’.

⁸³ Appendix E, Response from ‘Richard’.

This chapter has outlined the processes I have undertaken to create the final playscript of *What Happens Now*. The creative and informative process has allowed me to arrive at the final performance of the play. This was possible only due to my interest and research of theatre which became popularised during the pandemic, discussed in chapter one, and through my exploration of verbatim theatre in chapter three. I used the work of others to inform the structure of my final play script, but it was the interview discussions and analysis in chapter three of this paper which propelled my desire to create a verbatim piece encapsulating the isolation and loss that many had faced during this time. I explored the possibility of performing virtually to ensure the piece could be performed, even if restrictions remained in place, but fortunately I was able to rehearse and perform the play in person, to a live audience. The writing of the play itself was always evolving with each rehearsal and read-through, but it was the final technical additions at the theatre, which I believed encapsulated the isolation the characters were feeling: the subtle lighting choices, which have now been included in the final playscript made the stories seem at first separate, as they spoke of what had been lost during the Coronavirus pandemic; as the play develops, the universality of their experiences, is symbolised through merging of lights, from harsh separated spotlights to a warm general wash, making it clear that they were never alone.

Conclusion

In this paper, and the creative work associated with it, entitled *What Happens Now* I believe I have been able to show how the piece created during the height of the pandemic has successfully encapsulated the feelings of isolation and loss many felt – at first it may seem like this is specific to those in the arts industry, but as shown in the survey responses in the fourth chapter, the experiences are relatable to anyone, making it a piece which brings unity and togetherness, despite centring around a time when we were forced to be separated from others.

In chapter one, my research explored how the forced isolation of lockdown has in turn created a springboard for theatre which represents loss and isolation, using plays such as Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and Dyer/Williams' *Death of England* I was able to recognise a pattern of single isolated characters, revealing raw and unspoken feelings to their audiences, both live in theatres and on screen. This led me to an exploration of my own interview content in the second chapter, where I was able to highlight universal issues between my subjects in parallel with interviews conducted by Caridad Svich. The quality of these interviews became clear in this chapter, which is why in the third chapter I make the decision to explore the form of verbatim theatre, to best present the voices of those interviewed. Although this chapter identifies limitations within the verbatim style, to preserve the memory of the effects of the pandemic of those in the arts industry, it is the best way to ensure their voices are heard. Finally, in the last chapter I sought to highlight how I arrived at the final script, using not only the research undertaken directly for this project (as mentioned in the previous chapters), but also through experiencing the virtual performance platform, (performing *Parents Evening* via Zoom) to see if it was a viable option for performance. I have also raised how the individual rehearsals with actors and final rehearsals with technical elements allowed me to refine the script and ensure that the isolation and loss so evident throughout the script was illuminated to the audience. Following the performance itself, I was able to

reflect on the success of the piece and became aware that although the experiences placed at the forefront of the piece were of the six individual characters depicted, their stories were relatable to many within the audience, from numerous working sectors, not just limited to the arts industry.

By undertaking this research, I have been able to recognise how theatre can be a way of bringing people together, even when with a live audience, sat in the auditorium. It has allowed me to recognise that theatre, throughout history, has been a platform for untold stories, which places perhaps unrecognised feelings in the limelight, and through forms such as verbatim theatre, keeps untold stories alive, becoming time-capsule pieces which will speak of a time in a way that is unique. As highlighted in the quotation at the very beginning of this paper, “there is a freedom gifted by arts practice to transport ourselves into different lives”.⁸⁴ By creating theatre with this in mind, our audiences will look on stage at the lives of others, and not only feel empathy for them, but will see their own feelings mirrored also. As we begin to feel some distance from the coronavirus pandemic, many question what the future holds: as the title of my creative piece suggests, *What Happens Now?* Although in this instance the question is related specifically to the arts industry at the forefront, the feelings portrayed by the six characters in the piece propel the question out to everyone as we endeavour to navigate a post-covid world. With isolation and loss being something no one could avoid during 2020, the creative work is a powerful tool for mirroring how many felt during this time.

⁸⁴ Svich, C, Interview with Jason Crouch, p. 117.

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Online Courses

Webinar: “Playwriting Masterclass with Alecky Blythe” with Alecky Blythe and National Theatre, 8th March via Zoom

Appendices

Appendix A

The following Survey was created on Qualtrics, the University of Essex Recommend Survey Platform.

The Survey

Please answer as honestly and in as much detail, as you can. No questions are mandatory in this section, so if you would like to leave a question out please just leave blank and move to the next question.

Question 1) Family and Relationships Describe your relationship/family circumstances (who you live with, ages etc.), and how Lock down affected these dynamics. For example, were there any noticeable strains on relationships, or improvements due to increased time at home?

Question 2) Life at Home: Describe your home, and the experience you had during lock down within your four walls (for example what your daily routine looked like)

Question 3) Work a) What were your working circumstances during Lock down? b) How did the Lockdown affect your work? c) Does it continue to affect your work?

Question 4) Health What impact did Lock down have on your physical, emotional and mental health?

Question 5) What kept you going throughout Lockdown?

Question 6) Did you access any sort of Theatre during Lockdown? (please add details if possible)

Yes

No

Question 7) If you would like to add anything else, be it images of your experience for reference, and writing that you did during lockdown (eg. a journal etc) it would prove very valuable to the research

End of Survey

Links for Support

Q34 Below is a list of charities that may be of use, if discussing anything within these questions has highlighted any concerns for you. Mental Health: www.mind.org.uk NSPCC: www.nspcc.org.uk Domestic Abuse: www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk

Appendix B

The following information has been extracted from the Survey Created on the Qualtrics Survey Platform, recommended by the university

Start of Block: Participant Consent

Introduction

The Coronavirus Crisis of 2020 saw the biggest change to our daily lives that many have ever experienced. There are millions of people whose lives were changed dramatically as a result of the restrictions put in place. This survey seeks to collate a range of responses which reflect the Human Experience of the Lockdown. I am looking to gather a collection of stories from the people's experiences of Lock down - not the media's view, or the celebrity, but the views from those confined to homes, home-schooling, on furlough, or out of work altogether. There will be a particular focus on relationships within Lockdown, although it will not be limited to this.

The ultimate aim of this Survey is to collate these responses, and create a performance, which not only reflects the human experience, but also mirrors the mediums in which we used to navigate this difficult time.

Participant Consent

The Participant Consent and Screening Section of this survey are mandatory, however you may leave out questions in the main survey should you wish to do so. If at any point you wish to stop answering the questions, and not submit your answers just leave the page, and your responses will not be saved.

I understand, and wish to continue (1)

The following questions are mandatory to ensure you consent to the ways in which your information will be used, following submission of your responses. The survey cannot be submitted unless you have given an answer to the following statements:

I understand, and wish to continue (1)

a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty.

I understand (1)

I do not understand (2)

b) I understand that my responses are being used as part of a research project, and my responses may be used verbatim, to form the basis for a performance in Spring 2022

I understand (1)

I do not understand (2)

c) If necessary, I am happy to be contacted further to discuss my responses, via a private video call with the Survey Organiser.

Yes (1)

No (2)

Display This Question:

If If necessary, I am happy to be contacted further to discuss my responses, via a private video cal... = Yes

As you have answered yes to being contacted further, please provide your name, email and number which may be used to contact you for further interview.

Name: (1) _____

Email: (2) _____

Contact Number: (3) _____

d) I am happy for my name to be included in the final credit for the performance created.

Yes (1)

- No (2)
- e) Would you like to be invited to a ‘first reading’ of the Creative Work?
 - Yes (1)
 - No (2)
- f) Would you like to be invited to the final performance created as result of this survey?
 - Yes (1)
 - No (2)
- g) Would you be willing to take part in a follow up interview after watching the performance?
 - Yes (1)
 - No (2)

Display This Question:

If I am happy for my name to be included in the final credit for the performance created. = Yes

And Would you like to be invited to a ‘first reading’ of the Creative Work? = Yes

And Would you like to be invited to the final performance created as result of this survey? = Yes

And Would you be willing to take part in a follow up interview after watching the performance? = Yes

As you have answered yes to the previous questions, please provide a name and email address for the survey organiser to get in touch

- Name: (1) _____
- Email: (2) _____

G) I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.

- I understand (1)
- I do not understand (2)

End of Block: Participant Consent

Appendix C

The following questions have been extracted from my survey created on Qualtrics

Participant Screening

To ensure that this survey reaches a range of participants and ultimately reflects a true spectrum of experiences of the Coronavirus Lockdown in the UK, please answer the following questions. If you do not wish to specify an answer please respond with ‘prefer not to say’

- o I understand (1)
- b) Which age group do you fall into?
 - o 18-24 (1)
 - o 25-34 (2)
 - o 35-44 (3)
 - o 45-54 (4)
 - o 55-64 (5)
 - o 65 and over (6)
 - o Prefer not to say (7)
- c) Please define your gender (if you do not wish to do so simply write prefer not to say)
- d) Please describe your ethnic group or background (if you do not wish to do so simply write prefer not to say)
- e) What region do you currently live in?
 - o Scotland (1)
 - o Wales (2)
 - o Northern Ireland (3)
 - o North East of England (4)
 - o North West of England (5)
 - o Yorkshire and the Humber (6)
 - o East Midlands (7)
 - o West Midlands (8)
 - o East of England (9)
 - o London (10)
 - o South West of England (11)
 - o South East of England (12)
 - o Prefer not to say (13)
- f) How would you describe your marital status?
 - o single, never married or civil partnered (1)
 - o married, including separated (this category includes those in both opposite-sex and same-sex marriages) (2)
 - o civil partnered, including separated (3)
 - o divorced, including legally dissolved civil partners (4)
 - o widowed, including surviving civil partners (5)
 - o prefer not to say (6)
- g) Do you consider yourself to have a disability?
 - o Yes (please specify) (1) _____
 - o No (2)
 - o Prefer not to say (3)
- h) Describe your employment status over the last 12 months (if you do not wish to answer simply write prefer not to say)

Appendix D

Programme for *What Happens Now* including survey questions



What Happens Now Provides a unique snapshot of the lives of six people, who are involved in the Theatre and Arts industry, during the Coronavirus Pandemic. The Verbatim accounts show the stark reality of the fragility of the Arts Sector in the UK since March 2020, but also the passion that many have to keep Theatre and Performance alive despite the challenges they have faced.

The performance is a *scratch performance*, to develop the process of writing for Rachael Welham's research, so there will be some moments when actors are 'script in hand'. The use of **photo or video devices are not permitted** during the performance. Please ensure mobile phones are switched off.

The performance runs for approximately **1 hour 10 minutes** and there will be a post-show Q&A session immediately following the performance. Audience questions will be gladly received for the development of the piece. Also, please answer some questions that are on the reverse of this information page - we would be very grateful for your insights.

Cast and Crew

Olivia	Nicole Eve
Richard	Charlie Vaughan
Rach	Corrina Wilson
Sarah	Natalie Dwan
Mark	Edward Groombridge
Jane	Jane Rayner

Writer/Director Rachael Welham

Technical Support Harry Harris and Samuel Bell

Videographer Martyn Hazel

With special thanks to:

Mary Mazzilli for her advice and support throughout the creative process
The Lakeside Theatre Team

Post-Show Questions

This piece was written as part of Rachael Welham's research for an MA (by dissertation) in Theatre Studies, focusing on the effect of the pandemic on the Theatre Industry. The piece is Verbatim, meaning all content was taken directly from interviews with people working in the theatre industry, only names and locations have been changed. Answering these questions will help with the development of the piece in the final stages of research, so we thank you in advance for your support.

Was the first time you've seen a verbatim play? **Yes / No**

Do you think the play managed to engage and inform you? **Yes / No**

How? *(please explain)*

How did you find the performance as a whole?

Have you gained any new knowledge about the theatre /performing arts industry during the pandemic? **Yes / No**

(Please outline if possible)

Did you find elements of the piece relatable to your own experience of the pandemic? *(please explain if possible)*

Did any elements leave you feeling unsure? Are there any parts which were not entirely clear?

Appendix E

Roger ***** <*****@gmail.com>

Thu 17/03/2022 16:50

To:

- Welham, Rachael L

Hi Rachael,

I watched your play last week, I must try and loose my Essex accent! :-), seriously though, well done.

I had no idea you would create something so encompassing, so inclusive, and so relevant to a body of people who are so often and deliberately overlooked, during our first interview.

Our struggles are real, and often ignored by an industry who relies upon us but usually refuses to include us, (Equity and BECTU are also partially to blame), so thank you for highlighting us.

The industry is suffering, and with our current climate, Brexit and Covid etc, I feel it is harder to envisage a sustainable lifestyle for someone contemplating a job, let alone a career in this profession.

I not sure if change will happen from the bottom up, (forced by a shortage of people now willing to endure this lifestyle), or from an industry driven agenda!.

Whatever happens, stay on it and write about it!

TTFN

Rog x

Appendix F

Link to the recording of the 'scratch performance' of *What Happens Now* on Friday 4th February 2022.

<https://vimeo.com/hartwilcox/review/675803845/3694dced65?fbclid=IwAR3naZ6246IxxkPgsBS0ih8ptT6nF0uRpqNWPx9lr8jV46-BiM2Oj366FcRA>

What Happens Now?

A Play by Rachael Leanne Welham

PROLOGUE

Stage is lit with nothing but six empty chairs filling the space, and various props which are representative of the individual characters.

SFX: "Three Little Birds" by Bob Marley and The Wailers begins to play. Blackout.

All Six Characters enter in darkness. The order does not need to be specific, except for RACH who is centre stage, although at a distance to the other performers.

Lights up to reveal actors in their relevant areas.

Unless specified, the actors do not acknowledge each other, they simply remain in their space. They may be doing tasks which represent their work in 'Lockdown': OLIVIA will be sitting with books, lap top on her lap, making phone calls, RICHARD sat with a TV remote in hand, in his pyjamas with a cup of coffee, MATT will be sitting with a pair of wire cutters, a pile of wires and microphones at his feet, JANE will be sat a small table with crossword puzzles and paper and pens, SARAH will be sitting in Office Smart, at a computer, writing notes, an instrument to the side. Finally, RACH will be in 'Zoom smart' - smart top, casual bottoms, surrounded by books, and various discarded toys.

SFX: Music to fade after the space has been established.

SARAH: This is over, the arts is dead.

It's a wasteland. There's gonna be no culture, what're we gonna do?

RICHARD: That was always in your head - was "the show must go on", so if you've got the flu or a cold you carried on. What happens now?

OLIVIA: How do we keep ourselves safe?

RACH: Is it going to be a distant memory? I don't know. It's hard to tell isn't it.

JANE: I think that's the hardest thing, it's not seeing your family. Really that's the hardest thing of all.

MARK: I don't know... it's just made me think...

A beat.

SARAH: I work on the ships. Jazz mainly. Never at home.

RICHARD: So I've been working here for about 20 years.

[With Pace, almost overlapping each other]

RACH: Secondary School Teacher. Drama. Wife. Mum

JANE: Retired. I've a very active life. Lots of Activities.

OLIVIA: Freelance Theatre Practitioner & Community Facilitator in Theatre.

MARK: I'm a Theatre Technician. Been here for 11 years.

Beat.

RACH: 2020.

OLIVIA: Lockdown

RICHARD: Furlough

SARAH: Contracts cancelled.

MARK: Flexible Furlough.

JANE: Stay at home.

SARAH: Panic sets in.

RICHARD: What happens now?

Part 1: The Consequences

RACH: Part One. The Consequences. We've lived in Lockdown. Hibernated. And now we're stepping out of our caves to see what changes have occurred.

Lights Fade on all but Richard. The actors remain on stage, but go about their work/life in a silent, subtle way, to still acknowledge their presence, but to not distract from the actor speaking.

RICHARD: The pantomime was the last show we did, then we then decided - we had already planned to make that the last show. So, we were supposed to be concentrating on getting the theatre back up and running for a big opening in September.

But with the - with what happened, that never happened, you know we're - we're a year late because of that, yeah and, and we're a year late because of the problems that covid is bringing to the contractors that were building it together.

But also we've also had the contractors themselves going into financial difficulties, they stopped and that put things on hold, we had another delay caused by things being stolen - raw materials that were bought into theatre to refurbish - they were stolen. I might go on, then it was hard to get replacements because of rations, yeah - and this was a copper wire - things like that, but you know that was stolen - there's a lot of wire that when you refurbish a theatre, you know, hundreds and hundreds of miles within wire - it's extraordinary - so somebody did very well, but anyway. So it's been an interesting journey.

Simultaneously, lights fade on RICHARD and rise on OLIVIA.

OLIVIA: It's hard. *(Pause)* But I think, I'm lucky that I'm, what? A decade into my career?

Because I have a very strong relationship with a few organizations that I am kind of associate for now - so being able to maintain or have that line of communication is really useful; I can push for programs to continue to run and I be there as soon as it opens to pitch the next project.

I don't think I would have been able to sustain that as someone just starting out. If you didn't have that, if you weren't going to be at the top of somebody's school list, I don't know how you could survive.

When it initially happened, it was call after call and email after email with this project's cancelled, this project's cancelled, this project's cancelled, this order is cancelled and suddenly you go from... What was it March having a kind of full diary until the autumn term and then suddenly having absolutely... *(Pause)*, nothing.

And not knowing what on earth you're going to do, because the support for freelancers came out much later than the furlough scheme came out. There was a kind of, not knowing what that would look like and then... I was very lucky to be one of the people who did get that, but there were lots of people, the majority of people, I know didn't qualify, which meant they got absolutely nothing.

You know I could afford to not be working. I mean, I lost a lot of money within that year and I was just lucky that, it wasn't I wasn't needing that to pay out for children, or parents or any other dependency.

I literally went from doing stuff pretty much solidly six days a week to having sometimes one day a week's worth of work. *(Pause)* It was really hard, and I think that I was reminded that, you know, it is not only your job, but also your hobby as well. So, it's like there were points where I thought Okay, I could probably go and get a job doing something else but I need to be able to see theatre to be to be satisfied.

Simultaneously, lights fade on OLIVIA and rise on SARAH.

SARAH: Yes, yeah. So, I play the trumpet and I sing on the ships, so, yeah but I used to back up a lot. So, I was in fact - remember Seal, the 90s pop star? I was in his band quite a while. I used to back him and now I am well, I do my own my own show.

Pause. A deep breath.

I got back from my cruise on the 12th of April (2020) and I had a whole diary of work cruises lined up. I was meant to fly out to Australia, and I was meant to get off in Sri Lanka and then do another cruise from Sri Lanka to Bali and somewhere else, home was meant to be 'just going to pop in for a little bit', get back, do my show, but then after I got back on the 12th of April, that was it. Cancelled.

And then we had to play it all kind of Nice, it's kind of cool, this has been a sabbatical with, do a bit of learning, practice and all that and then panic sets in - it was right, what're we going to do? Rationalise. This is all - this is over, the arts is dead.

A wasteland - there's gonna be no culture what we're gonna do?

Simultaneously, lights fade on SARAH and rise on MARK.

MARK: We're getting ready to - waiting for the bigwigs to decide what we're actually going to do. When we're going to we're going to start doing any shows or anything we've got plans for things to happen in the summer, but plans for other things that maybe happening

Whether it be for front of house in helping out the refurb or we're getting ourselves ready by tidying up and doing maintenance and all of that sort of stuff so we're - we're here but we're all doing things differently.

And we're - we're all here. we're all doing things and there should – there should be, I mean before we had the pandemic there was probably about 50 or so people who work full time but that's got hard because of - because of the pandemic, and so we had to let go 23 people.

23 people got made redundant. And 23 of my family is, is how I would describe that.

I've probably worked more with them and seen them more than I have my own wife and children over the last few years, and it was it was a big - a big wrench for them all.

Like, not even being able to say goodbye to them. Just, just, just like we had - we had a big meeting and they said 'Oh, this is what's happening, these people are being taken and they've had their - they're having conversations.'

But then, after this meeting or before this meeting I've been told, and it's just a bit like - well I can't tell the person that I've worked with for 10 years I can't like, go and say, 'Mate this is rubbish...can't go and tell her.' That sort of thing.

So that was a - that was a big, big thing for us losing our Theatre Family as we refer to us as. And then we're slowly trying to rebuild it.

There are there's a there's a few of us left to - the originals, as it were. And there's this - the newbies that are coming in and it's just us - us getting used to having new people and I'm not referring to the - (*jokingly*) 'you weren't there man - you don't know how it was'.

There's a bit of that... there's...

(*Then more serious again*) We've all done an awful lot together - with the old family. So, there's this just yes, I say getting used to the having new people and going 'oh shit you weren't here for that, so How did we do that when you weren't here,' 'how do I tell you to do that?'

Simultaneously, lights fade on MARK and rise on JANE.

JANE: Well, because I'm retired, I suppose it didn't actually affect us as much as people who are working and so on, but I think the thing the whole thing, looking back at lockdowns is that I think with the first one you sort of accept it because you had no idea that it was going to go on so long. I think, we were much more 'acting' in it all. Everything closed down; we went 'Yes, we've got to do that! We've all gotta rally round'.

And then I think as time went on, and we had a second Lockdown, we have the tiers, the third lockdown - I think if - you know - it changes people, and I mean I give a lot of support to my daughter with childcare and, of course, for a long time couldn't do, that mm hmm. My life was much more different than my husband's I mean we're both retired but he's a lot older than me I don't do you know Bob, Front of house, you know, but he had already sort of cut down since he's 86 this year. And he - he always. You know stayed at home, perhaps more than I did anyway - I'd a very active social life - lots of activities.

And so I think it affected *me* a lot more, you know, I was always going out seeing friends, I have you know those clubs, there was singing - I did this wonderful thing called 'At Five' which is theatre

related activities at the Headgate Theatre - I used to go to London and see shows and theatre and go to the Globe and all that sort of thing. Very, very active life and then suddenly - suddenly it reduced and it was just with my husband so... (*jovially, but with sarcasm*) We got to know each other very well.

Beat.

I missed the theatre though, very much. Have done Amdram for years, I used to go and see the Local Drama Societies' productions, but I always preferred being in musicals because I'm a singer as well as an actress.

I can remember, which play it was it was called "Ladies in Retirement" and how I got to be in it was that, Angela Smith decided the part was too big for her and she'd heard that I was resting my voice (*as she gestures to her throat*), because I got nodules on my vocal cords and I was told not to sing so I dropped out of singing for several months.

And she said, I heard you're not singing she said, so I wondered if you'd like to have a go with the Drama Society, would you like to go an audition for this part? So I did and got it and I enjoyed the experience so I kept on with the Drama Society. I really enjoyed the experience of doing straight plays for change. I could probably find out what year that was... (*rummaging in papers and programmes*) Just I've got it on programme here. Let's have a look when was it? Way back - oh it's 1994 - there you go. So since 1994 I've been involved with them. When I retired - *as soon* as I retired - everybody wanted me on their committee, I went to the friends of the West Cliff and I went on the Drama Society committee.

Simultaneously, lights fade on JANE and rise on RACH.

RACH: I mean, school is starting to feel a bit more normal now. I love my job – I love being in a room, seeing kids work together, create, explore. You can't beat it, but it's been so far from usual service for such a long time now.

I mean, Drama virtually just wasn't a thing, I had to replan everything, and even since we've been back they've been in 'bubbles'. Not gonna lie, when it all kicked off, I was a mess. I doubled my sertraline dose, and just tried hard to make it seem like everything was gonna be OK. I was trying to juggle home schooling, housework, exercise.

Even before covid hit, I didn't feel like I was doing a good job at anything. I was an average teacher, an average mum, average wife. My health was crap. I wasn't looking after myself. I had no idea how to be better at anything, I was stuck, and I was miserable.

Then the world stopped. All these things I was juggling were forced to happen only within my four walls. My home. My safe place. I had no choice but to put the brakes on, slow down, and reevaluate everything. And now (*she stands*) I'm emerging from it all as something different entirely.

As each character speak, lights go up on each one, RACH begins to have some awareness of the others, in subtle but clear glances.

RICHARD: I've come out of this year, this Covid year, A lot weaker a lot.

SARAH: I had some days of real darkness. Not wanting to listen to music. Just slept.

MARK: I felt deflated.

OLIVIA: How do we keep ourselves safe?

RACH: I think it's going to be very, very different for a long time and they'll be caution, for a long time now.

JANE: You know, it changes people.

Part 2 – Coping

RACH: Part 2. Coping. (*she returns to her seat*) Or not.

Lights fade to all but OLIVIA

OLIVIA: I think there was a period of like very initially sort of weird, enforced break like as a freelancer, it's really hard to take holiday. It's really hard to program that into your diary and schedule, because you're sort of paying for the holiday twice because you're paying to go on holiday, but also no one's paying you to have that time off of work.

You know that break in a sense, initially was nice to sort of catch your breath a little bit and go. 'Okay yeah no it's been really busy so it's like an enforced pause for me.'

Initially it was like 'We're just taking two weeks off.'

Then you start to think... Shit. This isn't just like a couple of weeks break. This is going to go on for a significant period of time...

I had a little bit of work throughout. I was fortunate, not to be one of the people who had absolutely nothing but going from doing stuff solidly six days a week to like having sometimes one day a week's worth of work, it was really hard.

And as lovely as the online stuff was, I found myself being the worst audience Member ever like I could never just sit and watch.

It is that communal experience after all, that coming together, in that moment, that space. It's that communal experience that is really missed, I think. Missing people's voices like, seeing people laugh, grab the tissues, or nod off (*laughing*).

Simultaneously, lights fade on OLIVIA and rise on RACH.

RACH: Yes, I was one of those who was doing PE with Joe every morning. It got me ready for a day at my desk, trying to teach drama over a computer screen all day. I've kept it up actually, just do something to move my body every day. Lost some weight too which is a bonus. Come off the sertraline as well. So it's not all bad I guess. I'm definitely a better teacher now because of it.

I don't think I would ever have started my Masters if it wasn't for the break. For years I'd been putting it off, putting it off. Waiting for the right time.

Stopping meant I could think about what I really wanted to do with my career, interests, *myself* – despite the hard times, there's lots of good that's come out of it, you know?

Pause.

I couldn't help but feel for the kids though, my own, and my students. Reality is, they haven't had anything communal, extra-curricular, whatever this year. No dance classes, no performances, no

leavers concerts, nativities, couldn't have a whole school assembly. We could watch the online streaming stuff, and get something out of it, but it's just more TV time for them, especially when they'd been on the computer doing virtual lessons all day. They really have missed out on so much. I mean the online-streaming has been great. It's great for accessibility and, and like closing the gap for people that aren't able to get to the theatre.

But actually, at the same time - Theatre is an experience, and etiquette is a thing and people should know how to behave at a theatre and how to enjoy a performance and behave when you're watching something.

Pause.

I think it's going to be very, very different for a long time and there'll be caution. But on the other hand, is it going to get to the point where there are no rules and there are no restrictions, and you know by this time next year... Is it going to be a distant memory, we can all remember when it was like that, and it'll be back to normal? I don't know. It's hard to tell isn't it?

Simultaneously, lights fade on RACH and rise on RICHARD.

RICHARD: And for me. Well I've been a lazy, lazy bugger for a long time.

I said to our technical manager that my physical fitness is different now. I've come out of this year, this Covid year, A lot weaker a lot. It's, it's... I get tired, a lot more - a lot more easily. A lot quicker and, my enthusiasm wanes very quickly, however it's getting better, it is a slow process.

But I did warn them - I did say this is what's going on and I need some help with this - the theatre has said on many occasions, "That's okay do what you can do. If you struggle, if you have a problem come and talk to us, and we'll have a workaround."

That's been really good.

We had different circumstances it wasn't just covid that stopped everything because I'm part time so I give them hours whenever they want to use them and I used them all up by February of that year, and so I wasn't supposed to be working from the first of February until possibly a little bit in May and they wanted me to take all my annual leave, and everything too, so they could have all my hours, when we were moving back into the theatre. Do a lot for a month and then covid hit and I didn't do anything for *two* months.

Pause. A deep breath.

And then my mother died and I didn't do anything for three months and, and I was...

Pause, another deep breath.

You get into a kind of a brain fog and I got depressed and then we buried my mum and then...

I thought and I got really...

Yeah I was very depressed in the summer.

Then my wife said to me when the lockdown lifted, she said 'Me and Angela', her best friend, and our best friend, 'we're going to meet up and basically we're going to have a glass of wine and then a Chinese meal'. She said, 'Richard, come,' and I sat there and I thought, no I don't want to. I don't feel the 'want'.

And then I thought 'what's wrong with you?' And I thought, *(laughing in reflection)* 'I am depressed - absolutely - if I don't want to go and have some beer and a Chinese.'

Yeah you're not well, phone the doctor and I said this is what's going on, so they put me on some medication for it.

It did work. But obviously it takes a while.

But during that time as well because I'd been sedentary for so long... when I started to kick myself up the ass and say right go out and do a bit of exercise, go, do this - I got injured.

I've got a medical condition in my foot called a plantar fasciitis, which is the muscle on the bottom of your foot from your toe to your heel and something happened to it - so walking became impossible.

So, then had another month where I couldn't do anything, because it was painful to walk. So I was all alone indoors again.

I got back to work in November, the first of November, or second of November, and I was hobbling. *(Taking a deep breath)* I was just coming out of being miserable. More weight than I had usually and everything was just a bit dire.

It was...it was horrible.

(Trying to be more chipper) But we've worked our way through that and, and it was a combination of everything - not working, a combination of the way the theatre started and finished, a combination of Covid, my mother, injuries. Horrible.

So, so we went back to work in November and me and my... me and Annie who have been working together, since November - she left. She left last week actually, she's got a new job.

Pause.

But I think because there's been no time off, because we've gotten the agenda to get the building up and running my mental health in that respect has suffered.

But I've been trying to work at that. *(Laughing to himself)* I started - now this is bizarre - I started taking a little time myself, at about five o'clock most days, watching some really strange things on the

Internet, and when I say strange, I mean old Russian films and finding some different, (*A pause, thinking how to word it*) different visually and mentally stimulant.

And then this led me on to searching around and I ended up finding some series on things like Netflix or Sky or whatever, that I wouldn't of dreamed of watching beforehand, but I've loved it. It's just been something different to do in a time when all my normal things stopped I guess.

And, as I said, I got quite depressed because I wasn't mobile and I do like to walk a lot and I couldn't walk.

The person I worked with Annie; she was fantastic. And we didn't - it wasn't that we didn't get on before we just didn't really work closely together.

But between the two of us, we've developed a really nice, supportive relationship there. You know? So yeah, so it's just been really, really nice finding out about her, what she has been doing to get through it all. What she has planned, because she's only young. She's got her whole career ahead of her. That's been very supportive and I think on a reciprocal basis as well, you know? I know she's enjoyed it. So it's been great. I'm going to miss her actually. There's been no conflict there, which is more than I can say about others. Dear me.

Simultaneously, lights fade on RICHARD and rise on SARAH.

SARAH: It's interesting because, while I was on the cruises I was... I kinda wanted to get out of it, you know it's like it's... it's... I was doing like 30 cruises a year, and it was a matter of Sometimes I get back from South America and I have four days at home and then I'm having to get to America, and it would be I wouldn't see my other half and packing, always packing, living out of one bag.

It is quite a lonely life. Very lonely – on the stage and then you're lonely, and so I did want to kind of get out of that a little bit. But I never thought that a company would take me on.

So I'd like, I'd like to do a balance of both really, I did quite a lot of work on land before the cruises and so now I'd like to, try and get that balance. It's all been tipped up on its head and it's kind of like, am I going to get the perfect balance now?

Because you just find yourself going 'oh I don't know' you know, taking the bookings in, looking over I've got, I've got it yeah and you can't say no, because if you say no, then you shut the door on that part of your life and you really don't want to shut the door on things... I don't know... I kind of want the best of both worlds really.

So it's interesting but, then again it goes through periods of looking back on my life and thinking I'm really missing that show buzz.

I think you know what? I wasn't really enjoying it at the time, so I think this whole period has been stages of total elation of going 'Oh, my goodness I've got no job and then Oh, wait – I've got a new job!'

Doing the cruises was lovely it's a lovely way of life, but it's very long and but I only did two 45 minute shows a week, that was it and I just go walking around. With all this spare time, but no where to go.

But flash forward to now. Well I still can't go anywhere I guess (*laughing*)

Simultaneously, lights fade on SARAH and rise on JANE.

JANE: I think we really felt it with doing the play 'Brassed Off' because we cast it, we went for our first rehearsal and we were told to Lockdown so we never rehearsed. And you know we just thought 'Oh well'. Never thought it would take us two years to finally get it on the stage.

But yes, I've kept busy. You have to you know? I wrote a poem too, in one of my clubs. Did it over zoom. It really helped me. Did you want to hear it?

She stands and reads from a piece of paper next to her. A general wash of light across the stage, to unit the actors as they share Jane's writing.

When of the twelve-week lockdown we were told,
Just for the over seventies, we cried,

RICHARD: (*standing*) 'So many of us healthy! We're not old!'

JANE: But as obedient citizens we complied.

MARK: The weeks stretched out before me – misery!

JANE: Act V , AmDram, Choir, Theatre – all were paused.

OLIVIA: No family to hug, no friends to see,

(Sarah begins to stand and busy herself around her desk)

JANE: Just endless housework, cooking – all those chores!

RICHARD: (*sitting once more*) But now I find too swiftly fly the days;

JANE: I'm keeping fit with yoga , Joe's P E.

OLIVIA: (*she stands*) Walks in the sun.

SARAH: Zoom

RACH: Face Time

OLIVIA: Streaming plays

SARAH: And a hefty pile of books waiting for me !

JANE: So cake not baked or job not done, I say,

ALL: 'I really haven't had the time today !'

They laugh and acknowledge each other in the moment. The silence comes over them again, they return to their seats.

OLIVIA: Theatre is a communal experience. I miss people's voices.

MARK: (*almost to RICHARD in a mutual understanding*) You work in a theatre because of the kind of excitement of a theatre at the end of the day, with the - you know - the journeys of productions from the beginnings to final show...

RICHARD: And one of the things that was always in your head was 'the show must go on', so if you've got the flu or a cold you carried on. What happens now?

RACH: They're missing out on so much.

JANE: We were getting quite anxious.

OLIVIA: This is a minefield definitely, absolute minefield and it's yes... definitely not, not, not over just yet.

SARAH: Hmm - we're not out of the woods, by any means.

MARK: I would say I don't know if it's made me - made me think do I still want to do this?

Part 3 – Family

RACH: Part 3. Family.

It's sad really. The kids saw their first pantomime in lockdown, we streamed it, and they loved it. I can't wait to take them next year. Their innocence in all this has been a blessing really. Gracie said she liked 'the bug' because I didn't have to go to work and we've done lots of fun things. If only we could all have that perspective, hey?

Lights fade on all but MARK

MARK: But on the flip side of it all. The time I've got to have with my family has just been.... it has just been incredible.

I'm not actually entirely sure how we would have coped if I was at work full-time while my son was still bottle feeding, and my wife was expressing milk rather than giving formula. To be able to do so much, and to be a part of that was something I thought wouldn't be possible.

The times we spent as a four, playing silly games, going for a daily walk, and all that everyone went through was a time of worry, but also a time of joy. I helped my daughter learn how to ride her bike. I saw my son take his first tentative steps.

I mean, that's something that I wouldn't have been able to see if work hadn't been forced to stop.

I actually got to know my own daughter better. I could be part of her life for her schoolwork, and on weekends. Whereas before it was only when I had the odd weekend off that we'd get to spend any time together, and usually then there would be some sort of plan in the calendar to ensure we did something nice together as a family – now I know that I don't need to fill those weekends with exciting days out. Actually being at home is just as special.

It was great being there with them, I got to see more of my son than my daughter when she was that age, because obviously I was just working. And I was already a bit more involved with my son anyway, just because of with, with how he was born so...

Pause.

I've seen yeah, I've seen him grow in the time that we've been in lockdown you know from him crawling and then walking and babbling and all the stuff like that I wouldn't have seen.

(Laughing to himself) I don't know if it has improved my relationship with my daughter. Probably made it worse - we argue like cats and dogs - she's five - stubborn as an ox, that is how I would describe my daughter - pure stubborn!

But yes it's been it's been really it's I think that's the only one good thing I suppose about this Lockdown is that I spent a lot more time with my family.

And spending the time with my son, my son Alex and watching him become the crazy little boy, that he is. I mean, he doesn't let us get any sleep, but you can't have it all!

But, you know, it's getting there. Slowly actually but yeah I think that's the only overriding thing is the thing that I've got to spend an awful lot of time with my family and then it's I would say I don't know if it's made me made me think, 'Do I still want to do this?'

It's sort of made me go 'Well, do I still need to do shows? Do I still want to be a theatre technician? Do I want to go, and do something else instead? So that I can be with my family more. I don't know... it's just made me think...

Simultaneously, lights fade on MARK and rise on OLIVIA.

OLIVIA: I saw my Nan and my aunts on the weekend. And I hugged her when she came in and it was just. So lovely. I've been to like where she lives and we chatted at the door and stayed distance from each other, and we've spoken on the phone a few times, but this would have been the first time, we would have been together as a family, and that we would have hugged since Christmas 2019. And then we say that out loud you think, it's fucking mental. But I think you just accept and keep going. *(Changing topic, as if to avoid building emotion)* That New 'Amelie' is very good, by the way, I saw that the other day. I really loved it. I'm not sure that it's on for that much longer, but you should try and get to see it – it is really, really good.

Simultaneously, lights fade on OLIVIA and rise on JANE.

JANE: I mean I give a lot of support to my daughter with childcare and, of course, for a long time couldn't do that. Usually, like pickups and drop offs and things like that - so I collect them from school two days a week, normally have them, you know, until she comes collect them, give them Tea here and, in fact, my, my youngest, the youngest one, only just started school in September, and so before that I was having him for an entire day to help the childcare so that was a big difference.

(Pause) I think, in circumstances, of course, because we didn't see we didn't see them at all, except on screen, which was really hard.

I mean, my other grandson, who was nine at the time, he could understand it more, you know that he should keep away, and you know not go up to us, and so on, but I think it was a very, very difficult time, and because my other grandchildren, they live in Coventry, right, so we didn't... We saw them in summer, when things eased up in August, with my daughter, myself and her boys went up and stayed in a Premier Inn so that we could then go and see them.

But that was it, you know we've only seen each other on screen. It was really hot in the UK, in the Easter holidays; he actually came down - my son - because he separated from his wife, sadly, and he

came down with his boys, you know we met at the beach, in the fresh air and that was the first time we've seen them since last August.

It's really, really hard I think - that's the hardest thing, not seeing your family.

Really that's the hardest thing of all.

Lights go up to reveal all actors once more, although this time remain up, as if to suggest an increasing sense of unity.

OLIVIA: Once you're into that period of isolation, I realized I'd kind of I guess been holding... you're holding your breath.

RICHARD: But nobody understands the journey that we've had. The show must go on, hey?
The characters 'humph' to indicate the annoyance of the term 'the show must go on'

SARAH: I just thought if this is it – forever. This might be a forever, this could be...

JANE: It was quite surreal because... there was no weekend, there was no going back to work, and so it all sort of blended into this, 'we're here', you know, 'we're just here'

MARK: Home has become my safe place. Always will be I guess.

Part 4 – Understanding

RACH: Part 4. Understanding. Or lack thereof.

Throughout this section the characters begin to acknowledge their mutual experiences in some elements of dialogue, with slight laughs, nods of agreement, or raised eyebrows of disbelief.

OLIVIA: People are starting to say we're out of the worse of it now, but its just seems crazy.

Because it just doesn't feel like that at all. But also within our industry, you know we're not out of it it's a - you know, even in being in the office today, it was like oh this person is having to go and get a PCR and maybe the cast will have to swap around and then that has an impact on the understudies and do they need to phone them? Do these people need to be paid more?

And it's a constant worry, a constant slog, We had it in our summer school - actually one of our young people tested positive and then, after the initial like 'okay, shit' what do we, what do we do, how do we keep the rest of the young people safe? How do we keep ourselves safe?

It was like, now we've got to isolate for 10 days and then... the next projects impacted. Because I'm freelance and have this portfolio career, it didn't just impact that one project, it impacted the one after too. Just, crazy.

RICHARD: So, I've had a couple of run ins with my technical manager yesterday and today, coincidentally enough yesterday's was I tried to book some time off, we were told we weren't allowed to book time off. From November to, well, from November onwards.

They wanted to ensure we were on hand, because the opening was approaching, and obviously we had to get everything finished by the opening date.

Then I said to him last week I would like to, perhaps, move my hours around a bit just so I can be more flexible. And he said 'yeah that's fine, there's nothing happening, yeah, you know do what you want,' and so I booked something online for me and my wife and our best friend to go away and celebrate, next week, and I came in yesterday, and he said 'Oh, I made a mistake we've got Pink Floyd Tribute band rehearsing next week' and I said, 'well, I can't I've booked stuff.'

And so we had this big argument about stuff. About him changing his mind. About the pressure. About how I'm sixty and can't do these endless hours that those young'uns can. I mean I went part time for a reason, and that was before all this Covid stuff. Before I became the lazy bugger. Medicated. Injured. It wasn't nice.

And, that left me last night in such a place where I came home and I wasn't particularly in a good place. *(Pause)* My wife asked if I was alright, but I didn't want to tell her because I didn't want her to be upset about the fact that I'd lost one of the days that I had for annual leave, that our trip away was

going to be cut short. *(The anger fades slightly, his voice softens)* I kept it in I guess. Kept the angry in.

And then today because I was still angry about it I reacted badly about some contractors coming in again to fix a problem. But, you see, what they do is they just leave a mess everywhere.

And I've been to the facilities manager and I said look it's really unfair when they walk around the building and they do their job here, their job there, and they leave all that crap everywhere, and I have to clear it up. It's just not respectful.

SARAH: I think in performance, I got addicted to adrenaline and targets and challenges and having to do that and the rewards and then covid hit, and all I had is just days of nothing. Like, literally if I didn't get out of bed, no one would have known?

I'd kind of go and sleep, I slept for like four days, and I'm wondering 'how long can I sleep for?'

And then kind of like 'Should we just get drunk tonight?', because there's nothing on tomorrow - it's something to do! I would just sit - not really seeing the point in anything and then not wanting to listen to music, because if you listen to music, then you miss it and you remember what you would do and... So just kind of not wanting to get involved in that or remember those, those times, or how you were just, you know. I, you know, I just thought, if this is it - forever This might be a forever, this could be...

Pause.

I just didn't want to remind myself of those times. You don't want to miss them so I ignored it, and I guess that's how I've ended up in Education Recruitment.

OLIVIA: You're essentially stuck - you know? I either work or lose money, the company loses money because they have to pay out twice and then once you're into that period of isolation, *(struggling to get her words out)* I realized I'd kind of... I guess I had been holding... you're holding your breath.

It was like, now I have to isolate for 10 days I can breathe a bit because I'm like well it's a bit annoying but now I've sorted out all the bits of the puzzle and I'm not waiting for that to happen again.

And it will. *(Pause)* It will be interesting to see how long that continues to go on for because, yeah it doesn't feel like it'll every really be over.

(A pause, and a change of subject, as her emotion tries to creep in once more, and she attempts to block it out)

I mean now, the risk assessments are huge. There's a lot of work to be done around the elderly or Disabled communities. They can't be shielding forever, but they may still be unsure, apprehensive, to get involved in projects again?

What does it mean to bring these projects, back in a rehearsal room again and what does it mean to ask these people to come back in person? I mean this whole "Show Must Go on Campaign" was great but... It just feels like a sticky point I guess that idea of carrying on...

I think that was maybe like an unfortunate title for it because I think what people - what we're - facing as an industry is, it is the kind of uncertainty. The endless uncertainty. As a sector we rely so much on box office sales to be financially stable that the minute those theatres close...

SARAH: Anyway, well – with work gone. Income was gone. So, we tried to sell the House because we couldn't really afford to keep up the Mortgage payments. We tried to reevaluate life and kind of go, ' So we sell this House, we have to move to achieve'

And I kinda of went from these days of panic of I must find work, to a massive depression because I felt like I'd lost it all. So I signed up to job sites. Anything that popped up, I thought, I'll do that, I'll do that and then going , 'Oh my God what was I thinking? We nearly sold the House!' Thank God we didn't. We could have made some ridiculously rash decisions.

Then, I suppose, when this job came up, they literally interviewed me to be a teacher on the Wednesday, but they asked me to fill another role in the company, I got interviewed by this new place on a Friday and by the next Monday I started the job, and it was kind of like well why not, because... How can you turn down anything, you know?

RACH: I mean, what about Sick Days? (*She stands*) Not even just like the theatre environment with like live performance but, in any sort of working environment it's always been like you mustn't have sick days, you can't have time off or, you know, you only stay off the day that you're kind of dead in bed, but if you feel a little bit better the next day you're going to work. That's gonna change, surely, because you could potentially still have whatever it is, and be contagious if you go in three days after, like the culture needs to change! If you are poorly, you are allowed to - you know - it's not frowned upon if it's like four or five days off to make sure you're 100% better? Surely that's how it has got to be now?

And one of the things that was always in your head was 'the show must go on', so if you've got the flu or a cold you carried on.

What happens now?

RICHARD: I think, in theatre, we are just used to it all being a team effort. Everyone cracks on, plays their part, and is mindful of each other. Everyone has the same aim at the end of the day – to put on a good show. But these contractors, their aim is to do the job. Which was fine when it was just them in there doing their thing for the refit. But now, because the building's been handed back over to us, I have to oversee everything. So if it isn't cleared up...oh it's my job!

Well, that turned out to be bollocks because they were just walking around leaving crap everywhere. One came in this morning to fix a problem that they had not been able to fix beforehand, and I thought, I've got to solve this. I said to the facilities manager about them, not making a mess anymore so I'll be buggered if I'm going to clear it up.

And he said well they're very, very busy you know.

I said it is not about if they're busy or not busy, this is about respect and disrespect! Why should I? I'm not paid to be a manservant to a contractor, why should I clear up after them?

We got into a bit of an argument and then and it's not like me to to really, really have a go at somebody but we ended up almost tooth and nail!

OLIVIA: The stamina is, it is a real thing you know, going back to doing a week summer school. Like I would have done that standing on my head before.

I'd probably also work every evening on something different, as well.

And this evening, I was late to come on to zoom because I was working in the offices today and I forgot how long it takes to actually leave somewhere you're working, but when you were at home, you can close the computer, and that's it.

But then when you're in an office it takes twenty minutes to even leave the building, let alone get home.

I think I got into quite a good routine in the lockdowns: working from home, getting up and setting my schedule, going for a walk and setting my workstation up and starting work at a particular time and then being able to like close the laptop and not work of an evening.

But old ways are starting to slowly creep back in...

It's harder to juggle multiple things at once.

It was definitely weird working from one place and I had to like get (which I now love), but I had to – it took me ages to kind of work out all the different jobs that I had to do because i'm so used to where I'm going dictating what I'm doing so like today, I went to the Donnmar and that and say my head clicks into that work or I would travel to X place or Y place on my work, I would be in different locations every day, but that, like physically going somewhere put you into the mindset of the work. I

didn't realize how much a place, and that physical journey to different places as a freelancer helps you to kind of switch your head into what is next.

JANE: Lots has changed I suppose, but we have kept our little lockdown routine, even though life's getting a bit busier, we have this routine where we have, a morning coffee together and we do a crossword and a quiz or a sudoku, it that how you say it? And that's there to keep the old brain cells going. So, we do that in the morning, and we do that again after our lunch.

I make sure we had regular times to have our meals and I've got really sick of cooking I have to say. I don't think I realised how much the odd lunch out with friends, or Sunday Roast round my daughters made the monotony of cooking that much easier.

RACH: I remember, we were doing 'Sound of Music' and a sickness bug went round and our Maria had it on the technical rehearsal. And then by the dress rehearsal and one of the children had it and then on the first show, but no one went home, like everyone was there, because 'I have to be on stage', they were like, taking to drinking flat coke and whatever when off stage and got themselves back on stage doing their thing.

You literally just couldn't do that now, I can just... *(Pause)* We're so aware of how stuff can spread I think we've, we've always known how stuff can spread but it's never been so, like, such a kind of a forefront thing and such a risk and the world is just changed... that kind of that yeah, that show must go on culture, completely gone I think hasn't it?

There's so many different factors to how life might change, not only on the stage itself but around the working hours, even the fact that in other industries it's now become quite normal that you can spend a couple of days a week, working from home - some people have wanted to do that, for years, like the childcare and logistics and cost of travel and commuting and the stress of all that.

And all of a sudden they're like yeah you can do that two days a week and then it's changed some people's lives because you know Two days a week, not having to commute you literally cut your costs down by 40% and all of a sudden you've got more money to play with, and you know, the quality of your life can be so much better in that respect.

RICHARD: We had a half an hour discussion where it went angrily up there and then back down and a lot of the time he was saying, "Rich, this isn't you you're not like this, this isn't you what's - what's behind all this?"

What is behind all this? I don't know. But I guess it's the fact that you know, since November we've not been allowed to have annual leave and you know, it's been unpleasant working conditions, with

social distancing, and masks, and not being able to do much to let off steam because everything's been bloody shut. And it is not thought about.

We've made the theatre, a working place for everybody else. But all the new buildings have been pristine and lovely done by the contractors, new desks and offices so everybody that's coming back into the theatre to work again oh isn't this lovely, it's so nice.

Anyway, rant over.

ALL characters stand simultaneously on MARK's line.

MARK: Freedom Day.

ALL form a line towards the front of the stage during these lines.

RICHARD: Trepidation.

SARAH: Traffic Light Systems

JANE: A ping-demic.

OLIVIA: Jovial show announcements on Twitter, followed by updates in the weeks, days or hours leading up to a show with the words -

RICHARD: Unfortunately

MARK: Covid.

SARAH: Cancelled.

JANE: This summer may be the industry's most challenging period yet.

OLIVIA: Everything is so stacked with risk –

SARAH: Financial risk

RICHARD: Morale risk.

JANE: Audience confidence and inclusion.

MARK: From the actors to the ushers, from running a bar to the core staff –

RACH: The whole operation feels very, very fragile.

SARAH: We'll be feeling the impact of this hesitancy for a long time to come.

OLIVIA: If the industry somehow surmounts this hurdle, how long before it falls completely? We are in a long and complex ride trying to keep a steady, joyful, welcoming, sustaining theatre industry going, despite what the government does or does not do, and despite what the virus throws at us.

As OLIVIA delivers this line, they all intertwine among each other, gradually finding their way back to their seat.

Part 5 – Reflection

RACH: Part 5. Reflection. Pause. Wonder.

RICHARD: And now... Is it going to change for the foreseeable future? Will there be a different style of theatre? Or different style of experience when you when you say to yourself 'well I'm going to go to the theatre' - will that, that experience be different moving forward?

Pause. He stands.

But one of the other things that's come out of it is I used to get two or three colds a year and I didn't get any this year because of the hand washing and My wife has always said to me wash your hands more you won't get so many colds and, and this year, obviously with washing our hands and I didn't – I should have – but you know, I wonder if that culture, if that can be maintained, will make a big difference?

RACH: (*Approaching Richard's area*) I was saying to my head of department, like, we've just had a cohort of year 11s go through with a drama GCSE, some of which haven't actually been to the theatre.

Because in normal circumstances, we would make sure that as part of the course, they would have at least one live theatre experience. I mean, I know a lot of them go anyway, would go with families or would have at least watched a panto or something but, yeah there are - I know for a fact there are at least two in that class I've given a GCSE grade to that haven't actually been to a theatre.

JANE: I think everything is back to normal. I'm going back swimming again, the gym's open. The At Five thing that I do at the Headgate Theatre for over 50s on a Monday morning has started again. It is slightly different, they have a limited a little bit of the movement, we stay in the same group instead of swapping over, just little things that have changed. And the other singing group, because we rehearse in trinity church, there are strict rules, we have to do we have to space ourselves, we have to wipe down everything we touch before we leave.

So it's not quite the same, but it's all back.

SARAH: I signed up for some supply agencies - thought 'right well education is going to still keep going' and I found teacher booker on a website and I thought I'll sign up for them and then it looked kind of bit quirky - a bit different. The company looked a bit different, in a good way, and then during the interview the lady who interviewed me said, you know what we're looking for some people to work for the agency in development, and so I, and I said well I've never done this job - I don't know about computers, literally I don't know anything really.

Despite that, they took me on, so I've been trained up to do a whole new set of skills in the last year.

MARK: And having had like nearly a year off and not doing my job, and I think we're all a bit like what we did before, with the first snow queen that we - we didn't we sort of had a bit of build up to it. And then, and then we went straight into doing nine to 10 days as in 9am to 10pm. And I think it knackered us all by the end. By the time we got to the end of the show we were all a bit - we're all ready for a week off.

RICHARD: I know, the industry is looking into the fact that, an actor or a person from stage management has a fixed, amount of hours per week. I wonder if all of these things will make created different theatre. One that's perhaps less frenetic in so much as, 'Here's another one', 'Here's another one', 'Here's another one', and it might take longer to get something there, but the process for everybody concerned, will be healthier - I don't know.

SARAH: In fact, you know, and you go to Facebook and you're looking at your pictures from a year ago. *(She stands, moves towards the front of her desk, leans against it)*

A year ago on the ships, other side of the world, on the stage doing the variety shows and doing all the things. Selfies in the sunshine, cocktails in the Captain's Lounge.

And I never would have guessed that in years' time, and this wasn't even this room, you know this was a spare bedroom and yeah so now it's becoming my little office and yeah...

The music *(Pause)* It's taken a backseat and as you can see, I'm still trying to put up a green screen, do projects with some others in the industry. Zoom Orchestra, charity projects. I'm still kind of trying to keep my feet in both, you know?

OLIVIA: So, what do we do?

RICHARD: What about them?

MARK: What about me?

RACH: What happens now?

OLIVIA: It's difficult because I think there was a mixture of a kind of push to get back and I can see why that happened because there's a lot of sense like actually the processes, you know, the way in which theatre works, we know we have strong front of house and stage management teams, you can put like brilliant procedures in place that could keep you far safer than going to bar or a club for a night out, and I think when those places opened it was hard to swallow, but comparatively, How is this less risky?

But I think, you know, certainly, initially, nobody wanted the show to go back. People just wanted to have the financial support to stay closed to keep everybody as safe as possible, and then, when that

financial support wasn't coming it was like well you've got to do one or the other, so if you're not stepping up to financially support us; You need to let us be able to go back!

Especially once other things started to come back. Schools, bars, football.

MARK: Theatre was last.

RACH: It was the first thing to shut and the last thing to come back.

OLIVIA: And even closing initially was really complicated because it was 'guidance' that you shouldn't be in large crowds and you should avoid large crowds and avoid long periods of being inside with people you don't know and say it wasn't that we were forced to shut so Theatres made the decision to shut, but that was on a financial impact for them and those businesses, because we weren't forced to completely shut up shop.

SARAH: No money. No job. Contracts cancelled.

MARK: 23 of my family. Not even being able to say goodbye to them.

OLIVIA: And, as restrictions are coming to an end, tier systems in place, testing processes and a lot of theatres are debating:

JANE: We can have a full capacity audience, which will essentially mean profit, wages. but what does that mean for Our disabled audience members or the vulnerable?'

OLIVIA: They might not yet feel comfortable coming and being in those non-socially distance theatres - say you'll see some theatres doing, you know, X amount of performances, a week that are still socially distant and X amounts of performances that aren't socially distant because they need to do that in order to financially function.

You know, there was a period I think around Christmas 2020, when you could open again but lots of theatres didn't because they couldn't open on that reduce model. It was not financially viable for them to open.

JANE: We were getting quite anxious, I think, towards the production of "Brassed Off".

Asking everybody to take tests before they came through. We've been really worried that somebody would get it for show week and then what could we do? With amateur groups you don't have understudies.

RACH: There's so many things I want to say it in my mind I'm still like I mean "Frozen" is only, what, three weeks away? And I want to go so much, but I'm still too scared to tell Gracie. It's her first west end show. It just ruins the excitement doesn't it, because... I want to be excited for it like I wanted to be excited for her dance show.

But I wasn't, I just worried the entire time because I was constantly nervous, because obviously Cooper was isolating. So dealing with logistics - the fact he couldn't leave the House. To come and get Gracie but not coming into the House and it just made the whole thing just a stress, whereas normally it would be a week full of pure joy and excitement...

OLIVIA: Cinderella closed because of a close contact and then chose not to open again until after the 19th of August, but they can't afford to continue to keep closing the show for 10 days, because one person in the company test positive, it's complicated.

I'm glad I haven't had to make most of those decisions.

RACH: We're all trying here, but it's scary. Worrying. But that's what we do I guess, we get up. We carry on. (*Looking towards OLIVIA, when OLIVIA see she looks away*) Not even thinking about the damage we might be doing underneath it all, to ourselves.

JANE: I have to say now that we're sort of out and about and I've had to go out three evenings a week because I do a singing rehearsal as well, so three evenings a week I'm out, and I really look forward to my nights in because actually it's made us realize that it's quite a good idea, sometimes to slow down a bit.

It certainly has with me because. You know I've always been somebody goes from one thing to another, and every day was like a jigsaw where I go from here and I go to there and, like I now think knowing actually doing something on that day, I won't book something up for the afternoon as well. You do, I think, you do begin to pace yourself a bit more and realize that you don't have to live life to a frenetic pace.

MARK: Whereas normally obviously if we, the way that it would work is you do one build week, which you do 9am to 10pm pretty much every day. Then the next week you do your tech week, and for that, from the Monday to the Saturday you pretty much do nine 9am till 10pm. Then you get into the run of the show after that, so you have like two maybe three solid weeks of ridiculous hours, doing like 90 hours in a week.

(*Realising the weight of it all*) But you just get used to doing that. I think, for the next show, we've got like three weeks to build up to those hours from the furlough hours. We've got the build a week, we've got another week to sort out the video and everything, and then they've got a rehearsal week and then we've got a tech week so we've got a little bit of time to build up to it, I suppose, for us to (*pause*)... to get used to it again.

MARK glances down at the box at his feet, as if he has packed it up for the final time.

RACH: (*Looking towards MARK*) For some, I guess it has caused a complete turnaround. Re-evaluation.

OLIVIA: I think we're still at the point now where, covid is still a huge risk and then, once we get over covid being a huge risk -whenever that will be - we fall into the period of seeing truly how that period of closure will impact the life of that theatre.

RACH: Stepping into the Theatre again... it had kinda lost that magic. I wanted to be buzzing with excitement for Gracie's first time up there, but I was just like this (*holding up a shaking hand*), just a mess. I was shaking, I could feel my breath getting short, I was holding my mum's hand for dear life because just being round all of those people, after so long being in our own little bubble, was just terrifying.

SARAH: Welcome to the West Cliff Theatre.

JANE: Do you know where you are sitting?

MARK: Please wear your mask until you are seated.

RICHARD: Oh, and don't cough!

RACH: I mean I text Drew, and said 'Oh, my goodness, this is horrible, I'm in a room full of people - (*inhaling to calm*) like deep breaths' - his reply was "not too deep" (*laughing*) well...

We're facing similar battles back at school – full expectations of us "carrying on as normal" but you battle with attendance enough in school theatre clubs, with kids being pulled here and there for different things, but now we've got the 10-day isolation period after a positive PCR, and let's be honest, if we get one case in that school it'll spread like wildfire, so setting scenes will be an absolute nightmare.

I just can't fathom getting back to 'normal'. I mean you know me, I used to love a bit of Am Dram, but realistically, I can't see myself getting back to that again.

JANE: I think a lot of us do still worry. I mean it's wonderful that we've all been vaccinated and protected, but it is still there. And people who've been vaccinated can still get it.

I think everybody's very keen to get on with it and in committee meetings we are planning ahead, and I think, yeah I think we're trying to be very positive. I think people just are keen to do things.

RACH: (*To JANE*) You need to be doing things, keeping active is so important to keep your brain working. You can't hide away forever.

MARK: We're still on 24 hours but we're building up, back to 40 and beyond again probably... It is a big jump.

OLIVIA: So, what do we do?

JANE: What do we do?

SARAH: So, what do I do?

RICHARD: What about them?

MARK: What about me?

RACH: So much has changed hasn't it?

MARK: Crazy turn around really.

RACH: I could be saying all this though, and when they finally give up on all the restrictions I'll go back to 100 miles per hour, burning myself out.

EPILOGUE

On delivering the following lines, each character speaks out to the audience, coming forward, in unity, as they deliver their line. MARK and SARAH end up on the end of the line, to represent their departure from the industry.

OLIVIA: We paint a picture of an industry that has struggled to survive and faced huge financial strain - but remains resilient and adaptable.

RICHARD: Over 95% of surveyed theatre organisations around the UK reported being worse off because of Covid.

SARAH: Many of the highly skilled freelance theatre workforce have been forced to take alternative jobs during the pandemic, or even leave the sector altogether.

All characters turn their heads to MARK on this line.

MARK: It has also been a year in which we have truly witnessed the resilience, creativity and community-mindedness of theatre.

JANE: It all feels very very fragile

RACH: Theatre is a house of cards.

SARAH: What're we gonna do?

RICHARD: That was always in your head, was "the show must go on", so if you've got the flu or a cold you carried on.

RACH: Is it going to be a distant memory, we can all remember when it was like that and it'll be back to normal?

ALL: What happens now?

Beat.

SARAH: I work from home. Education mainly.

RICHARD: Part time technician. Husband.

RACH: Teacher. Wife and Mother. MA Student

JANE: Retired.

OLIVIA: Freelance Theatre Practitioner, .

MARK: Dad. Husband.

RICHARD: Nobody understands the journey that we've had.

And that's - I think - what pissed me off the most.

SFX: "Tomorrow" (Annie) by Marisha Wallace begins to play, as the lights fade, the characters wander back to their respective areas.

CURTAIN.