



# THEATRE HAS NOW CAUGHT THE BALL: A CRITICAL STUDY ABOUT THE ROLE OF TESTIMONY THEATRE IN TACKLING BURNING ISSUES AFTER JOURNALISM HAD FAILED

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## Abstract

Elie Wiesel (1977) stated: “If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony (p. 9). Wiesel refers to testimony theatre as the most prominent innovation of modern playwrights. While Albert Einstein once observed that “the secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources,” others state that testimony theatre does the opposite. This genre of factually-based theatre is based originally on saying the unsaid and unveiling the unknown, as practitioners argue (Hammond and Steward, 2008, p. 9). However, the relation between this genre of theater and journalism is arguably problematic. The purpose of this study is to find satisfying answers for these questions: What is the main reason of the flourish of testimony theatre in the twentieth century? Why have traditional fictional works become inadequate in dealing with burning issues? Why has journalism failed in tackling such serious social and political issues? And how factually-based theater managed to compensate this role?

Key words: Dramaturgy, Conventions, Testimony Theater, Verbatim Theater, Factually-based Theater, Theatre of Journalism.

## Introduction:

Factually-based theatre has its deep roots in history since Ancient Greek drama from the time of Herodotus and Aristotle. Dawson (1999) stated that "It is not a genre that has been recently invented" (p. 169). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were many plays based on real testimony and documents. Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley wrote a play based on a real contemporary trial named *The Witch of Edmonton* in 1621. Yet, many critics assume that the rise of verbatim theatre began in the early nineteenth century. They consider George Buchner (1813-37) as the first dramatist to create plays that draw on documentation surrounding cases from real life. Dawson sees his *Danton's Death* in 1835 as the earliest factually-based play (p. 2-3). Buchner believed that, as a dramatist, his "supreme task is to get as close as possible to history as it actually happened" (Richards, 1997, p. 117). After Buchner, a generation of dramatists such as Ibsen, Zola, and later Chekhov developed his belief to create plays based on realistic behavior using real documents and assisted by technology of this time such as prints and photos.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, testimony theatre emerged from opposing politics that followed World War I. In the 1920s, Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) exploited, in an innovative way, many political and social issues in his plays. For this reason he is considered the real founder of modern testimony theatre. Attelio Favorini (1995) stated that Piscator's technique, based mainly on real testimony and documents, was to "create a drama based on the principles of new reportage, constructed in an epic succession of tableaux and stations, and designed to promote direct social action. Presented in a revue format and accompanied by music, political cartoons, moving pictures borrowed from government archives and photographic projections, in spite of everything created an alternative to the capitalist newspaper accounts of the same events" (p. xvii-xix).

Therefore, the real flourish of testimony theatre was in parallel with the rise of political theatre during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the 1930s in particular which witnessed the first strong wave of verbatim theatre. In the period of the two world wars, writers found in the political issues a good material for their fact-based plays. But the plays of the 1930s differ from contemporary factually-based plays. Both make use of verbatim material, but the most significant difference is that contemporary plays aim at representing testimony credibly rather than entertaining, whereas as the main aim of 1930s plays was the political entertainment. Another difference is that, in the 1930s the plays presented political ideals and principles rather than merely transcribed real testimony. Paget (2009) states that the plays of this era were moralistic. He sees that "the factual material in these plays were as one 'weapon' in the revolutionaries theatrical arsenal" (p. 224).

More than any other playwright that contributed in the development of testimony theatre from its rise until the 1960s, Peter Cheeseman had a significant role for this. He produced many plays that tackled political and social issues and events that affected his society, including *The Jolly Potters* (1964), *The Staffordshire Rebels* (1965), *The Knotty* (1966), *Six Into One* (1968), *The Burning Mountain* (1970), and

*Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974). Wake notes that Cheeseman had his distinct technique which depended mainly on creating the news and telling the stories that have never been told (qtd. in Brown, 2010, p. 14).

The aim of this study is to find answers to these questions: What are the reasons of the rise and flourish of testimony theatre? Why are fictional works insufficient in tackling social problems? Does theatre have a journalistic function? Why did journalism fail in dealing with burning political issues? And to what extent has theatre succeeded to catch the ball?

### **Literature review:**

On January 15th 2009, Cambridge University Press published online a study entitled “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques” by Derek Paget. This study was first published in *New Theatre Quarterly Journal* in November 1987. Paget focused mainly in his study on the techniques the playwrights, directors and actors use starting from recording and taping interviews with real people, the transcription of these recordings, then the final performance on the stage. His aim was to analyze the possibility of performing such technique, its characteristics and development.

In 2012 Jennifer Keating-Miller published a study entitled “Testimony and Theater: The Controversy of Truth-Telling in Post-Apartheid South Africa and Post-Conflict Northern Ireland” in *Outrage: Art, Controversy, and Society*, pp 207-222. But in this study the researcher limited the analysis on the role of telling truth in societies who lived in conflict for decades like South Africa and Northern Ireland.

On March 5<sup>th</sup> 2018, Sarah Peters Published online a study entitled “The function of verbatim theatre conventions in three Australian plays”. In her study, she traces and examines three verbatim plays to explore the conventions of such technique. These plays are Alana Valentine’s *Parramatta Girls* (2007), *Campion Decent’s Embers* (2008) and David Burton’s *April’s Fool* (2010).

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019, Pamela Baer, Jenny Salisbury and Tara Goldstein Published online a study entitled “Pairing Verbatim Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed to Provoke Startling Empathy” in the *Educational Forum Journal*. In their article, they focus on their verbatim play *Out at School* and a school applied theatre class to discuss homosexual and bisexual’s lives in school and how students changed their response to such topic.

## Discussion and findings:

One of the main reasons of the flourish of testimony theatre in the twentieth century is that traditional fictional works are insufficient to tackle social and political issues of this era. Wake and other critics state that "several playwrights considered "pure" fiction as inadequate for capturing past traumatic events or burning contemporary political questions. Thus, the various documentary forms turned theatre into an instrument for sharing and critically re-assessing knowledge and information" (qtd. in Brown, 2010, p. 12). The burning social and political issues all during the twentieth century spurred Brian Barton to consider these issues "too urgent, too complex or too overwhelming for fictional plots or characters being able to deal with them adequately. Under these circumstances, artistic truth needs to be certified concrete documentary evidence" (Garde's trans., 1987, p. 12). A thought echoed by Dawson (1999) who as well stated that what distinguishes this genre of theatre is "the desire to achieve a truthful interpretation of facts" (p. 19).

More recently, Lyn Gardner (2009) stated that "there have been plenty of occasions over the last decade when it has felt as if theatre has lost interest in fiction and decided to concentrate on fact" ("Rimini Protokoll's"). One believes that Gardner refers to September 11<sup>th</sup> and the war of Iraq in USA and the failure of government in Britain which were catalysts for the appearance of a new and strong boom of testimony plays. Just for example, we mention in USA, Anne Nelson's *The Guys* (2001) and Annie Thoms's *With Their Eyes* (2002), and in England *The Colour of Justice* (1999), *The Permanent Way* (2003), *Justifying War* (2003), and *Stuff Happens* (2004).

Once asked whether he sees that theatre has a journalistic function, the British playwright David Hare emphasized that testimony theatre "does what journalism fails to do" (qtd. in Hammond & Steward, 2008, p. 62). Moreover, Hare (1981) warned: "Because the values of the society were rotten . . . therefore, in artistic matters you must, at whatever cost, trust your own experience and believe nothing you read in newspapers" ("Time of Unease", p. 141). Hare's attack on journalism went further when he doubted that journalists were held to account for the honesty in presenting their material. He stated:

If journalists were held to account for the truthfulness of the way they represent their subject in interview, then *The Times* would be nothing except apologies for what appears in *The Times*. In my experience newspapers are a rich mix of what people never meant combined artfully with what people never said. (qtd. in Hammond & Steward, p. 61-62).

It is noteworthy that this attack started during performing Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2004), after the complaint of Chris Garnett, the Chef Executive of GNER,<sup>1</sup> that some statements had been omitted from the interview. Garnett meant by this his speech about the measures of safety they put in place after the crash. Stafford-Clark, the director of the play and the cofounder of Joint Stock Theatre Company with David Hare, William Gaskill and David Aukin in 1975, defends Hare stating that an interviewer's work includes

<sup>1</sup> Great North Eastern Railway.

choosing and editing the material of interview. He assumes that some things in the interview may be "cut for reasons of length or whatever" (qtd. in Hammond & Steward, p. 60). Hare himself declared that the actors carried out the interview and gave him the dialogue; he never interviewed Garnett. Nevertheless, immediately after Garnett's complaint, Hare said: "I can see I'm misrepresenting you, I'll put it in the play, and I put the line in." The strange thing was that Garnett later spoke to *The Times* which published a full-page article entitled "Knight of long knife leaves blood on tracks" (Webster, 2004, Feb. 11). That did make Hare laugh, as he admitted.

The headline of *The Times* caused a major upset for the editors in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* who, all week long, celebrated Hare and his play. Michael Billington wrote: "Hare is back fulfilling his role as the nation's moral watchdog rather than its bedside comforter" ("The Guardian Profile"). He described him as "a laser-like eye on the condition of Britain" but one believes that he is something much more than 'a laser-like eye.' His works are sincere "X-ray" for the British society, as he himself once used this term to refer to theatre. Billington assumes that what is really impressive in Hare is his sustained conviction that writers have a duty to record what is going on around them and that the theatre has a moral duty to deal with the big issues of public life. It is what Steve Waters (2004) refers to, in *The Guardian*, when he states that factually-based theatre "offers a necessary challenge to writers to embrace contemporary life." He claims that "in a world flooded with information, its task remains to reveal the facts behind the facts". It is Hare who once described his play as a "painful parable about the badness of British government . . . which privatize things to blame other people when things go wrong" (Aaronovitch, 2004).

The editing of testimony plays from large amounts of interviews is not an easy task. Norton-Taylor described it as a "formidable task—an almost physical struggle—of distilling tens of thousands of words . . . down to the relatively few that can be filtered through the mouths of actors in little more than two hours" (qtd. in Hammond & Steward, p. 125). He noted that *The Colour of Justice* was drawn from more than eleven thousand pages of transcripts of public hearings (Norton-Taylor, 2004, p.7). One believes that editing a play, of somehow two hours, from this enormous material necessitates choice of the key dramatic moments to be staged. Thus, David Thacker stated: "You might do a hundred interviews as a company and maybe seven or eight of them are key interviews" (qtd. in Paget, 1987, p. 328).

Philip Ralph (2008) wrote *Deepcut* as an inquiry for truth about the circumstances of the unexplained death of four soldiers who died from gunshot at Deepcut barracks between 1995 and 2002. He based his documented script on real testimonies of the families of the four victims. The reporter Brian Cathcart once stated: "journalism dropped the ball" after the internal inquiry into the four deaths (qtd. in *Deep Cut*). Cathcart's words imply that theatre has now picked the ball up. The idea echoed by Aaronovitch (2004) who highlights the theatre's effectiveness that may surpass that of journalism. He states that "Theatre can question where journalists often cannot. But it must be a measured inquisition". Thus, Lyn Gardner (2008), reviewing *Deep Cut*, comments: "This extraordinary, complex and moving piece of verbatim theatre

is a reminder that we cannot treat each other this way, and that we cannot allow governments and institutions to hide the truth behind closed doors". The attack on journalism or on media in general did not stop at David Hare; Blank and Jensen (2005) launch a sever attack on it emphasizing that "media culture works as hard as it can to shut down most questions" (p. 25). One thinks it is the lack of credibility of the printed media that spurred Robertson to apply for The High Court to allow broadcasting of the Hutton Inquiry around the murder of Dr. David Kelly. His words emphasized "the appetite, legitimate appetite of the public, for information beyond the press, beyond the bare written words of what happened."<sup>2</sup> The application of Robertson has implied a significant message, that public lost confidence in the printed press which became unsatisfying for their lust for information any more.

Consequently, the inability of press to deal with a number of contemporary scandals was a catalyst for many journalists such as Walter, Victoria Brittain, and Richard Norton-Taylor to turn to testimony theatre as a more adequate medium. Norton-Taylor, editor for *The Guardian*, stated that his experience as a testimony playwright proved him "how powerful and how complementary to journalism—in many ways how much more effective than journalism—the theatre can be" (qtd. in Hammond and Steward, p. 105). Ralph (2008) assumes that printed media emphasize on half-quotations and the alacrity to hit the headlines rather than tackling and dealing with the burning social issues. Press to his mind "has been singularly unable to encompass and communicate, other than via lurid headlines or repeated government soundbites" (p. 22).

Norton-Taylor (2005) quotes Clark's<sup>3</sup> statement in the inquiry of *Bloody Sunday* asserting that "the tribunal's task is to discover, as far as humanly possible in the circumstances, the truth. It is the truth as people see it. Not the truth as people would like it to be, but the truth pure and simple, painful or unacceptable to whoever that truth may be. The truth has a light of its own. Although it may be the first casualty of hostility, it has formidable powers of recovery, even after a long interval" (p. 7).

Kent claims that theatre's effectiveness surpasses clearly that of media, particularly the printed. He emphasizes that a tribunal play could fulfill the public's desire much more than what they could receive from press. He states: "Instead of the sound bites or the quick reports of about one or two hundred words, they are getting someone's whole line of argument, if you address it well" (In Hammond & Steward, p.138).

I'll go with Kent as I believe that, unlike the day-to-day press reports during an inquiry, we normally construct and perform a tribunal play after the inquiry had finished. Therefore we have a clearer view and more coherent not contradicted material. Otherwise, the storytelling form of a tribunal play—as many called it courtroom drama—makes it more effective than a mere report in the press or other media, as Kent asserts. Asked once about what he wants to achieve from his tribunal plays, he replied: "I try to take a stand against

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<sup>2</sup> The Hutton Inquiry, 1/8/2003, from Geoffrey Robertson QC's application for the proceedings to be televised. <http://www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsN/norton-taylor-richard.html>. Accessed November 12th 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Clarke is the Queen's Counsel.

things that I do not like in society and to say how we can change them . . . not confrontation, but I am comfortable with telling the truth as I see it" (Wroe, 2004). Kent's assertion concerning 'telling the truth' takes us to the issue of authenticity. I think that it is for this reason that Hare decided not to interview politicians in *The Permanent Way*, as he declared at the performance. Hare seeks truth, and only truth, but he cannot trust their speech. He asserts: "Frankly, they cannot ascend to the level of truthfulness that's needed for this play. There's no point going to John Prescott because I know what he would tell me in advance." This spurred Julian Meyrick (2008) to ask "Can plays be truthful?" and then answer "yes; absolutely." However, he traces certain procedures to judge a play 'truthful.' He states: "Slow, patient, careful thinking, together with moral courage in facing up to the consequences of events, can carve out a path of right action the fate of the world demands. It is not easy, and it certainly is not risk-free. But it can be done" (p. 13).

Likewise, Sheena McDonald (1996) comments on testimony theatre and media stating that this sort of theatre practices "can reach those parts of the mind apparently cauterized by media coverage . . . by focusing on the word. The investment of time and concentration needed to watch and hear is repaid with a terribly enhanced understanding of the human capacity to hurt and deny responsibility, commenting on *Nuremberg* and the World War I crimes trials.

The flourish of testimony theatre may explain the failure of press and the desire of public to a more credible source of information. Reinelt (2009) sees that the main reason behind the prominence of documentary, whether theatre or even film, is "the increasing awareness of 'spin' and the inadequacies of print and media journalism to explain complicated public events" (p. 10). The production of Cheeseman's 'Living Newspaper' to many critics' mind means that "the official print media was either inert, moribund, or already dead" (Harker, 2009, 26). Nicolas Kent (2005) as well launches his attack against media because of its negligence and inattention in dealing with world burning issues. He declared that the failure of world media in covering one of the most horrible massacres against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia caused him a major upset. In his introduction to *Srebrenica* he claimed: "I was so upset that this testimony to the worst massacre in Europe since World War Two was receiving so little public and media attention that the editing of this material into a play for the theatre became a necessity" (p. 5). This inhuman massacre, that left eight thousand victims, that should have been the headlines in all world printed newspapers and audiovisual media, was shortened to the tiniest items left to the very end of the news. The absence of justice within the media and neglecting issues that need to be high lightened, for the interests of totalitarian governments, deepened the necessity for testimony theatre to open to the audience debates that were closed, and to discuss issues and sources of information that were obscured. In this context, Renielt (2009) assumes that "documentary theatre can catalyze public engagement and activism, although this is not a guaranteed outcome of its performances" (p. 10). Her assumption proves that the stage is not only a place for entertainment, but it surpasses this role to be a place for open debates and complex issues. Therefore, writers

such as Billington (2005) believe that this genre of theatre surpasses journalism. Reviewing *Talking to Terrorists*, he writes: "Verbatim theatre is not just living journalism. If it is to succeed, it has to have the shape and rhythm of art".

On the other side, there are critics and practitioners who see that journalism has supported and helped the development of testimony theatre which has learnt from it in the last two decades more than other forms of media. All plays are a hybrid of journalism and autobiography, as Stafford-Clark assumes. He highlights the vital role of journalism and autobiography as the main sources for the verbatim playwright stating that they are "the two shire horses that pull the writer's plough" (In Hammond and Steward, p. 62).

Likewise, Peter Preston (2004) emphasizes the relation between journalism and theatre: "the link is everywhere and explicit. Suddenly, we're handed theatre as journalism—or journalism as theatre. The curtain rises on a new hunt for reality—or semblance of reality". Preston assumes that "the new journalism is not in newspapers—it is on stage" However, he provokes an essential issue: "can this version of the truth be trusted?" While Stafford-Clark as a theatre practitioner tried to keep his balanced view about theatre and journalism, Preston's career as a journalist spurred him to defend journalism and take its side. His suspicion in the credibility of truth presented in theatre made him believe that there are many forms and varieties in journalism that can be trusted as 'a trawl for facts.' He refers to 'the right to answer back' as a distinct tradition in journalism, which spurred him to conclude: "How does the theatre cope with all that?"

### **Conclusion:**

Although David Hare's statement "Newspapers are a rich mix of what people never meant combined artfully with what people never said" is extremely shocking, Richard Norton-Taylor's mind in journalism in particular and media in general is highly precious, because of his double-career as a journalist and a playwright. Once asked about testimony theatre and media, he stated that theatre had a better scope than that of media; whether newspaper, radio or television. What might be mentioned briefly on radio or television news or written in short in newspaper articles could be a perfect material to a coherent piece. He argued that "a theatre audience could listen together and inwardly . . . digest and understand properly what all the fuss was about". However, he sees that journalism or media in general has many problems; one of them for example is "the perforce brutal and inconsistent editing, the constant fight for space or air time" (In Hammond & Steward p. 121-122). One believes that journalism, despite these problems, does not contradict with theatre. Therefore, one can go with Norton-Taylor in his assertion that theatre can be complementary to media; it can be considered a powerful medium in explaining and communicating burning social and political issues in a credible and truthful manner.



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