

**In theatre, fiction is being underrated**  
**(by Lyn Gardner, The Guardian, 26/05/2014)**

Verbatim plays are lauded, but they are no more true as theatre than fiction, or even a combination of both: it's story that matters.

One of the errors that verbatim theatre often makes is to conclude that because something is true, it is more interesting. Or rather, more interesting than something that has been made up. It's like those Hollywood movie openings that tell you the film you are about to see is "based on a true story". Why should that give it any more currency than a story that has been entirely made up and yet feels as if it's real – or more real than real? After all, imagination is the currency of all writers and theatre-makers.

The interest in *London Road* – revived next week by Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, in what is a very brave choice – is not merely in the fact that it is based on interviews with people living in Ipswich in the wake of the murders of several young women, but in its musical form. *The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's* *Life and Times* is fascinating as a theatre experience, not because it is based on 16 hours of phone conversations with a young woman called Kristen Worrell, but because of the way it shapes and presents that lived experience in multiple formats from country house murder mystery to illuminated manuscript.

Both shows recognise that even when based on somebody else's words, the truth exists not inherently in the words themselves but in the way they are offered up to us, in what is unspoken or lies beneath them.

One of the things that made Tamasha Theatre's play, *My Name Is ...*, so fascinating was a recognition by Sudhar Bhuchar of the sheer power of the playwright as editor. And as verbatim pieces such as *Sochi* often prove, even when the veracity of every quote used is carefully catalogued, what comes out of people's mouths is often less illuminating and complex than what comes from the writer's pen or laptop.

Yet people still get hung up on truth in the theatre, as if seeking an authenticity of experience that can only be conveyed by fact, not fiction. It's odd for an art form which sees its participants routinely pretend to be a mad old king on a blasted heath or a mass murderer, or a woman who realises that her marriage and life are a sham.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is no less fascinating or watchable because we know it is historically inaccurate. It may not be true, but it is wonderfully truthful about ambition and guilt. *Handbagged* is clearly a fiction but one that questions the very nature of history and truth by honing in on real people – one recently dead, (Mrs Thatcher); the other still alive (the Queen) – and presenting them in a playful meta-theatrical package.

In their early work *Frantic Assembly* often blurred the boundaries between the performers' real lives and their stage personas. A few years back the very brilliant Dennis Kelly produced a play, *Taking Care of Baby*, which neatly strung the audience along as it presented a fiction as a fact and in the process explored the way truth can so easily be compromised, not just in the theatre but in everyday life. Rather than undermining the experience it made it all the more powerful. It made us more alert and

questioning.

I felt rather the same in Brighton on Thursday night watching Berlin's new video piece **Perhaps All the Dragons**. The piece takes its name from Rainer Maria Rilke's suggestion that "perhaps all the dragons in our lives are just princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage". Those of you who were in Edinburgh last summer may recall seeing *Bonanza* at Summerhall, a film about a largely abandoned mining town in Colorado. That too was made by Berlin (who actually hail from Antwerp).

This show – loosely inspired by the six degrees of separation theory – also uses film footage, but in a particularly intriguing way, creating a one-on-one experience in which personal testimonies become increasingly reflective of each other, rather than staying as standalone stories. In the way these individual narratives are curated with an increasingly staged element to their presentation, I found myself questioning the veracity of what I was being told, perhaps even to question whether those presented to us – a woman involved in the transplant of monkey heads; a Japanese woman who hasn't left her bedroom for seven years; a female Jain monk committing slow suicide – might actually be actors reading from a script after all.

Apparently all the stories are indeed true bar one (I don't know which one). Aside from the show's obvious point that we are all connected, this raises an intriguing spectre: that it's not the fact that these individual stories are authentic that matters, but that storytelling is something we all share, and is part of what makes us human whoever we are, and wherever we live.

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/may/26/verbatim-theatre-fiction-stories-london-road>, **The Guardian, Lyn Gardner**