

# The On Theatre project

## Social and political theatre, and the notion of the 'theatre essay', with On Theatre's Mick Gordon

This event took place at Central School of Speech & Drama, 3 November 2009

### Guest Speakers:

**Nina Steiger** (NS), director, Writers' Centre, Soho Theatre

**Mick Gordon** (MG), director, *On Theatre*

**Dr Chris Megson** (CM), Senior Lecturer, Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London

### Chair

**Dr Gareth White** (GW), Lecturer, Community Performance/Applied Theatre, CSSD

### About On Theatre

On Theatre was set up in 2004 by award-winning artistic director Mick Gordon to explore the fundamental preoccupations of modern life through bold experimental theatre. Much of the company's work takes the form of a 'theatre essay', a theatrical presentation taking a universal theme or contemporary subject and proceeding to debate, dramatise and present it on stage. To date they have explored big philosophical themes through their explanatorily-titled plays: *On Death*, *On Love*, *On Ego*, *On Religion*, *On Emotion*, *On Memory*, *On Identity*, *On Truth*, *On Evolution*.

**Topics are explored with experts, artists and leading thinkers from outside of the theatre world – previous collaborators have included philosopher Prof AC Grayling, neuropsychologist Dr Paul Broks, and musician Billy Brag. Future ‘essays’ will include *On/Off* (an examination of virtual reality), *On Memory*, *On Free Will*, and a major international collaboration: *On The Silk Road*.**

**Though early pieces were presented at the Gate Theatre, where Gordon was Artistic Director; the company has since found a home at the Soho Theatre.**

**Awards include Critics Circle Award for Most Promising Newcomer and the Peter Brook Award for Most Outstanding Theatre**

Mick Gordon: What is a ‘theatre essay’? Really it’s a very simple theatre making process.

Just as in a written essay, we decide on a theme and that theme could be a fundamental pre-occupation, like death, or it could be a shrill question of the moment, as with *On Religion*, which we made after the 7/7 bombings. Then we try to ask interesting questions about the theme, for example with *On Death*: ‘Can dying people teach us how to live?’ ‘Can dying people offer any lessons for the living?’ For *On Religion*: ‘What place does religion have in the 21<sup>st</sup> century secular world?’

Now this is important for me because this will lead me to a choice of primary collaborator, an expert in the field of the theme (but definitely not an expert in theatre – that’s my job!). For example, with *On Death*, I asked ‘Can the dying offer lessons for the living?’ That led me to a French palliative psychologist called Dr Marie de Hennezel who’s written many books (including *Intimate Death*) on this very issue. With *On Religion*, asking ‘What place does religion have in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?’ led me to the philosopher AC Grayling, whose views you’ll already know. That then starts a fundamental relationship and leads us

on to a decision about how we will source materials and content for the piece that will end up on stage.

So we've got the theme, and the questions. We've identified an expert collaborator, and now, together with that collaborator, we decide how to source material. Again this is crucial because there will be a relationship between how I decide to source the material and what ends up being on stage.

How can I demonstrate this? Okay, I'll use my two examples for you again. For *On Death* with Marie de Hennezel, we used her diaries of case studies of patients she'd accompanied to death, and our own interviews with people who knew they were going to die shortly. The way we sourced the material related to the form that the piece eventually took on stage. With professor Grayling, it was very clear in our discussions that we shared certain anti-religious views, so it seemed sensible that we speak to religious people. So we're entering interview format and again the material and the way we sourced it related to the form that it took on stage. How so? Because we transcribe all the material that we source or we print it out in order to go into a room with actors and dramatise it, and usually, if they are given a monologue, they dramatise it as a monologue, if they are given dialogue from an interview, they re-rehearse the interview.

Now we try to play and challenge the form in which the material is sourced, but it often wins because it feels rich and it feels appropriate, and that will influence how I re-conceive it for the stage. So the process is a simple four-step process. Decide on the theme, ask the question, that's the first. Then source material, then dramatise and interrogate that material with actors or primary collaborators. Nina's gone through several of these processes with me, she's on our theatre board, and acts as a non-official literary manager to the company and certainly interrogates my work, and then we produce the work for the stage. So that's step four.

Now the interesting thing about *On Theatre* is one of the reasons I wanted to be very upfront about the theme that we were exploring – five years ago I felt that theatre in London, my home, particularly the new plays, was not being upfront about what it was exploring because it wasn't exploring very much. We got caught in a sort of naturalism where people were writing semi-biographical pieces, maybe with a little story attached, but they weren't fully using the medium of theatre to interrogate a theme or an idea that was bigger than the characters and the story. I was very frustrated by this because, as a theatre maker, I wanted the theatre to be an access point, a thinking space, to use its fully emotional intelligence to interrogate issues in a way that I would feel satisfied by as an audience member. I think theatre's changed in the last five years.

The interesting thing about calling these pieces 'theatre essays' is that it's a terrible marketing angle. Although it's very good in France – they love this *On-whatever* – and it's very good in Germany, they like it very serious, and in Scandinavia for some reason, but in this country I think there's still a sort of anti-intellectualism or an anti any notion of elitism, and so people look at these things and go, 'My God, that sounds like work! No.' So that's one of the interesting little difficulties that we found with presenting the *On...* work as it's conceived, using its titles. The other interesting thing of course is that every play, every good play, is a theatre essay. Every great play that you've seen will be a theatre essay.

Now picture this diagram in your head: a triangle, you've got a triangle in your head, an equilateral triangle. In the middle the word 'theme' and around it on the three points you put 'story' (what happens, that's the story of what happens), 'plot' (how it happens), and character (who this happens to). Then you realise that's a little definition of a play and certainly any play that has lasted more than its premiere, especially if it's lasted through generations, will adhere to that very general formula. What that means is that when you go to see a very good play and anytime you laugh or anytime you feel emotional, you have just been given a huge amount of information or an argument

relating to the theme. In other words, really good plays very successfully disguise their thematic exploration.

Now *On...* tries to do the opposite, *On...* tries to say, 'This is what we're going to be looking at. We want you and your brains to be actively engaged in what we're doing. We are going to give you an emotional journey through it, otherwise we know as an audience you're going to become peculiarly irritated. But we're also going to try to puncture that emotional journey, so that it doesn't dominate and doesn't disguise the interrogation, so that your brains can be active from your point of view, so that the argument can continue after the event completes itself. So that's why we still call these things *On...* It's a challenge and it's trying not to hide or disguise the interrogation underway, which is what good plays normally try and do.

I'll just give you a little potted history and then finish, because I don't want to talk for too long, because there's going to be more interesting questions later. Part of the process of the *On...* work is iterative, which means the next one comes from the current one. It started with death, and it started because I was preoccupied by death, I was constantly thinking about this and I thought, 'I need to do a piece of work on this because I need to get this out of my system somehow.' Now the fact that I was constantly thinking about death, my own death, the death of my loved ones, shouldn't have surprised me being an artist, it's a common enough theme, it's a common enough preoccupation for artists, certainly for Irish artists. So that was the first and one of the reoccurring questions, and one of the reoccurring pre-occupations of the dying people that we met was love. It was people who had come to terms with their death who were very actively pursuing a noble re-encourure with their important relationships and they were framing it in the word love and their regrets were about their behaviour in love. It got me thinking about love and I thought ok, so let's do a piece about love stories.

What we did with that piece was I got a group of actors together and we all went out to and collected love stories. Of course, when these were then transcribed and acted out and it was very, very boring: 'I met her, she liked

me, I liked her, we met again, we got married and we're still together.' And, and we went, 'Oh shit, this is really dull. Happiness writes white.' You know, all of those little clichés. So then we went back to the same people and said, 'Do you have a story about love where it fucked up, where it *didn't* work?' And they go, 'Oh yeah, lots.' 'One in particular?' 'Yeah one in particular.' Those stories were then recorded, transcribed and played out, and where love *didn't* work became much more interesting a subject than when love did work

From that, a pre-occupation that came from both series of interviews, or a line that kept reoccurring, was, 'Why didn't it work?' An interviewer would ask the subject and the subject would say, 'If only she had behaved like this, then it would have been perfect.' Or, 'If only I could have changed this, then we'd still be together.' So we've got to the territory of I and my behaviour and my emotions and my thoughts and how these things relate, and that led us to working with a neurologist about how the brain constructs a sense of self, and that led us later to looking at emotions and how emotions relate to thought and behaviour.

So that is the iterative side of the *On...* work again, where the next one comes, if you're listening carefully enough, from the current project. Then there is the *On Religion* idea or the *On Identity* idea with Billy Brag. These are themes of the moment. Religion – particularly talking to fundamentalist religions, or Islam, or Islamism – was a very shrill question at the time and it was something that we thought London would be interested in debating, having views upon and using theatre as a forum to start that conversation. *On Identity*, particularly on the run up to the 2010 general election, with the big dilemma between choosing who would represent us and our motivation for voting for those people, thinking of the BNP and Nick Griffin and that whole conversation, that series of conversations that are alive at the moment. That felt a very alive issue to try to address through the theatre.

So there's two strands: there's the *On Theatre* project which is sort of the mapping of human preoccupation and consciousness which is the iterative *On*; (death, love, construction of the self, how the brain works, emotions,

thought, behaviour, relationships); and then there's the current sharp shrill question that we try to address obliquely and put something on stage.

So that's the context of our work.

GW: Ok, thanks very much Mick. Shall we move straight on to Chris?

Chris Megson: Thank you. I like the sense that you gave, Mick, of each issue containing within it the seeds of the next: a kind of domino effect of metaphysical preoccupations. That to me is a very arresting way of putting it.

I want to give some remarks about my perceptions of *On Theatre's* work and to try to relate them to some broader issues pertaining to the complexion of political theatres in the UK.

I think you're right about the term theatre essays: 'essay' is a little bit off-putting, but that's only because it presses all the wrong buttons in a British theatre context. In a sense, the term 'essay' and its connection with theatre might lead us back to Ibsen and Shaw, the play of ideas or the thesis play. Alternatively, it might suggest those big, disputatious, state-of-the-nation plays that characterised the political theatre of the 1970s. If you think of David Hare's *Plenty* or Howard Brenton's *The Churchill Play*, these are plays that tackled social democracy and deployed a panoramic and epic structure to prise open some of the social contradictions and injustices in the period.

The style of theatricality that's at work in the *On Theatre* pieces reaches beyond the naturalism or the social realistic models of theatrical debate in Shaw, Galsworthy, Edgar or Hare. As you mentioned, the word 'essay' is better understood in France and Germany; here we generally take it to mean (I'm saying 'we' as in parochial English) a short piece of critical writing on a particular subject. But it also means, and this is something you pointed out very clearly in your comments, an attempt, or *try* at something, and this distinction is important. I think rather than being *On Identity* or *On Memory* it might well be *At Memory* or *At Love* because there's an attempt to scale an

issue as you would scale a mountain. The word essay can be traced back to its Latin root '*exagium*', which means to weigh something up, but in old French the word has a slightly different provenance: it means 'trial' or 'to put something on trial' and we might reasonably say that the work of On Theatre carries the traces of both of those meanings - to weigh something up and to put the issue on trial.

But, as I said, these aren't plays in the Shavian sense since they don't articulate a thesis, and there can be no socially organised resolution of the questions asked. Instead the pieces arbitrate themselves as philosophical speculation. I was looking at the On Theatre website this afternoon and, in one of the press releases, Mick makes a call for a New Enlightenment in British theatre. It's a bold claim and it's a very interesting one that's attuned to the subjects of death, love, religion and memory. The limits of the Enlightenment project are the limits of science and reason to explain our seismic experiences of emotion in the context of death, or love, or both. I suggest actually that yours is a theatre of secular metaphysics, if that makes sense.

Having just made that point – and I don't want to invent pigeon holes if the pigeons aren't there and nor do I want to invent boxes to put things into – it strikes me as curious that, on the surface, many of the On Theatre pieces share affinities with the techniques and aesthetics of verbatim theatre which, as I'm sure you know, exploded across the theatrical landscape from the mid-1990s, though it's receding now. The stimulus for the On Theatre shows, as has been described, is often a documentary source (for example a published book) and the pieces emerge from in-depth discussion and research, including interviews with 'ordinary people' as well as talking heads or experts. The theatrical aesthetic in some of the work has been quite pared down and uncluttered, the rhetorical register is constituted in personal testimony. Actors play roles but occasionally they step outside those roles or they speak as 'themselves'. And the plays, as is the case with some verbatim plays, produce discourse of their own. I know, for example, that the books of interviews have



been published, so there's a sense of creating a ripple beyond the theatre event within the wider culture.

We were talking earlier about the fact you directed the verbatim play *Deep Cut*, a wonderful piece by Philip Ralph that took Edinburgh by storm a couple of years ago. *Deep Cut* follows the usual protocols of verbatim theatre: it consists of edited transcripts of interviews and other forms of documentation relating to the unexplained deaths of young recruits in the Deepcut barracks – a scandalous situation. *Deep Cut*, like most verbatim theatre, is a kind of theatre essay in the old French sense – it puts a pressing social problem on trial, it's preoccupied with the question of justice, it addresses the perceived democratic deficit in the wider political culture, and it constitutes the audience as a witness in the legalistic sense of that term. In fact much documentary theatre puts its subject on trial, as it were, by actually *staging* a trial or having an inquiry setting. I'm thinking in particular of the Tribunal plays that have been performed at the Tricycle theatre in which certain state inquiries are actually reproduced for us to watch 'as if for real'. Interestingly, *Deep Cut* is a play about the *lack* of an inquiry, and I guess if there were to be a public inquiry into Deepcut, as I hope there will be, we'd have *Deep Cut 2* – the staging of the inquiry.

However, in spite of these methodological and aesthetic similarities, it seems to me that On Theatre relegates justice as a preoccupation and perhaps, in so doing, falls away from the literalist theatricality of much verbatim theatre and the preoccupations that drove the campaigning naturalism of Shaw or the left-wing social realism of the 1970s. I know that in some of Mick's writing, theatre's been celebrated for what he describes as its 'human scale', its intimacy and its immediacy. Etymologically the word 'immediacy' has its origins in the Latin for 'no intervening agency' or 'not intervening'. The dictionary defines it curiously as 'nearest in time, next to in space'. Immediacy is fetishized in all sorts of traditions in theatre but it has become an especially utopian impulse in British theatre in the past two decades – to have an experience that is somehow undistorted by any kind of mediation. It strikes me that the formal experiments in British theatre of the past ten or so

years, of which *On Theatre* is a part, whether these experiments are in verbatim or so-called fabulist mode, bring into focus this question of immediacy. Related to this, is the question of what it means to be a witness, about what we precisely mean when we describe that much overused term. Witnessing, after all, can designate juridical, scopophilic, metaphysical or religious dimensions of experience.

Verbatim theatre works within a realist aesthetic – it excavates history, it opens up the failures of the state and its institutions, and the spectator is constructed as a deliberating witness who witnesses other witnesses giving witness testimony. This brings actor and spectator into an especially forceful conjunction. Many of the playwrights who emerged in the 1990s – let's say Sarah Kane or Philip Ridley – worked within a wholly different frame of conceiving that position of the witness, where the experience of the event itself is constructive of that reality. In the plays of Kane, to take an example, the spectator is constructed as a reluctant or involuntary witness or even, in the example of *Crave*, as traumatised. The witness is not seen as advocating in the manner of verbatim theatre but as implicated in the events on stage. To conclude, I'd suggest that *On Theatre* treads a really interesting line between those two different kinds of approach: the aesthetic is grounded, by and large, in terms of the documentary-real and the use of actual testimonies, but the pieces also bring into focus a powerful sense of the bonds or burdens that we share as human beings. Interestingly, the responses of reviewers also tend to circle around this point.

MG: I can remember all of them!

CM: Inscribed on your memory, no doubt. Can the dying teach us how to live? How does the brain create a sense of self? Are we just a puppet of our emotions? These are the trigger-questions, and sub-titles, of the *On Theatre* pieces and they are questions of *exagium* or weighing up, they are not juridical questions in the manner of verbatim theatre. I thought it very interesting when you talked about the emotional journey creating a particular

kind of affect, and I think my interest is in what kind of witness is constituted through that process.

GW: Thank you very much Chris. Nina, on to you.

Nina Steiger: Okay, I'm just going to take out my laptop with some notes. I've got the possibility of projecting a couple of links and websites at the end, but lets see if we need them; it's possible and likely that we won't.

I'm hearing new things in both of these talks, and I think my points of connection in the first two instances are this obsession with the immediacy, the idea, and sharing very much with Mick a frustration with conventional forms of storytelling and performance and writing and coming to a kind of question about the idea of what is a text and what is source material for a text.

I come from the background of someone who reads nothing but texts all day and reads plays not as pieces of literature, but as a recipe for a live event and I have to try very hard to keep remembering to read them that way because a play on the page seduces you into a relationship with it as just words: 'Oh, that was particularly well written,' 'Oh, that's nice structure.' But I also have to think, 'How will this play work as a live event?' and really try to reinforce that for myself. I think I see a different relationship with liveness and immediacy, and certainly feel a modern obsession with it, so that's what I wanted to talk about in first instance, and we can get back to the On Theatre project towards the end.

I started to look at some trends in what we're reading and what we're seeing around us now, and why there feels like a very strong current towards re-negotiating what the text is, where the performance takes its place, so I'm just going to leave the idea of the script and the text aside for the second.

One the areas I've been working on a little bit at Soho is about a convergence between traditional storytelling and different ways of using interactivity and digital media to make bridges with things like game design, site specific work,

virtual worlds, social media and uses of interesting interactive technology to put the story, in some ways, more in the hands of the audience. What this immediately brings up is an idea that performance can take place in many places other than just on the stage, and the frustration that I talked about at the beginning for me came around the fact that we spend a lot of time at Soho Theatre making flyers, inviting people to a performance that begins at seven thirty and at ten past nine you go. And one of the things that I know our audiences at Soho Theatre love so much about the work from On Theatre is that the text has a life outside the show itself, that it's more than a play that gets brought to life, that there's something else going on. It's partly projects like that, and a variety of other influences I'm starting to see around, that are making me think that one of the things that's happening here is that there isn't just one author, and the whole idea of performance starts to blend audience and performer in an interesting way.

I was reading up a little bit and there's a quote from Wagner on his desire for something called 'the total performance' and the quote here is 'through which the public, that representation of daily life, forgets the confines of the auditorium and lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as life itself and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole world'. I think that, to me, somewhere in there is this bridge between the immediacy of live performance and live storytelling, the authenticity in as much the authentic of verbatim theatre and the use of real experience and testimony as source material for theatre. So to me this starts to bring round the idea of total performance and I'm starting to look at ways at Soho of cultivating projects like this and cultivating projects that aspire towards some kind of blending of text, source material, performance, and audience. Where's content generated? When does it begin and end? How can it start before 7.30 and finish after nine o'clock? Etc...

Just as an example, how many people have been on the internet already today? Has anyone not? Ok, how many people got news online today? Communicated with a loved one? Communicated professionally? Yes, I mean, we're all doing it all the time. I think sometimes theatre is by people

who can't handle having to express themselves, communicate, relate with any technology... but the point is, we are getting our stories, our relationships, our news, and our professional lives enhanced constantly through technology, digital media, the internet, whatever word you want to say for it. We're creatures who are comfortable and happy there. That's point one.

Point two is that there's this problem in the arts where we're struggling, we're running out of money, we're finding it hard to get new audiences. We know there's a new audience out there, but we don't know how to reach them. We think they might be doing something online sometimes, but we don't know how to talk to them, and certainly there are these throngs of projects and certainly a lot of things getting off the ground. We've probably all heard about this digital theatre project getting off the ground whereby the work of the National, Young Vic, Royal Court, and Soho are going to be digitised in performance and distributed on YouTube to subscribers. There's a big question whether this is still live theatre, but the point is, we're starting to get out there a little bit in these ways, and somewhere in there what I'm starting to feel is this birth of a kind of hybrid performance and audience membership that uses the internet, uses technology, uses social media, and uses some of the basic rules of game design to engage people in the different ways with storytelling, live performance, and the consumption of narrative.

I wanted to talk through a couple of examples and how these things intersect with live art, game play, new writing and the fact that these things often rely on new technology but frequently don't, and maybe talk through a couple of examples. Does anybody here know the term of 'alternative reality game'? Maybe. And has anyone ever played one? You have? Okay, so I'll just give an example of one as a starting point and hopefully the link between the main topics that we're talking about will become clear.

One example of an alternative reality game is something called *World Without Oil*. This is a game that plays over six weeks, you play as yourself, your way into the game is online but basically the game play takes place as a live performance of a hypothetical reality where you've got six weeks until the

world's oil supply dries up and in teams you get points and are rewarded for the performance of interventions to this reality. So on a grassroots level we have to get together and posit a structure by which you are going to save some aspect of your known life, in spite of this immediate threat. It's reckoned about a million people became aware of this game if in fact only about 250 played passionately, and a lot of the grassroots efforts that were put into effect had carried on a year and a half later. What I feel like this is, is a promise. It's a question: what would you do if...? And there's something about the collective and collaborative creation of a text and the performance in the way of an intervention and it seems to me that this is one of the most political pieces of theatre I can imagine. It also brings into question what is the text? Is it the performance? Is it the way the game is documented? Is it the final outcome? But to me there's something in here that overlaps profoundly with something we're trying to do at Soho, which is gather people and ask 'what if there was a world where this was happening, what would you do?' The game then says, now get up and do it.

Another example is a kind of hybrid project, something called *Our City, Our Music* where basically five recording artists from Leeds were asked things like, 'What's your favourite song?' Then those people went to a specific location within the city and recorded the song live, an album was created which people could then download and walk around the city listening to their favourite music in the place where it was recorded live, suddenly forging strong geographic associations through live performance. Now is there a theatrical equivalent? In a way, it's sort of like the flip side of verbatim, which takes live dialogue and transaction and puts it into a theatre context. This is sort of taking your relationship with art and putting it out live, and again it's one of these interesting ideas that flips the question of 'what is text and where does performance take place?'

Just to finish this idea, in the theatre of new writing, in the refreshing forms and in the regeneration of the relationship with text and performance, what I feel we're talking about here is different ways of bringing authenticity and

immediacy into theatre, and also taking it out and putting it back in the hands of audience members and artists.

GW: Thank you very much Nina.

*(short break)*

GW: Well I imagine our three speakers have plenty to say in response to what they have heard from each other by now, but I think we should open to the floor and let those inter-relationships develop.

Audience Member 1: I was interested in some of the terminology about a new theatre and a desire for immediacy. Bearing in mind theatre has been done digitally and live and simultaneously, on the internet as essentially a mediated art form, and the fact that verbatim has been criticised as being untheatrical and ultimately sort of absent because it's essentially reporting back on something, I wondered about the concept of 'presence'. What does 'presence' mean in this new desire for immediate experience in theatre?

MG: That's a very interesting question and I suppose beneath it, you're asking of yourself, if you're the first audience member, what kind of experience do I want? That's very hard to answer because there are many different types of experience. It makes me think immediately of an anecdote that happened when I was running the transformation season at the National in 2003:

One of my responsibilities was to encourage under 26 year olds into the National Theatre. I met a woman who sought me out. She was in her mid-sixties, maybe a little bit older, but she looked smashing, I remember, she had lovely skin, and she said, 'Why bother encouraging under 26 year olds into the theatre? Let them go and get drunk or do whatever they want to do. I didn't want to come to the theatre when I was under 26. I want to come now because I'm 65 and the way that I like to consider things is slightly more calmly, with a little bit more silence and a little bit more reflection on my part,

and theatre offers me that experience. So stop wasting your money. You can sit there with the audience you already have. Maybe the theatre's not for under 26 year olds.'

I thought that was absolutely brilliant, and of course you know I'd been spending two years trying to persuade any under 26 year old I could get me hands on, so we spent a fortune doing this, and I thought that was a very, very interesting argument. So I suppose, there are horses for courses, there'll be different forms and different ways of interacting with the theatre because there are different communicative abilities and access points now, people will want to explore those because it's fun. People like them. At the end of the day, my suspicion is theatre will be theatre, it will always return to two planks and passion or, if you're Peter Brook, a carpet and some actors.

NS: I think that theatre comes in different shapes and sizes. Theatre is where you find it. Theatre is where you make it. We need to break down barriers that people have like theatre only starts when you've paid x pounds and you've come in, and only if you sit quietly and leave when we tell you to. I think it's like the death of the art form and I know that in America what they're calling it now is a 'crisis of culture'. It's like 'the end of the world as we know it', like the extinction of opera, the extinction of the symphony orchestra. And there's a lot of people say, 'Let it go. If it hasn't earned its place as a valuable, urgently essential artistic commodity, then let it go.' I don't think it's about letting go, I think it's about what is urgent about it, and for me I think there are these urgent components in theatre. One is the ability to sit quietly and reason in a thinking space with thinking people, as in a darkened room. I feel like I'm quoting from *On Religion* right now and there are lines and feelings and moments in *On Ego* that have shaken my entire philosophy of what it means to be alive. I love that about it, but I also like running down the street, chasing a story with people.

The Smithsonian did a project called *The Ghost of a Chance*. They felt they weren't getting enough under 26s into their building. The museum closes at 7 so at 8 o'clock they opened the building up for a bunch of, however old they



are, to come and play a game where the museum texts you clues and you and your team go on a treasure hunt through the building. So now, I'm not dragging you by the hair through the collection saying 'look, I want you to know that this is important' you 're telling me it's important because you're racing through the collection to find the missing fact, embody it, take it, own it, build it, to create your own story and your own relationship with the collection and then leave at 9. And what's it cost us to be open an extra hour a day? Absolutely nothing, but actually we've changed your whole nature of engagement with not only the collection, not only history, but your personal relationship with the architecture. And there's something that theatre can do that's not unlike that, that then isn't this kind of po-faced, bring in under 26s, bring in people of this demographic, let's racially profile everyone, find out who's missing and then go get them, but actually really say 'what can we offer?' It's not making them do something, making them come. It's what can we give them, so when they come they have a really good time.

*(Inaudible muttering)*

GW: That sounds like a disagreement to me. Chris do you have any productive disagreements to offer?

CM: The question was about what's the nature of presence in verbatim theatre? 'Verbatim' is not just one monolithic modality of doing theatre of course: it gestures towards a range of different practices, as you know, but its critics tend to seize on its truth-claims as disingenuous since they are always-already mediated. This point is surely self-evident. On the other hand, I know that when I've seen certain verbatim pieces, they have engaged and arrested me in often unexpected ways. It's a bit like what Roland Barthes says about the photograph: there are qualities in certain images that can mark the imagination and memory. Joe Kelleher, in his wonderful book *Theatre & Politics*, mounts a really interesting defence of theatre working through analogy: verbatim theatre can pursue the literal through an analogical frame, lifting it from the particularities of any given situation and, as it were,

'expanding' on it metaphorically, and not just in terms of a kind of broader social resonance.

MG: Is that what you meant by presence?

AM1: I completely see an authenticity in all these very different forms of presence that have been invoked, whether it's the way that authenticity and immediacy link to participation and the ability to participate with some kind of interface in a virtual sense, or the notion of authenticity being in the presence of some text that stands in for someone who's not there, that the person who originally spoke those lines. I sort of wondered whether there's a notion of sort of authenticity we assume from a shared understanding, which perhaps is a different sort of presence.

MG: I think one of the interesting things, well one of the things that we try and do with the *On...* pieces, is puncturing the emotional narrative so that people aren't swept away with it. We do that because it's my hope that the audience can run their own concomitant narrative, so very actively they can disagree when they're watching an argument being played out or an experience being relayed, rather than just emotionally engaged with it and reflect thereafter.

NS: I don't know if this is going to build on that point or answer the question, but one of things that happens when we work on an *On...* play is that we're don't just dramaturg the play, we dramaturg an argument and an issue. I really like the way the characters speak the evolution of the question and the lift off comes when you can't see the joins between the construction of the argument and the construction of the theatrical premise, and the theatrical moment. There's something about those two things that plays out in verbatim and in a kind of theatre essay and in a lot of these hybrid forms that we're talking about where the construct and the emotional experience of it start to blend and so you are present as a spectator to a piece of theatre but also to an experience of a piece of theatre, if you see what I mean. You sort of lose your way talking about it too much but there's something in there that has to

do for me with where that crescendo comes in and you're sort of engaged in two levels of experience.

GW: Andy are you following up with this question or do you want to contribute a new one.

Prof Andy Lavender: Well it's a slightly different area but it does follow on. I was interested when I came across the On Theatre project in what looked like a sort of recuperation of a political, socio-political theatre after a period where it seemed it wasn't possible to do political theatre for various reasons – one, because it's out of fashion; two nobody was political in that sense; and thirdly it seemed somehow disreputable anyway to do the 1970s David Hare thing and in a way all of the instances that Chris gave earlier (the Shaws, Ibsens and David Hares) are people who have a position and express that position through drama, dramatising issues, interacting with a sociable process. Then along came verbatim theatre and political theatre was recuperated by being authenticated in the voices of people who had had experiences happen to them or whatever. That's a very situated contextualised voice and the positions quarrelled often. I'll come to my question: do you have a position, or does it work because it doesn't take a position? I add as a writer that question: where does the pleasure reside? It seems to me that there are partly what Nina's been talking about, a series of engagements by people and of people, with people, where you go through the co-modification of experience knowing that you've had some kind of time because you've been there or you've been viewing it. And the same might begin to be true of the On Theatre project. So where does the pleasure reside, and do you take a position or does it matter that there is no position?

MG: Well, one of the difficulties of directing a piece of verbatim theatre is this: you've already relegated one of the theatre's favourite tools and that is character development over time. Everything's reported, everything's after the fact, that's why it can be so boring. Yes, it can be authentically voiced, but it can be very, very dull because there is no development or change, everything's already happened. One tries to activate those moments and use

that through the theatre, and it tries to activate it by interrogating the different positions.

Now, do I have a position? When asked this very question Tom Stoppard said, 'That's problematic for me because I tend to believe the last plausible argument I've heard a repeat it as my own.' And that really chimed with me because I thought yes, I am going to use these pieces to try to work something out. So I will have usually worked out my position by the end of it but try not to let that dominate. What I try to present on stage is the working out and whatever position I've arrived at, I don't then go back and re-edit, form that as a premise.

GW: It sounds like process is predominant.

MG: Yes, I think that's really interesting, because the real aspiration of the piece is my position, which is a belief in conversation. That's what's really underneath all the pieces. What happens when conversations break down? That's tragedy for me, that's violence, and so it's always trying to say how do conversations break down? What's the effect of it? But I'm really asking, how do you keep conversations going between parties that seem not to be able to communicate with each other or use the same language? Where's the pleasure? The pleasure is in the process, the pleasure is in the process of working it out, just to know that, just when I've settled on a position on something, somebody's going to say something to me and I'm going to have to rework it out all over again. I suppose that's one of the reasons why these pieces are interactive because while doing something, somebody's asked me a question or said something that I think is more interesting or more fundamental than the thing that I'm actually worrying on, working on currently. So I have to keep going to the next one. So yes, I do come to positions and sometimes I do hold positions, but I think that the argy-bargy is much more alive and opens up conversations given that what I think is only so interesting. I think that's a great thing to hold on to, that's my position. Where does the pleasure come? Presenting the process in the hope it's going to stimulate more work, more conversation.

GW: Can I chip in there, abusing my position as chair? Something you said earlier Mick seemed to be very Brechtian. Now you're talking about stimulating conversation but you also talked about not wanting your audience to slip into too great an empathy – I'm paraphrasing but it was something very much like that. I wonder if you think actually there are a set of technical theatrical dramaturgical strategies that are deployed to keep alive a conversation, that the nature of theatre as a conversation is different now to when Brecht was telling us these things.

MG: Well, no, this is interesting, this is why I was asking you about your word 'presence' because I love shit movies, I really love them, I go and I watch them and I go on this kind of emotional roller coaster. I come out and I can't remember anything about them and if I find something that's interesting about them I've got to go back to them again and keep pinching myself to try and work out what it is and how they communicated that and what techniques they used. But what I'm trying to do in the theatre is to try to keep an audience's thinking brain active. I'm so addicted to an emotional journey. I'll go on an emotional journey with anybody. I'd much rather do that than thinking. Thinking's tiring. It's hard work. That's the Brechtian question – am I using distancing effects in a contemporary setting in order for people to reconsider their own experience? Well absolutely and we know what those techniques are and there are a finite number and we use them all the time in different ways.

GW: You say that you're still using the vocabulary distancing techniques. That's still the way it works?

MG: Wim Wenders, the great German film maker, said a very interesting thing; he said, 'When you show an audience an image for too long, for some irrational reason they will become unbelievably irritated.' And he's tried this experiment showing people a railway track and no train coming, nothing happens, nothing fucking happens, and you start going absolutely crazy. Rehearsing with Peter Brook is like this, quite happy to sit there for hours,

waiting for you to do something different and you go crazy and then you kind of come through. Well that's what Peter reckons. I just think you go mental. And so that's always the juggling act with the On Theatre pieces, and we know when we haven't achieved it because it fucks up and the audience gets pissed off. So you're trying to judge that all the time and then you put it in front of an audience. We're always doing a pile of work in previews and then after we open we have to keep changing it because that's when we're learning how much we're irritating the audience. That's the other thing that's pleasurable, it's knowing that because you're washing your dirty laundry in public some things don't work and aren't finished but that's the only way you keep learning, but it is pleasurable because you can change it the next night and make it a bit better after you've learnt.

GW: Some more questions from the floor.

Audience Member 2: I'm interested in teasing out the nuances between political theatre and making theatre interesting. I think it's interesting that you've made reference to Shaw, Ibsen, Hare and Edgar, and those heavyweights of a very particular mode of dramatising, while also talking about new technologies, media and how to interact with it. My belief is that the crux of making theatre political lies in something to do with the production and reception constituting the theatrical end effect and I think what Nina's talking about in the way of shifting the dynamic between the audience and where the text lies is really, really interesting and political. I suppose this question is directed at Nina – coming from a new writing background where the playwright is the conventional creator of the text in the theatre, how are the playwrights or the directors or other theatre managers responding to your propositions?

NS: Some are responding with abject panic and disgust. Let's look at three projects going on in London right now about one issue. Four, we'll make it four, and we'll widen it to July.

We've *Jerusalem* on at the Royal Court, this is Jez Butterworth's play about a guy called Johnny 'Rooster' Byron who's being kicked out of his rural caravan in a clearing where he's been doing no-one any harm except providing drugs and sex to local kids and a hell of a lot of local flavour. Great play, totally sucks you into its brilliant structure, simple narrative art, but really character driven. And the word Romany isn't said until three quarters of the way through the third act. Kind of a political play though, it's man versus system, it is very Arthur Miller. It's sort of like, 'I have my name, that's all I have. I've got my blood in my veins and that's it.'

Soho tomorrow night is opening a play called *Shraddha*, a *Romeo and Juliet* style love story between a Romany girl and local working class boy from the estate, who meet through the fence. It's set on the eve of her family's eviction from their Stratford camp, where they've lived in basically a permanent caravan for the last seventeen years but they are deeply in their heart and blood travellers, even though they've never travelled. They, the kids, go on the run to find love, find who they are and escape the heavy hand of the Olympics and the system and the machine. It's kind of a political play, but it's a soft play, it's a love story, and it's one of those plays where the political context and backdrop tell you about the love story and the love story tells you what the price of that political situation is.

Then we have a verbatim theatre project going on at the Royal Court right now with the Romany community, and Romanies are difficult and tricky to get involved in projects like this. They're very, very concerned about how they're depicted. They are on the political back foot at all times and they're like the last legitimate prejudice in this country, the last accepted form of racism. So it isn't verbatim perfect for them because there's no fetishising; we're giving them their own voice back.

And then there's this silly project we're doing at Soho which is to compliment and underscore our production of *Shraddha*, which is again is called Drom. You text a short code, follow the drum to this little number and basically there's this GPS labelled caravan going round the country. You can track

these people in this caravan every night and help them find a place to sleep, and you get points for helping them find the best place to sleep closest to Soho Theatre. And it just asks you as you start getting involved in their story and their journey and the blogs and the picture and all of this to just for a second empathise. What would you do? Where are you going to sleep? Where you going to be a year from now? Why has the act of not having a home become this total act of transgression?

Which is the most political way of getting involved in a fairly political story? Is it just to be sucked heart and soul into a narrative? Is it to hear their side of the story in a quite managed way of depicting it? Is it to just do it with your own hands? You know, that's the magic of theatre that sort of lays out to me the different ways of looking at it. I think the democracy of it is part of what makes it so inherently political, these different forms. There is an incredible democracy for verbatim and a democracy to the empathy that comes from game play as you perform your engagement as a player.

MG: That relationship between political theatre and making theatre politically is sort of built into the structure of commissioning new plays. So for example, Nick Hytner goes, 'Shit, we need a play about the financial crisis!' So he phones up David Hare and says, 'We need a play, in the next season's brochure, about the financial crisis. Will you write it?' 'Yes I will, Nick.' 'We're going to press on Friday, what will you call it?' 'Call it *The Power of Yes*, that's a great phrase and I'll put it in the play.' 'Brilliant!' Now that's making theatre politically because that's phoning up as the head of the National Theatre saying we need to deal with this issue now, because this is the issue of the moment.

AM2: Sorry. Are you being sarcastic or serious? You're being serious?

MG: Yes, that's, absolutely serious.

AM2: OK, because that just seems to me quite superficial



MG: No, it's not superficial at all in the sense that many, many commissions are directed commissions where artistic directors have taken various people with specific interests out to lunch and suggested directly or indirectly that maybe they should write a play about this subject.

AM2: But I think that phrase you used there probably captures what I was talking about, 'taking people with a specific interest out to lunch'. It's David Hare, it's an established system.

MG: No, so listen to me. Let me finish. That is part of the system that is at play and dominates in the theatre landscape in this capital. Now the other way of doing it is if you're rich enough to be self sufficient or if you are prepared to work hard enough to buy yourself some time to be self sufficient. You can be active in writing the piece that you want about the subject that you want and if you're rich enough to be self producing or work hard enough to produce it yourself, you can put that piece of theatre on in the way that you want, if you don't want to engage in that system. But the truth is, both those ways of working exist in a circle, because if you do it the way you want and somebody from the institution thinks its good enough, it will be you there taken out to lunch and asked, 'What are you interested in writing about next.'

AM2: Yes, I think I'm talking more specifically how the piece is composed, its compositions. So is it the playwright who writes a simple text which then gets handed to actors who then serve it? How does it fit within the theatre or within the audience?

MG: Well that's interesting. Very briefly, it's both. There will be a primary artist involved, you know it's the Shakespeare and the Dogberry, when two men ride a horse, one has to ride in front. In theatre that's very much the case – somebody has to make the decisions eventually if there's an argy-bargy about it, that's how it works best. There will be a primary artist, there might be a writer who says, 'This is my text, please don't alter it, or if you alter it please ask me.' Or it might be a formidable director who says, 'I want a group of people in the room and we're going to make this piece together.'

Simon McBurney, for example, who has a writer but it is very much Simon's vision involving every element. So it just depends who you put in the room. But there will always be a primary artist in that room.

CM: Especially with David Hare. His response to the issue of authenticity in the past has been to dispense with the actors and, in his monologue *Via Dolorosa*, take to the stage in a tour-de-force performance of self. His personal writing is full of his love for actors, but he also treats the actors' work quite contentiously.

MG: This is quite interesting because this relates to your question again about making theatre. What did you say? Political theatre and making theatre politically? Because in theory, yes, that is right, but how *Via Dolorosa* came about was that Stephen Daldry had asked David to go and write a play about Israel and Palestine, and David Hare came back and said, 'I've only got a monologue.' And Stephen went, 'Oh for fuck's sake! I thought you were going to write a play.' He goes home and he goes, 'Fucker! He's only done a monologue.' And he goes, 'I know, I'll ask David to perform it on the West End!'

AM2: But even with plays like *The Berlin Wall* that you might have seen, where he also performed a monologue, it's the very fact that he can't act, and I don't mean that that term pejoratively, inscribes the piece with a kind of authenticity because his *not* acting becomes the embodiment of that authenticity in his work. But I think this raises a broader much more interesting set of questions about the extent to which verbatim theatre denies its own theatricality in some instances, but also doesn't in lots of other instances when it pursues, helter-skelter, the allegorical potential that was talked about earlier.

GW: I can see lots of hands inching up here, lots of people wanting to join a very lively debate, and I hate to be the one to bring it to a close but we've reached the end of our allotted time. I'm sure there will be a few moments to

bends people's ears on the way out of the room, but can we formally at this point say thank you to all of our speakers.

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[www.on-theatre.org.uk/home.html](http://www.on-theatre.org.uk/home.html)

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