

Uncelebrated Voices

The moral and political, as well as dramatic, questions encountered during the development of Liverpool Everyman's production *Unprotected* (about a series of prostitute murders in the city), and the powerful emotions the play provoked

Part of the two-day symposium Verbatim Practice in Contemporary Theatre held at Central School of Speech & Drama, 13-14 July, 2006

The Panel:

Nina Raine (NR), director, *Unprotected*

Leanne Best (LB), actor

Suzanne Bell (SB), Literary Manager of the Everyman Playhouse and the dramaturg of *Unprotected*

Esther Wilson (EW), lead writer, *Unprotected*

Chair:

Dan Milne (DM) actor/director

Dan Milne: In our first split session of the symposium, we're looking at the idea of uncelebrated voices. We are really pleased to have with us the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, who will be performing excerpts from their production *Unprotected*. We have decided to start with the excerpts so that we have some sense before any discussions of the area we are looking at and the style of the production. So I'm going to hand straight over to the director, Nina Raine.

Nina Raine: Just to give a little bit of context: Leanne, one of the actresses from our production, will do this first extract, which concludes the first act of *Unprotected*.

Reading 1

NR: I don't know whether you gathered from that, but *Unprotected* is a piece about prostitutes and the prostitution problem in Liverpool. The next extract comes from the second act of the play and the scene that leads up to it. It's the scene where drugs workers talk about the problem of heroin in Liverpool and how it's totally bound up with the problem of prostitution. At the end of the scene, Ali, who is one of the prostitutes we interviewed, says she would like to go into schools. And, rather than the slightly pious message that often gets preached in schools, she would like to talk to the children there and tell them her story, as a deterrent from getting on to heroin. So, this is the story she would tell.

Reading 2

NR: I feel we have given you a whistle-stop tour of the play, of which this is the very last section. Essentially, the play was inspired by two prostitutes who were both murdered by the same man. While we were creating it, yet another prostitute got killed. So at the end of the play, we had the bald facts from the police of what these murders were. And then we ended the play again with Ali. So that was where we came out.

Reading 3

DM: Thank you very much, Leanne. So, we have seen three extracts from *Unprotected*, which appeared at the Liverpool Everyman Playhouse in March of this year. It is now going on to the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, and after that, who knows where? Today we have with us Nina Raine, the director; Suzanne Bell, literary manager of the Everyman Playhouse and the dramaturge of this piece; and Esther Wilson, the lead writer of a team of four.

Probably the best place for us to start is to hear from you, Suzanne, about how *Unprotected* came to be made.

Suzanne Bell: Well, every year we run a new writing festival, and we have various projects that take part in that writing festival. I spoke to the artistic director, Gemma Bodinetz, about the possibility of doing a piece of verbatim theatre, partly because the Everyman Theatre's history is very much rooted in socio-political drama and a lot of writers we have worked with have a very strong socio-political voice. So on a very minuscule budget – far too small a budget – I persuaded a group of writers to get on board with the idea of creating a piece of verbatim theatre. So we met.

And at the time, the vote was just going through the city council on the possibility of a private scheme to run a managed zone for street-based sex workers in Liverpool. This was going through internally, in the council, before it then went to government. Esther had been doing some research for a radio play into sex workers, so she had an 'in' on that angle. It was something that touched on many of the issues we had talked about in terms of regeneration, of where the city was, but also, while it had a political debate within it, I think what excited the writers was the human story and the uncelebrated voices that were at the heart of it, the people we would talk to.

So each writer took an angle – politicians, punters, police, prostitutes, parents – and did some research and started forging relationships and interviewing those sources. We scheduled a script-in-hand performance of it for our new writing festival for June 2005, and that was the point at which Nina Raine came on board to direct. Because she has a very strong background in new writing and is herself a writer, she worked very closely with the writers and with me. The run-up to that was a bit mental, really. We were just dragging students and people off the streets, including Esther's son and girlfriends, to transcribe all the tapes and interviews. We were just stepping into unknown territory. We didn't really know what we were getting ourselves into. I think what was great was that the reading gave us a first marker.

After the reading, we were then able to do a big evaluation of the project up to that point and then continue developing. And that did mean going back to a lot of the sources, getting new sources, finding new sources, building new relationships and responding to the news. We had to have an emergency meeting over Christmas because of the whole thing with Fiona Mactaggart saying no to managed zones. We had to then go back to a lot of the sources and go, 'Can we have your response?' And that ranged from very political, angry statements to, 'Oh, well. Anyway, how was your birthday?' So there was a range of voices. I knew as a literary manager that I would be placing ads in the sex pages of newspapers to get punters to come forward, and setting up an anonymous phone line. That voice – the punter's – certainly was the hardest to source. Tony Green, the writer in charge of that angle of the research, trawled the internet. We got permission from the IT guy at work to access sex sites and stuff like that, and it's still an ongoing process. We had a meeting just before today to talk about the script. So that's where it came from, really.

DM: To bring us to our theme of uncelebrated voices, a couple of things you said sparked things for me in terms of how important it was for you that this was a verbatim piece as opposed to a highly researched and then written piece. That probably would have been, in a way, much less time-consuming and much more straightforward to make. So can you tell me: why a verbatim theatre piece? Because, we assume, that's not the only way to celebrate an uncelebrated voice.

SB: I think it was the possibility of opening up the human story, but also the political debate around it, and having those kinds of voices next to each other. Also, I think, these voices aren't heard. We could have just done the research and then gone, 'OK, thanks very much, we're just going to base it on that,' but we had a responsibility to a lot of people we worked with, a lot of the sources, and they were a part of the rehearsal process and part of the research. And it was always going to be a verbatim piece. It wasn't a case of, 'Let's do a verbatim because we have come up with this topic.' It was, 'We want to do a verbatim project. What's the best topic?'

DM: So I suppose the question goes back to that: why do a verbatim project before you know the issue?

SB: Because I think it was something that was happening a lot in theatre across the country, and Gemma and I wanted to celebrate the political but also social history of the Everyman. I mean, a lot of the work we do that isn't verbatim has a big political oomph behind it – politics with a small p.

NR: Liverpool is particular, isn't it? Historically, it has always been a very political place; it has always been very militant. And it was punished under Thatcher, punished because it fought back more than anywhere else. We say in the North West that Manchester's 10 years ahead of Liverpool because Liverpudlians were always the militant ones. You know, they always fought.

DM: So it has that relationship with the local community.

SB: Yes. So the writers we originally brought on board for the original, first phases of the project, they changed slightly, for no other reason than because of the work commitments some of them had. Those writers were particularly political in their understanding of their work. So John Fay, Tony Green, Esther, Morris Betterman and Bill Morrison had, I think you could say, a particular political and socialist angle in their writing that they wanted to explore.

Esther Wilson: So it was verbatim first and street workers second. I think it was particularly important that it was verbatim because so often those voices get sanitised or edited into nonexistence. Because if you read any newspaper article, as we did at the time, quotes from any girl on the street would be two sentences, and then you would have so much from a politician. It's a way of redressing that balance.

DM: Which is similar to something said in the last session about people involved in 7/7 who, in the news articles or on the news, were just experiencing themselves shown in one soundbite.

NR: I mean, certainly, the debate about what the piece was going to be was a long, into-the-evening, into-the-night debate. We were quite particular about what we were going to look for.

EW: What was interesting was that we started off with the issue of the managed zones. And when we realised that the stories we were getting back were stories we hadn't heard before, that became the springboard for what Nina just said.

DM: So you had an angle? It wasn't just a general issue about prostitution, though that was a springboard for it.

SB: We have subsequently, as a theatre, been approached by some other communities in the city, going, 'Ah, let's do verbatim about this!' But I think that made it easier, because it gave it a hook straightaway. So a lot of the initial interviews we did were, 'How do you feel about the managed zone, the possibility of the managed zone?' And then they became, 'Tell us your story.' It was a very definite hook.

EW: They started telling their stories, and then you couldn't shut people up. We were very fortunate in that John Fay, one of the writers, managed to speak to Dianne Parry, the mother of one of the murdered prostitutes. This was leading up to the first reading of the piece. She was very, very vocal, and felt she had not had a voice in terms of how she felt her daughter's case had been handled legally and politically. Her feelings and her grief had not had a voice. So that seemed to lead us.

NR: I'm sure people have said this ad infinitum, but what I really relished was that pros... street workers, we should call them, not prostitutes. But anyway: they are portrayed by writers as 'tarts with hearts' endlessly in fiction, and you

never quite get the real feel, I don't think. And that is what was so great. Funnily enough, we were sitting in Hampstead half an hour ago, trying to lose 15 minutes off the show, because we've got to do that for the slot in Edinburgh. One of the writers has emailed us saying, 'We could snip these ums and ers. And look here, she repeats the same word three times,' or whatever. And you have to start thinking really carefully about how much you're going to clean it up. Because you can very easily edit enough in that subtle way, but then you get the clean version a writer would have written.

DM: Something else that arose as you were talking about John Fay and his remit to look at that side of the story: just in the panels that we have seen yesterday and today, and in the discussions with writers and people making verbatim theatre, it's clear that the relationship they get with the subject is key to the material that you get. So how did you decide who was going to look at what, in terms of how you could best use your writers to get the material?

EW: Tony was a bit, 'God knows how I am going to access the punters.'

NR: We did give the punters money, didn't we?

SB: Yes. That was very deliberate. And Tony had very private contact with them, which meant setting up interview rooms that couldn't be accessed by the public.

NR: And then for the first leg, for the reading, because John Fay had accessed one mother, he always felt guilty he hadn't had access to the mother of the other prostitute who was murdered by the same guy. So he made it his business then – though he couldn't actually follow it up; it was Tony Green who ended up doing it. But he wanted that to happen. He just felt guilty, more than anything else.

SB: And Lizzie forged a relationship. Originally, in the first phase of this project, Lizzie Nunnery was a research assistant, but then she came on board as a writer. After the reading, through the research, she forged a relationship

with Flo Clucas, who was the member of the city council who ran the research around the managed zone. So she continued with the interviews, and building the relationship with Flo, as she did with some of the academics, who were really helpful in the research for the project.

DM: Nina, can you give us a sense of the stage at which you became part of the process, and perhaps of what experience you had had prior to this in verbatim theatre and what difference that made?

NR: As Suzanne said, I came on board with the first public reading of the play, which was a rehearsed reading with an invited audience. So I had a week to edit. It was really a first edit of the material with Suzanne. At that point I suddenly got faced with the politics of having four writers, and that was something that was an ongoing challenge.

DM: Just tell us a little bit – and, Esther, chip in as well – about how that works, and what the problems are. We've talked about what it means to be a writer of verbatim, as well as a director and a dramaturge. There are a lot of viewpoints.

NR: It's hard to establish a hierarchy, that's the thing. Because it's not that the writer can say, 'I came up with this line and that's why the character should say it.' No one has that right. So in a way, suddenly, you're all dramaturges. In the end, we had to nominate Esther as the lead writer, as they simply became too protracted, these discussions about: 'Well, I think this. Shall we have a vote?' And the other problem is that, with verbatim, people get so passionate about it. Because, especially when you have met a person, you feel they have entrusted you with their story. You really don't want to do them a disservice. And then there's the whole question of art versus morality. Do you put that line in because we need to know that in fact she wasn't such a bad mother, even though in fact it's a boring line theatrically? You know, what do you do? What is your responsibility?

SB: There were a lot of arguments.

EW: You know, we had access, for instance, to information that one of the mothers didn't have about her daughter. It wasn't very nice information, and it was very detailed information about the period just before she got killed. We had this awful time, didn't we?

SB: This is a dramatic story, so do we put it in? Another example is, even during the production, one of the mothers we had interviewed was now bringing up her daughter's son. The boy's paternal grandmother came to see the production, and asked us to remove a section of the play that attacked his father. And we did, because we felt responsible.

EW: And the irony of that is that Pat Brown, the grandmother of Jay (this little boy) only had her dead daughter's words on this incident. So she was, to all intents and purposes, being completely honest with us. And yet this other mother was saying, 'But I know that's not true. I know my son went off the rails.' It's not all easy.

DM: So you did remove that bit, even though you were presenting one person's viewpoint.

SB: We spoke to her about it, but we wouldn't always remove. If people got in touch, we would argue the case. And we did argue the case. But then we felt, at that point, that it was to do with the boy.

EW: If he ever read this play, he would find out something about his existence that he didn't want to know. We thought that was too bad.

DM: So was it a continual treading of the line between responsibility to the subjects and responsibility to the piece of theatre you were creating?

SB: Yes, absolutely. And that goes on even through rehearsals, because a lot of the sources built relationships with the actors as well. And that can also be difficult, because then the actors are going, 'But for me, this is a job, and I've

got to go. Goodbye. The last night is the last night.' And the writers, as well, and all of us, go: 'It's a project; it's a play.'" I think there were times when we all questioned it – for me, particularly, when Anne Marie Foy's family came in.

NR: This is the third girl that was murdered recently. I mean, in September.

SB: We had interviewed her, and she was murdered two weeks after the interview took place.

NR: Her voice was on tape because she was interviewed, actually for a radio station. And we left it, because we thought the family would be in such turmoil. But then, in the new year, we got in touch, and we said: 'Well, do you want us to commemorate your daughter by making her part of this piece?' And they did. And that's the thing. Whenever we didn't know morally quite what to do, at the end of the day we would ask the source. because if they said no, that made it easy: we wouldn't go there.

EW: And often, we would ask the family about what the Government had said. We just thought it was still happening: the Government were turning their back on the subject matter.

NR: And girls were still getting killed.

SB: And so that was one of the worst nights for me, sitting there.

NR: Because her two daughters came and saw the show. So this girl, Anne Marie Foy, was quite an old working girl, well into her forties. She had two teenage daughters who came to see the show, and right at the end, rather than having an actor do her voice, we just had her voice.

EW: And we did warn them. One of the drugs workers or sex workers had told them, and they had said: 'No, it's fine, it's fine.'

NR: So they absolutely knew: 'You will hear your mum's voice. Are you OK with that? Are you sure this isn't going to be too painful?' And they said, 'Yes, yes, it's fine.' And then, when they watched it, you know...

EW: They were just openly wailing, shoving people out of the way.

SB: And running out of the theatre.

NR: And at that point, you suddenly think: 'Are we actually doing the right thing here?' We all felt really queasy about it.

LB: But I have to say, that evening was the worst. We had a lot of evenings where it wasn't like a performance: it was like an event. And those were the evenings the working girls and people's families would be in. We eventually had to record a message. We had one evening when Gemma Bodinetz, the artistic director of the Everyman Playhouse, had to go on the stage in the interval and say, 'You are allowed to cry in here. You are allowed to share your grief collectively. Don't leave the theatre.' There were people running; there were chairs banging; there was screaming.

The working girls have done their own memorial for her. The tree she was found underneath, naked, battered and raped, is their own little memorial to her. There are flowers, and they light candles and they leave cigarettes for her. And it was that night, when Anne Marie Foy's two adult daughters were in that I had to deliver a line about the tree that had come directly from a tape I had heard from the woman I was playing. The line was: 'Here is the tree now, and here is where she was battered and left like a fucking rag doll.' And this wail came up from the audience, and I knew it was Anne Marie Foy's daughter. She ran screaming from the theatre and didn't come back until the end. And there was this weeping, and I went offstage. It was the only time in my working life I've ever thought, 'I can't go back on.' And this isn't me as an actor; this is me as a human being, having to go on stage. And I don't want to cry because that devalues what we are doing.

I got dressed afterwards and it was really a difficult experience. I went straight to the bar, and her two daughters came over to me with a bloody programme. 'Can you write me a message on the programme?' And her daughter said, 'Thank you, because I don't feel ashamed of my mum any more, and I wanted people to hear what happened to my mother because nobody is listening to me.' That validated what we were doing.

They are very working-class women, so their language, like mine, is peppered with the odd F and C and T. And this politician guy is sat there, and he has obviously got this prearranged statement he is going to give about his stance on prostitution. And you had this bizarre scenario where you had a woman whose mother has been battered and raped asking, 'What are you going to do?' And his response was, 'We can't legalise prostitution.' 'But what *are* you going to do?' That's what they are coming up against every day, with every letter they write, every phone call they make.

SB: The guy we invited was the 20th person we had tried to get on the panel. Every other person just did the standard, 'No, we're not available.' I think even Flo Clucas was trying to pull strings to get people in.

EW: Dianne Parry said one of the important things on that note: she said to the politician, 'When your son or your daughter gets in trouble with drugs, you can afford to send them to the Priory. When it happens to my daughter or their mother [of the two girls], they have to go on the streets to feed their habit because they have got no help. There's no help out there.'

LB: So that all validated it. Because, as Suzanne said, I think at some point everybody questioned whether we were being exploitative, and it was impossible not to feel like that at times.

EW: That night I found the girls and asked them, because Gemma was upset, Deborah was upset, everyone was upset. We found them, and just said, 'Look, is this a bad thing? Should we stop? Do you want us to stop and take this out?' And they said no.

NR: The resounding response was, 'Do not take these voices out; do not take this material out.' And we were getting emails, letters and phone calls from people, saying that.

LB: And it was consistent, right across the board. The outreach people who appear in the play were brilliant with us and they allowed us all to go out, with the girls' say-so, and do research. So I spent a lot of time with the rest of the actors driving around at three o'clock in the morning with outreach workers in the red light districts of Liverpool. We would stop and talk to the girls: 'Have you seen any dodgy punters? Have you got syringes? Have you got condoms? Do you want a hot chocolate?' Just seeing the everyday interaction made it clear it's not *Band of Gold*, which is what I had in my head. And the girls came. The outreach workers brought the girls, and I spoke to many of them afterwards, sitting on the steps. It's a non-smoking building now, the Everyman, but I sat there with girls who would chain-smoke and pour their hearts out and go, 'Thank you.' And then they would walk a few yards up the street to their bus stop, which is where they pull punters, near the front door of the theatre. Every single one of those girls said to me, 'Thank you.' And that's not so I can sit here and say I have done a good thing. But they were like, 'Nobody listens to me. We're the pariahs.'

EW: Word got out pretty quickly, and we couldn't get a seat for these girls. And what was great was, like Leanne said, it was like an event. That was its success, for me. You got people in that theatre to see their stories told who would never go to the theatre. I met my son one night, in the bistro underneath, and he walked in and I was with Ange, the girl who is portrayed. And my son just looked around and said, 'My God, it's like dawn of the fucking dead in this building tonight.' Because there were all these smackheads just going, 'Come to see a play!'

SB: We actually sent an email we had from one woman to all the sources, because she emailed saying: 'I have been to the theatre many times, and I know these women. I know who these women are, and I cross the street to

not walk past them: they are the pariahs of society. I came to see the show, and on my way back to my car, I saw a woman and I went up to her and hugged her, and I gave her £10 and said, "Take care of yourself." '

EW: On the opening night, at the interval, which is straight after the story Leanne's just done, the story about the child, I was sat with the girl Leanne plays, and she said 'Esther' to me. And this other woman turned around and said, 'Excuse me, are you one of the writers?' I said I was, and she then said: 'Who's that girl? Do you know that girl on stage?' I said, 'It's this lady here.' She just held her, and I had to walk away.

DM: Can I just ask about the impact the piece has had, which is clearly a great one on the people involved. Has it had a wider impact politically, socially, on what is happening in Liverpool? Did you ever think of it as part of a campaign?

SB: I don't think we ever really thought it was going to have a political impact. That's certainly not where we came from with it. Certainly, Flo Clucas dragged a lot of people from the city council in to see the production and is campaigning to get people up to Edinburgh to see it – as are we, as a theatre. But we are a theatre, and it is a play. We're not going to change things. These politicians are going to come and see it, and they will see what they want to see, and then they'll come up with their own excuses.

NR: I didn't ever think we'd be part of a long-running piece of theatre.

SB: It was never going to be agitprop.

NR: What you find, while you start editing and hearing these stories, is that you start to become politicised because you can't not have an opinion on it, and then it's really hard to stay unbiased and to try and present it unbiasedly and not make it slanted towards a particular argument. But I think it's really good that it's going to Edinburgh. It's great that it was on in Liverpool, but the thing is that these girls were Liverpoolians, and I don't think they ever made

any headlines other than in Liverpoolian newspapers. And it should be mainstream.

DM: So there is something that's going to change in it, and that is the journey of the piece, presumably away from what you have called an event. Because with local people coming to see it, people who were being represented, there was a sense maybe of being part of something. And that's different from presenting a new play that you might be a dramaturge on, or a literary manager, or which you might write or you might be in. So it will be something else when it is presented in Edinburgh, London or wherever. It will have different statuses.

LB: Yeah, but the other thing is the people on the grassroots level who were working with the girls day in day out. What a huge eye-opener it was for me, being involved in the research aspect of the rehearsal process. Those people, in different capacities, in different cities, exist everywhere. I think it was Shelley, one of the outreach workers we worked with, who famously said: 'If it goes to Edinburgh, I'm getting a big double-decker bus. I'm going to drive around the city and find every prostitute and sit them on the front row.' Because everywhere you've got a drug problem, which is every city in this country, you have women selling their bodies to pay for their drugs. And for every one of those women, there is a mother or a child. So I think it transcends.

SB: We did have groups come from Bournemouth, Nottingham, Southampton, Bristol...

DM: Specific interest groups?

SB: Groups of women and drug users and outreach workers. Key workers, health workers and street-based sex workers came. A lot of them were coming together and getting a minibus and driving up to see the show and then driving back down. We would then give them free tickets, because they

were coming all the way to see the show. So it reached out, to a certain extent, but I hope it continues to reach more people.

DM: Thank you. I'd really like to start to open it up to the floor and see what questions and responses people have got. And I'll throw something out, which touches on something Leanne said about a collective communal experience and the possibility of verbatim doing that in a way that maybe a lot of other theatre doesn't do so much nowadays.

Questions from the floor

Steve Buckwell, Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts: To take on that point, it was very interesting watching all of you talk about it, how animated you got about it. I think that, if I can go back to Peter Brook a little bit, to way back, when he wrote *The Empty Space* and talked about 'deadly theatre' and 'immediate theatre', I think that since we see so much deadly theatre, and it seems to be getting worse, it's really interesting how theatre finds ways of reinventing itself to become more immediate again. And maybe verbatim theatre is one of the ways we are doing this currently.

That's one point I wanted to make. The other point is: you mentioned that fact, I think, that you didn't feel in any way that there would be any positive political outcome in doing this production in Liverpool. And I would say to perhaps be more patient. I don't think you are going to have an immediate change in Liverpool City Council. Living in Liverpool, I tend to think that's not going to happen; but five years down the road, maybe you will. Maybe what you've done by having this communal experience is you've lit a spark and got people rethinking the entire idea of how to deal with the prostitution problem in Liverpool and perhaps in other cities, such as Edinburgh and London, or wherever. And maybe, five years from now, that spark will be a full flame, and maybe from there – being very optimistic – we might want to start re-evaluating our attitudes about drug policy in this country.

EW: Because that's the issue, isn't it?

Steve Buckwell: Exactly. And it's that, really, that theatre can do perhaps better than other forms of communication. Because, journalism, as hard as it tries, is somewhat limited by its need to be 'balanced', even though it is really not, or, I think your word was 'sanitised', and I thought that was a really good word, because obviously they have to sell to readers, and they don't want to offend those readers. But for instance, maybe I come into this play and I totally disagree with the idea of legalising prostitution or whatever. In theatre, unlike with other forms, I might be moved to change my mind. And I think maybe that's what *Unprotected* does. It moves people, obviously, from some of the stories you've told. It's certainly moved a lot of people who saw it. And that's how we begin to change.

SB: Esther, particularly, kept reminding us to tell the human story, because the debate is there, but we needed to tell the human story; the narrative arc of the play is the human story. The debate hangs off it, but the structural arc of the whole piece is the story of the mothers and Ali.

EW: You know, I live in Liverpool, and I walk past these people every day of my life and see them there. And I just think that's what they do, and they are nothing to do with me. But now I've met them, I see them very differently.

DM: Can I just ask people to identify themselves?

Audience Member 1: I was really moved by your experiences of their experiences of watching your work, which was telling their stories. I have done a bit of this myself, though nothing as contemporary as yours. I did a lot of work with First World War letters. I spent two years in a war museum, off and on, transcribing letters and diaries. And, I have to say, it has really provoked something. I feel quite emotional. I'm not quite sure why. Just bear with me a sec. But I found that when I was working with actors, a lot of them were taking letters that were written from one person to another – from a boy to his mother or a boy to his wife or girlfriend or whoever, or a diary that was not necessarily meant to be performed – and often, we had breakdowns in

rehearsals. I'm sure you had the same. People just go, 'Actually, I don't know whether, as a human being, I can do this.' You talked about your experience of not being able to go back on stage. One of the things it really left with me was a sense of my own subjectivity and the fact that we are doing a piece of theatre for everybody, and the dangers surrounding that. Big warning signs went off in me when I was doing the work, and – it might be slightly contentious to say this – they slightly went off here. Because if you become so involved in it, as creatives, you lose your subjectivity and your objectivity, and then you become something else. And then you are too sympathetic to them. And that's where we're in trouble, because we are not them. We go back to flats and all of that kind of thing. That set off really big alarm bells in me. I'm not even criticising: I'm putting it there, on the table.

LB: As you said, I am clearly quite emotional about the experience I had off the stage. In the research part of the rehearsal period, I was dealing with rape, battery, sexual abuse, women having cigarettes put out on them... You would be inhuman if, as a person, as Leanne Best, I wasn't sitting in tears on certain evenings going, 'How can these people live in such a degraded way? How do people behave like this towards other people?' And I sucked it all up, and sucked it all up and sucked it all up. And I think Nina and I at one time had a crying fit outside rehearsal one morning, and that was it. And then I went back into the room. And Nina and I have spoken about this quite a lot. There was a point in rehearsal for me, for exactly those reasons.

I think we all went into it being very aware that when you are dealing with such hideous stories, you want to romanticise these people's lives. But you have to constantly remind yourself, having sat and had coffee with Angela on numerous occasions and talked about her mother and her baby, and met her sister and her mother, that she lies, that she steals, that she would step over my dead body to get a bag of smack. I'm under no illusion about her as a person. I have to make a very, very conscious decision in rehearsal to divorce Angela the woman from Ali the character that I play. And as soon as I had done my research and had my visceral experiences, I packed all of that into what I wanted to do. I was then able to leave that behind and work on the

work. And I think that's why Nina's job in rehearsal was so essential – much more so than in than anything I've ever worked on – and marvellously done. It was, just every so often, to reel it back in and constantly remind yourself. I think if you do that, you have your footholds in the piece. It does no service whatsoever to Angela personally for Leanne Best to go on stage and cry about how shitty her life is, because I think that is a little bit condescending. And that was a really good reminder for me to not do that. But it's a brilliant thing to bring it up, because it's a very real danger.

AM1: Once you've lost yourself in it, then you've lost. This goes right to the heart of verbatim. The gentleman who is doing the work in China raised that very point: how do you divorce yourself from it? At what point do you?

EW: I think I had a terrible time on that, to be honest, emotionally and mentally. When I came out of it, I thought: 'I'm never, ever going to get that involved again.' I know, as you say, you can't not, because you would be inhuman not to engage with someone when you hear these terrible stories; nevertheless, it's a danger to the work. The drama is on the stage; it shouldn't be with us, because it's not our drama. You can't tell a story if you're engaging emotionally so much. Then you are not intellectually able to make decisions, artistic decisions that can make that work more powerful. I think that out of all the writers, it was me who found that out, probably because I was the lead writer. And it was a very difficult process, because there were four – five, including Nina – all having different artistic and aesthetic ideas about the piece, and fighting our corners. I think that was a danger, and I learned a great lesson.

SB: As the literary manager, I had every writer at some point through the process having a day where they went 'Aaarrggghhh!' and burst into tears, and would scream. As Leanne said, you had to almost go through that to then go on. And fortunately, as the literary manager, I could be talking to Nina about the structure of the piece and the voice of the characters and the journey and the arc and whatever, through the development of the script. But I did some of the transcribing, and for me, that was the point at which I got

emotional. Because I would be listening, and you would rewind, play, rewind, play, over and over again, these horrific stories. And I had a couple of days where I went into one of my colleague's offices and just burst into tears. And they were like, 'Whoah! OK. Stop transcribing for a little bit!' But I think there was a point at which you go: 'OK, now, this is a play, and this is a production, and we have to get it on.'

LB: And we all reminded each other, because it all happened at different stages. So on the evening Anne Marie Foy's children were in, there would have been no way, if we hadn't had those footholds, that I could have walked back on stage. Because in my next scene, I am, you know, smoking a fag and having a cup of coffee and having a laugh and a joke. And you can't do those things, or do the piece any justice, if as a person you're in bits. You do that in the dressing room afterwards. And there were many of those times.

EW: One of the girls we interviewed had her children taken off her and hung herself. And when we got told that news, it was a low point for a lot of us as well.

Audience Member 2: It was very interesting when you said you took from real people and then you did your process and then you went back to your people, and the real people actually went to watch your piece; and that you were quite pleased to know their reaction was very positive to your work, and they got very emotional and were very grateful. I think that was quite interesting. But what actually worries me is: let's imagine, just theoretically, for one second, that the reaction wasn't positive; that it was negative. Let's just imagine for one second that their reaction was really bad, and the girls got upset and they felt that their mother wasn't being portrayed in the way they imagined. And they hate it, and one of them decides to top themselves. They go out of the theatre and decide to top themselves because they get really frustrated about it. So my question is: who is going to feel responsible for that? Because the question is: when it ends, and it's a happy end, everybody gets the credit. But when the end is not so good, who takes the responsibility? It seems an

important question. I know I seem Devil's advocate here, but I am just trying to help validate the process.

SB: One thing was, we were very clear, as soon as we met anyone, what they were getting themselves into: what the process was, how it worked and what it would be. We carried out interviews where the source said, 'Can I read the interview?' And this is way before it even gets into any of the editing. The source read the interview and then went, 'No, I don't want it.' And we would respect that.

AM2: They read the final script?

SB: No, they read the transcript of the interview.

AM2: Yeah, but they can't guarantee the final reaction, right?

SB: They said: 'No, I don't want any of this in here.'

DM: At the first stage.

SB: At the very first stage. We would interview someone. We would go, 'We are interviewing you for a piece of verbatim theatre.' We would give them the full transcript of the interview, word for word what they said, and there were a couple of people who then said, 'I don't want this in it.' And we respected that. I think a lot of it was about communicating throughout the process.

SB: They saw every edit.

AM2: So they followed the process.

SB: Absolutely. It wasn't a case of go to them, do the edit, go back to them. It very much involved having a lot of conversations with them.

LB: Even down to the costume. I had a very funny conversation with Ange: we were sitting in a coffee shop and she went, 'Yeah, I'm fucking telling you, if I come and see it and you're in a pair of stilettos on that stage...' And she told me. I went back into rehearsal and said this to Nina, and we worked around that.

SB: We had one of the outreach workers saying, 'This character cannot wear this T-shirt.' There was a constant dialogue.

NR: At the end of the day, it is a play and it is a piece of art. But what was good was that so often it chimed. Because the thing is, you're talking about the hypothesis. And if it had become untenable, then we would have dealt with that. You have to evolve every step of the way, I think. If the people we had been interviewing had been saying, 'Oh, no, actually I want to write this little thing, and I've had an idea for the script, and I'm going to write a poem in it ...'

AM2: You say you follow this process, but some people before said they were really upset by the way they were portrayed. So I am wondering: how were they upset about it?

SB: Emotional?

EW: I think you are talking about the two grandmothers, about one grandmother who was interviewed, who we portrayed.

AM2: It seems chaotic.

EW: The other grandmother hadn't been interviewed, so this woman we had never spoken to, who we didn't know existed, came to see the show because the grandchild was her grandchild. So we hadn't interviewed this woman. There were two mothers: there was one mother, whose daughter was murdered, and the other mother, whose son fathered that child. So that mother wasn't interviewed. She took issue because something was said in the

play. It was one line, and basically it's out anyway. The line was, the mother says: 'My daughter wanted nothing to do with this boy.' She had had this baby because of a rape. 'He raped her, and that's why this baby came into being.' And this other mother took issue and said, 'That wasn't the case. They had a relationship. She was lying to her mother.' Now, for us, that was verbatim. We hadn't interviewed this mother, but morally, it was verbatim. We had a meeting and said: 'Right, we'll take that line out, because that child has had his mother murdered and chopped up.'

NR: And we didn't want him thinking, if it wasn't true, that the one surviving parent was a rapist. It was one line. It was an easy sacrifice to make; it wasn't really a sacrifice. I never felt, 'Damn, I wish we had that line about the rape.'

AM2: Obviously, it matters for her. Not for you guys, but for her...

SB: And we would argue the case, because the policeman we interviewed had argued for a cut, and we argued quite strongly to keep it, until he finally said, 'OK, keep it. I agree.' So, you know, we didn't just listen to them and go, 'No, of course, if you say cut...' We would argue and debate, but it was constant, you know: a lot of phone calls and meetings.

NR: The thing about the policeman was that he hadn't had his son chopped up or daughter chopped up. When someone has had that happen to them, it gives them a moral high ground in a weird way that you just can't ignore. So with him, we could be quite muscular, and come back and say that we should keep it. It does tie your hand slightly, the question of who you are dealing with.

DM: And it sounds as if at every stage it is an issue of who or what you are being responsible to. Who do I need to be responsible to here, the subject, the play or the issue? You had to deal with each thing on its own merits.

EW: And that is a dilemma.

AM2: Yes, it sounds very hard.

Audience Member 3: Watching this, it really brought home to me the age-old question that there are arguments on either side so can art change things? I found that so incredibly devastating to watch, more than anything else I have seen here. Maybe it's because, as with things about some atrocity, you think, 'At least that one's over' – even though other atrocities may happen. But this is, of course, going on all of the time. I think the fact that these were real stories did bother me that much more. So yes, unfortunately, it doesn't seem to have changed the city council or whatever, but that woman did write to you and said she no longer crosses the street. I mean, maybe that's all that we can hope for in change: small changes within our own hearts; and how those will grow, you never know. I think it is wonderful that this thing has changed someone.

AM1: I was just going to say a very small thing, and again it is more of an observation. I think it is highly commendable that a huge team of people created this piece of work. I think that is something I found difficult when I have been trying to work with verbatim theatre. You've had all these conversations, all these discussions and all that back-up, and just put it out there on such a scale for people who are doing it. Because all of us are probably trying to create work and collaborate in our own different ways.

SB: The tree Leanne was talking about, where the memorial is to Anne Marie Foy: Thomas Gray, the filmmaker, and his assistant, Mandip, had gone and filmed the tree and filmed the memorial, because a lot of the production had a film backdrop. So they became a part of the verbatim process as well. Nina worked very closely with them on that, taking them to areas where the women worked; and Miriam, the designer, as well – everyone in the whole creative team.

EW: It is a difficult process, that. Nina and I had two stages, and we knew in the first stage that it was going to cause a lot of problems because of what we have talked about. So it was decided that I would work as the lead writer. Each writer would hone their own specific piece and send it in, and then we would all have a meeting. Nina and I worked very closely together. To start off

with, we fought, and we had to find a rhythm that worked for us both in order to make this piece. It was difficult, but I think it's about keeping the idea that you have to put up with finding that rhythm. And it took a while, but eventually it went OK.

AM1: But it's not about you, is it? It's about them. It's not about your ego – one ego, as it were.

Steve Buckwell: A very quick question for Nina, just listening to what everybody is saying about the team approach on this: officially, you are the director of the piece, but is it not possibly true to say that there is a fifth writer on this?

NR: Yes, and I felt a little bit guilty about that, because I thought that I came in under a different name and then I turned into a writer. But I think Max Stafford-Clark, when he does verbatim, becomes a dramaturg. I am quite certain of that. I don't know how many directors we've got in the audience, but as a director, you find you are editing the material, because it is all about making it into a piece of theatre. You can't just have a series of monologues. It gets very boring when it's just people sitting and talking. You can always create a scene, but in order to be able to create that scene, you have got to have a hand in the editing. So I felt like I did shift role in the cycle, in a way.

Steve Buckwell: But it's not just you. As with other productions we have talked about over the past two days, it seems to me that this is the nature of the beast: that you cannot, directors cannot, avoid becoming part of the writing process. I just think that's almost inherent to the genre.

EW: It's good to know that now. It wasn't so good last year, when we all went in as individuals, not knowing, because none of us had worked in this way before.

DM: We're going to have to draw it to a close at that point. So thank you very much, Suzanne, Esther, Leanne and Nina.

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ENDS