

Central School of Speech & Drama Verbatim Events symposium 2006

# Creative Writing and Curated Speaking

A discussion of the role of the writer in verbatim theatre, where the dialogue is taken from real life interviews with the subjects.

## The Panel:

**Tanika Gupta** (TG), playwright. Work includes *Gladiator Games*, a verbatim play about the murder of Zahid Mubarek and the ongoing enquiry

**Gillian Slovo** (GS), novelist and writer of *Guantanamo*

**Conor Lennon** (CL), development producer for BBC radio

**Esther Wilson** (EW), co-writer of *Unprotected* which looked at the tolerance zone for prostitution in Liverpool

## Chair:

**Prof Dan Rebellato** (DR), playwright and Professor of Contemporary Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London, writer of *Outright Terror Bold and Brilliant*

*This event took place as part of a symposium on Verbatim Theatre at Central School of Speech & Drama 13-14 July, 2006*

## Presentation by Tanika Gupta:

It's terrifying, that word 'presentation'. I am actually just going to burble at you. *Gladiator Games* is the first kind of verbatim drama that I have ever attempted. I have written mainly fictional plays, so I was actually approached by a very young director called Charlie Westenra, about a year ago saying

that she wanted to do something at Sheffield Crucible about the death of Zahid Mubarek. I'd actually heard about the case – a young Asian lad who'd been beaten to death in a prison cell by his cellmate – but that is all I knew about it. It was just one of those things that you read in the papers, and you tut, and then you think, 'How awful' and then you move on with your life. She said that Imran Khan (the solicitor) was representing the family and that the monitoring group was also representing the family in campaigning to get an inquiry. So I chatted with her for a while. I thought, 'This would be quite an interesting thing to do, but I don't really know how to write verbatim drama. I mean, I don't write plays like that.' What was fascinating about talking to the director was that the more she told me, the more outraged I became.

Zahid Mubarek was a young man, a 19 year old Pakistani boy, sent away to Feltham for three months, or 90 days custodial sentence, for stealing six pounds' worth of razor blades and interfering with a car. He was put away for three months in Feltham, and for six weeks of those three months he was put in a cell with a chap called Robert Stewart, who was a known racist. Robert Stewart had a tattoo on his forehead saying RIP as in 'Rest in Peace' and a cross (a crucifix) and was a skinhead. After six weeks of sharing a cell with this man, who was also 19 years old (actually in Feltham for writing racially abusive letters), Zahid was beaten to death with the table leg in their cell. It took something like an hour for the ambulance to arrive. They got Zahid out of there eventually but even when the alarm was raised, Robert Stewart was in the cell with Zahid for about a good ten minutes after the alarm was called.

Basically it's a terrible story. Robert Stewart was sent down for life imprisonment, but after Zahid's death (he died a week later in hospital) the family were unable to get any answers. And they campaigned for four years to get an inquiry into the death. The first thing that they got was a visit from the Head of Prisons, Martin Narey, who apparently said, 'I tell you what we'll do, we'll plant a tree in Zahid's honour in the grounds of Feltham.' I think the family told him basically to sod off. What was fascinating about the whole case, apart from the heartbreaking fact of it, was it was like opening a can of

worms. You start to look at one thing and you think, 'Oh my God, there weren't any cell searches. Were these two boys deliberately placed in this cell? Was there some sort of gladiatorial game going on?' There was talk of prison officers saying there was a Coliseum-style game that the prison officers used to play. Anyway, the enquiry went on for a year. As you probably know, it reported last week and they came up with about 87 different recommendations.

As a writer I was very interested in trying to tell the story of Zahid and his family rather than the story of the enquiry because although the enquiry's fascinating, it's tomes and tomes of information – it's too much information. I was very keen to try and tell the story from the family's perspective ie a Pakistani family perspective, one that you don't necessarily always hear. So I interviewed the family. I talked to Zahid's uncle, Imtiaz Amin, and Suresh Grover, who was the head of the monitoring group. And you get a much more interesting inside story when you hear about the struggle from their point of view. When I say the family, I am talking about Zahid's mum and dad. Zahid's mum doesn't speak any English and she is a hijab-wearing woman who was frozen with grief. Five years after her son was killed she was still unable to speak because she was crying so much. For me that was just... I mean what questions can you ask? You're thinking, 'I've got to think of a sensible question to ask this woman' and it was heartbreaking. It makes you even more determined to try to tell that story.

So that was the shape the play took, which was verbatim stuff taken from the enquiry interjected with the story told from the point of view of the family. It did very well at Sheffield Crucible and went to Theatre Royal Stratford East. But what was fascinating was that people kept coming up to me afterwards and saying, 'Brilliant, brilliant story, but what about Robert Stewart? What about that fascist – wouldn't it be interesting to know more about him?' That made me feel quite upset because I thought, 'It's true, isn't it, with theatre, that actually we want to see the Nazi, we want to see the Ralph Fiennes character in *Schindler's List*, we're not really interested in Oskar Schindler.' I found that

quite disheartening in a way, that people, particularly white people, wanted to know more about Robert Stewart and not more about Zahid. Yet he was the one that I was trying to get the story through.

DR: *Gladiator Games* was always conceived as a verbatim project, is that right?

TG: Yes. It was very important to make sure that even though there were dramatised sections, they were always taken from fact and hearsay, rather than... I didn't just make up a little dream sequence or anything like that!

### **Presentation by Gillian Slovo:**

Before I talk a bit about *Guantanamo*, I just want to add something to what actor David Annen said in a previous session. He made mention of having to play [civil rights lawyer] Clive Stafford Smith and having to make him much more 'present'. Well, I don't think David was there at the time, but we had a reading of *Guantanamo* in the House of Commons and Clive Stafford Smith played himself. In the rehearsal – which was mainly for him so that he would know when he came in – all the actors were there and we had changed it to end with Clive Stafford Smith in order to update the play. At the end, he said his final speech and then there was silence and then somebody said, 'That's what you get when you don't hire Equity.'

I am a novelist; I am not a playwright. It had never occurred to me to write for theatre, but Nick Kent of the Tricycle came to me and made me an offer that I just didn't think I could refuse because he wanted to do something on Guantanamo. He wanted to do a verbatim play on Guantanamo in the model of the tribunal plays that he had done before. But, of course, there had been no tribunal about Guantanamo. So he came to me with the proposal that I go out and interview all the people and then structure a play, which he said he could guarantee. I don't work in the theatre so this was all news to me. He

could guarantee it would go on in the Tricycle because he had a three-week period that he had to fill. And my first fear was, well, what if I fail? I mean, I know how to write a novel and I hope and I think it's true that I have got better at writing them as time has gone on, so I know different art forms require different things. I was scared I'd fall flat on my face and there would be something appalling in these three weeks. And Nick's answer was, 'Well, if you fail, you fail. At least we have tried.' And that's why I did it, because I really do believe that there is great honour in trying to do something and out of that you can get the most unexpected things. I got an enormous amount of unexpected things.

But I didn't feel I could do it on my own and we didn't have much time. I particularly wanted somebody to help me with the interviewing. I asked Victoria Brittain, who had a long career as a journalist and had just retired from being the Deputy Foreign Editor of the *Guardian*, if she would do it with me. And then we set out to structure a play about this place Guantanamo. It is hard to remember really because everything moved so fast, but at the time that we set out, hardly anybody knew anything about it because nobody had emerged from it. It really was the black hole. You know, there were what we thought were nine British citizens in Guantanamo (but that turned out to be nine British citizens and something like 13 British residents) but none of them had come out. We set out to interview as many people as we could and used a number of ways to get people to talk to us. One, I think many of the relatives felt very desperate about the lack of publicity about what had happened and therefore they would talk to anybody. But they had also been very badly burned by what the press had done to them: as soon as it was known that a family had a relative in Guantanamo, they were labelled terrorists. There were ladders outside their houses with photographers and they had to have police guarding their houses, particularly in certain parts... In Tipton, where three of the boys came from, they had to have police guarding them because there is a lot far-right activity in Tipton and there was a genuine fear that they would be attacked. But the reason that they agreed to talk to us was because Corin Redgrave had been working with the families for a very long time. He was one

of the few people who wanted to do something about what was happening to these relatively powerless people, who had seen their sons and brothers disappear into a place that they had never heard of [when] there was nothing that they could do to change it. And so Corin rang up all the relatives on our behalf and vouched for us. Really, many of the people who talked to us did so to pay Corin back. Often when we went in, they said, 'I wouldn't have talked to you because I won't talk to anybody from the press, but Corin has been so good to me, he asked me as a favour that we talk to you and so we will.'

I think what I experienced doing these interviews was a journey that I really didn't expect to have. For me, it was a journey through Britain. It made me realise how London-centred I am, because we travelled out of London to all of these places that I have never visited before and which, I realised (no matter how hard I have tried not to let this happen) I had certain prejudices against. In particular, Tipton, where all you heard in the mass media was the Tipton three, these 'terrorists'... you kind of imagine some Islamic hotbed that was this place called Tipton. In fact, what we found was a very poor suburb on the edges of Birmingham where there were possibly only three roads, extremely poor, where Muslim families lived, and a mosque. And that was it. It wasn't some hotbed. In the houses of the people we visited were ordinary people, in many ways powerless people, who had never really had a voice in this society although their kids actually had been born in Britain and gone to British schools, which had in many cases failed them quite badly. And suddenly, they discover that their sons or their brothers have vanished and nobody can help them. A policeman comes to the door and says, 'I have to tell you the Americans have your son and I can't tell you anything more.' The only people who could tell them slightly more were the Red Cross and the Red Cross really couldn't tell them anything. We went from family to family, hearing different stories but a very similar story of powerlessness: a Kafka-esque story actually, that was completely shocking to witness.

At this point we knew very little about the people who were in Guantanamo, and we knew very little about the circumstances of how many people were

being kept in Guantanamo, apart from newspaper reports (but it was very hard to validate them). Victoria and I did all the interviews together and then I sat down to structure it. Because I am a novelist and I am used to working on my own and creating a story, I was not sure that I could do that bit of it with somebody else. I sat down to structure this play, and one of the things I decided to do was not put anything in that I didn't have evidence of. So interestingly enough, I wrote a play about Guantanamo which said very little about torture because we could not prove that was happening and said very little of the terrible way people were existing, but said a lot about the experience of what it's like to have your relatives suddenly disappear. And also, I think, said a lot about the journey that I had gone on, the incredible feeling that I had got from these families as they talked about what had happened to them. 'What would I do if I was living a normal life and, suddenly, this happened to me?' I think that it is so easy to have a voice. That's what I do in life, I have a voice in the world. But what happens when your voice is absolutely taken away? I think that my experience of the collective summation of their experiences is what the play became. It became a story about kidnap and imprisonment and an absolute failure of a justice system that we believe in to do anything at all. And it was a very, very interesting process, made more interesting by the fact that as the play came out, so did four of the five people from Guantanamo. We could actually go and meet people who had been in Guantanamo.

Then the play, far from having its three-week life in the Tricycle took on a life of its own: it took on the life that people have, an interest in Guantanamo and the way it has been going on. First of all it moved to the West End and then it went to New York and to San Francisco and to Washington. It played one of the ones that pleased us the most, in a school in Pakistan (a video was sent for us to see). And now it's actually still having a life on its own, because it's on the 'Net now and very many community groups in America are still reading it as a way of trying to put pressure on the government.

Just to talk a little bit about what it's like being a writer in this situation... I am a novelist and I am a fiction writer, but I am a writer who writes about real events that happen in the world. I have often felt that there is something about fiction that can get you in touch with truth in a way that non-fiction can't because you can go into emotion that you can't with non-fiction. The example that I will give of that is that I wrote a novel that was set in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission at a time when many people were bringing out non-fiction books about the experience of the TRC, including a woman who wrote one of the best of them, Antjie Krog. I think that it was no accident that Antjie Krog's is a verbatim book in many ways; it weaves together various hearings and what people said from different sides. She put a fictional element inside of this book and I know why she did it – I think that she couldn't find a way of expressing the collective emotion that she experienced from witnessing the Truth Commission except by putting in a fictional story that revolved around herself. I have always thought this is the great gift of fiction, that it can do that. But *Guantanamo* disproved it in some kind of way to me, because I think there we had real people's stories that were woven together to tell a bigger story, but with their words. I think in a way, I could never have made it so powerful if I had tried to fictionalise it. It was the detail and who these people were that really made it what it was.

The other thing that I think is utterly amazing is what language can do and what speech patterns can do because there were these actors who listened to the tapes that we had of the interviews and therefore they could hear the voices of people we interviewed. But in some cases they were playing people that they had no access to. For example, Paul Bhattacharjee, who I think is a brilliant actor, played Moazzam Begg, who was still at that time incarcerated in Guantanamo. I wove together a lot of his letters to show the progression of what this incarceration was doing to his psyche. And what is fascinating to me is that Paul found in Moazzam Begg's words a tone, a very quiet, restrained, dignified tone. Then two years later the real Moazzam Begg came out of Guantanamo and they were almost (although they are not physically twins)

like twins. That an actor managed to get from the structure of language how this person talked actually taught me an awful lot about dialogue.

**Presentation by Conor Lennon:**

I just wanted to start by playing an excerpt. I did some research into what we have done at the BBC. Apparently we have done quite a lot, more than I'd thought, going back to 1938 which is *The King's Trial* (the trial of Charles I) right up to just a couple of weeks ago with *The Conversation*, which is taken from transcripts. So, it's about five minutes long and mainly trials and enquiries: the Titanic enquiry, the Nuremberg trial, the Chicago Conspiracy trial and *Unprotected*, or our version of *Unprotected*. So I'll just play it.

*Recording of BBC radio verbatim:*

*Well it is notorious that Charles Stewart, the now king of England, not content with those many encroachments, which his predecessors had made upon the people and their rights and freedoms, has had a wicked design totally to subvert the interest of fundamental laws and liberties of this nation.*

*She'd thrown the shawl over me, she told me to stay in there, I believe she was Mrs Aston, they didn't see me and the boat was lowered down into the water and we rowed away out from the scene. The men that were in the boat at first fought, and would not get out, but the officers drew their revolvers and fired shots over our heads and then the men got out, except me.*

*Do you recall any effort made on the part of the officers or crew, to hold the steerage passengers in the steerage?*

*Oh yes sir, they tried to keep us down at first in our stair check, they did not want us to go up into the First Class place at all.*

*Mr Scopes tells the children to copy this diagram which detaches them from the throne of God and leads their ancestors with the jumble and then, my*

*friend, if they believe it, they go back to scoff at the religion of their parents. But these parents have a right to say that no teacher paid by their money shall rob their children of faith in God.*

*Doctor Esher conducted experiments on the effect of cold water on humans, looking for a way for reviving airmen who had fallen into the ocean. The subject was placed in ice cold water and kept there until unconscious, his blood being sampled every degree to open the actual temperature. Some men stood it for as long as 36 hours, and their temperature would drop to as low as 19 degrees centigrade. Then they were removed, there were attempts to revive them by artificial sunshine or electrotherapy or a panel of warmth. For this last, prostitutes were used and the body of the unconscious man was placed between two women. The majority died and of the survivors, many became mentally deranged.*

*Abbie Hoffman: the only dignity that free men have is the right to speak out. When the law is tyranny, the only order is insurrection.*

*Sentence, eight months and six days.*

*Thank you.*

*The judge then listed the contempt charges against William Kunstler:*

*For calling this court a medieval torture chamber when the defendant seals an altercation with the marshals, three months. For arguing in an angry tone at the conclusion of the witness Ginsburg's testimony, that the court should not be recessed early as government requested, three months.*

*And anyway, when the explosion took place, at Mr Carr's house, that rocketed into the headlines the existence of the Angry Brigade and also related was the disclosure of previous bombings in Britain.*

*Yes, the Robert Carr bombing was very serious.*

*Here you have a cabinet minister, whose house is bombed and there is massive headline publicity from it and it is accorded a massive police hunt. The level of investigation would have been accorded to any other bombing.*

*But isn't it right, that after Mr Howard Wilson said that it was a major crime that had to be investigated and the people responsible brought to book, something more was done?*

*Commander Bond, did you conduct your investigation from a criminal or a political point of view.*

*From a criminal one.*

*He goes, 'You seen my face, you'd be able to identify me, so I'm gonna have to kill ya. Going into that kitchen to get the knife to kill you.' And I thought, 'Well, before you kill me mate, I'm going to kill myself, I'll kill myself first.' So I jumped out the window, three floors up and landed. My ankle shattered, taxi driver was going past to pick me up, wrapped me in his coat. All the bizzies meet up, and here he is coming out the chippie with a meal. I was in hospital, I couldn't speak. Twelve hours that man tortured me, and he goes 'not guilty' and the crown court took the trial all of the way, and they just said, 'cos he'd been in the army, 'cos he'd lost his job and his wheels and his house and he'd suffered enough. If I was a normal woman, if I was a normal woman, he'd be receiving 15 years in prison.*

*From the five hundred of those who had been left at Shutov, about a hundred and forty had died or been killed. Amongst the hundred and forty, there were women who had managed to get their children through Auschwitz.*

*Really?*

*Yes, children who were seven or eight years old, because they said that what they needed was young people with dexterous fingers and they managed to get them on the list to get them through Auschwitz. But in Shutov, they were selected out and the mothers and children were killed.*

*And you would see them killed, or they were taken away to be killed?*

*Well, that was before the 32 of us were sent to clean and load up the machines.*

*Right.*

*We were on the roll call in the morning when the air search took the mothers and children out. The husbands wept, they knew exactly what was happening when they were taken away.*

I want to talk a bit about *The Conversation*, mainly because it is the most recent one we've done and because I could get access to the producer. I asked him about the process, and I think it could be useful because we are under very different time constraints from theatre. This doesn't always work. This was very unorthodox in that Toby, the producer, received the transcript of a conversation between an Auschwitz survivor and the son of another survivor who knew Roman, the survivor. He conducted a conversation with him and recorded it – the idea was that a playwright would make a play of this. So this transcript came to Toby and he read it and thought it was very interesting because throughout *The Conversation*, Trevor, the son, realises things about his father and his grandfather that he didn't know and it creates quite an interesting dynamic. He felt that rather than get a playwright to rework this, it would be more powerful if he just edited it down. And that's what happened.

The production process was: three quarters of an hour read-through, a half-hour discussion with the people who were played by the actors, and then the next day the piece was recorded in two takes with no rehearsal or pickups. But it was a half-day recording. Toby felt that the idea was to do it quickly and avoid the temptation of any acting. And that was it – there was no focus on creating drama. Toby just wanted to focus on storytelling and Trevor's search to find out more about his father. That's an idea of the time constraint we work under; it's quite normal for us to have very little time to record radio drama. That was the last one you heard there, and I think it still works.

So verbatim drama does work on the radio. Having heard all of those excerpts, it's very powerful. You concentrate entirely on the words and there is nothing else to distract you. Other than that, these are examples of plays where we try to find some truth in art. It is just one of the techniques that we are using at the moment in radio drama. We're trying to make radio drama

more topical, more relevant... responding to current affairs stories – we've recently done a play about bird flu! Not sure when that's going to be going out, but rather soon and that was a quicker turnaround. We've just done a series called *From Fact to Fiction*, which is a five-day turnaround. We look at the current news stories on the Monday and that goes out on the Saturday.

Over the past couple of years, there has been quite a large spate of drama documentaries, not verbatim as such but really trying to work with community groups. Mixing drama with recorded interviews – either using the interviewees themselves or using actors to play them, trying to find some kind of truth that way and by working on hyperrealism techniques as well. So various methods. I couldn't go through all of them, but hot-housing actors is one of them and elements of verbatim is another. Those are the kind of techniques that we've been using at the moment.

**Presentation by Esther Wilson:**

Towards the end of 2003, the Everyman Playhouse wanted to do a verbatim piece of theatre and invited myself and three other writers, Tony Green, John Fay and Lizzie Nunnery. They weren't the original writers (two of them were) but that's beside the point, they ended up doing the project. So we sat around a table and we discussed what kind of things we were interested in doing that were topical, and would have a local resonance but could resonate nationally.

We came up with this idea because Liverpool City Council were responding to the murder of two prostitutes that had been found chopped up in bin bags in Stanley Park in 2002. They were trying to respond to what was happening. Because of the renaissance of Liverpool at the moment, artistically and culturally, it is having a big change; the prostitutes and the sex-trade workers were getting pushed further and further out. It was like a bubble really, like squeezing a balloon. One police department saying, 'We don't want them

here, cause all these shops have been done up really nicely so they'd move out somewhere else, establish a patch... and then that department would say move them somewhere else. The problem was just getting shifted. Then, when this happened, finding these young women's bodies (Pauline Stephens and Dianne Parry) the council decided that something had to be done.

So they embarked upon a study looking at different groups, the community groups, the girls themselves, health workers, the John Moores University, trying to establish what could be done. One of the things that they came up with was to have a managed zone for prostitutes in Liverpool. They went to various places in Europe, to look at a model that could work for Liverpool, and they came up with the one that was used in Utrecht. Apparently what happens in Utrecht is that during the day, the place is completely clean and everybody can use it and it's all fine. But at seven o'clock at night there are police either side of it, there's barriers, and signs are put up and that's where the girls go and the customers go. If you are walking, you have little concrete blocks where you can go and do your business and there's places just off site where you can get health treatment. You can get access to all sorts of things that these women need but these women are normally denied. So this sounded really good.

One of the big things in the Utrecht model that I thought was fantastic was the way it was laid out: a car would drive in and had to do a three-point turn. Once the car was parked to do the business, the driver couldn't get out, so if there was any violence towards the women the women could get out. And there was CCTV and there was no tolerance at any other time, bar seven at night to seven in the morning. At seven in the morning, the local authority would come, clean up anything that need to be cleaned up. That was all fine and violent crime went down and murder rates all went down. And even though drugs weren't allowed inside that area – it was an arrestable offence for any drug dealers to be there – they knew that was the main reason that the women were working, so they always allowed one dealer outside unofficially. That seemed to work, because otherwise the women wouldn't use that area

and their safety and health was the main reason for having this managed zone.

So Liverpool City Council had this consultation, came up with this idea that would be the model. It seemed all well and good and very progressive and everything. And then Liverpool got the 'Capital of Culture' and things changed politically. So it was more or less seen that we don't really want them here unless we can put them somewhere where it is sort of a tourist attraction. And then, of course, various places that had been earmarked for the managed zone were bought up by businesses, saying, 'Well, we don't want them here, we don't want them here.' There was this sort of schism. We thought that this would be a good piece of verbatim theatre: we'll go out to interview people, all aspects of this issue, and come together and do that. So that's what we did.

Then we had a reading of that. We had a director with some actors... we put that together ourselves, painfully, because there were four writers and we had a lot of material and a lot of people that we'd interviewed, hours and hours and hours of it. Trying to hone it down was very difficult, but we managed. We had a reading last year, in May, at Everyword, a new writing festival in Liverpool – a rehearsed reading with some actors, script in hands. That was quite successful, but it was great for us to see clearly where the flaws were. When it got preachy, it was really boring. What was fantastic was the stories. You can't write like that – the rhythm of what they said, how they say it, what they don't say, when they break, was so powerful. That was the thing, the gripping thing on the stage. When you listen to the tapes, that was the fantastic thing. We said, we need to look at this if it gets commissioned to be a full production, then we need to look at that and weed out all the stuff that is a bit preachy, all the facts and figures that weren't that interesting. Because you could see the audience reaction. So we did that.

Ironically, when we had the meeting to be told we had been commissioned, another prostitute (Anne Marie Foy) was found murdered just opposite the Everyman theatre. And it's funny because I came past in my car and I

thought, 'Oh my God, what's this?' It was all cordoned off, and when I got in I said, 'This is really weird, a serious crime or something?' And of course this woman had been battered to death and murdered. That was it: we were all saying, 'Oh my God, this is a really important piece of work.' So then we went out and re-interviewed. I was appointed lead writer and we went out and interviewed people and shaped it. Each writer would have a deadline to create their own piece, so they would have, say, two or three characters to do. They would create a piece that would stand on its own. They would bring it to the table, we would discuss it and then myself and the literary manager, Suzanne Bell, and Nina Raine, the director, would be in constant contact and shape it, take it back, give it to all of the writers and discuss it.

As you can imagine, it was very, very time-consuming. It was exhausting, because not only did we have different artistic eyes and opinions and stuff, we also didn't want to lose some fantastic material. But we had to get it down to two hours 50 minutes. So we did that and the BBC also commissioned us to do a Radio 4 piece, a Friday Night Play, on it. This was very, very different than the stage version, and much easier to do because of the nature of the medium. We just did our own bit, sent it in and then the producer took care of the rest really, in consultation with us all of the time. Nevertheless, it was a much easier process for us as writers. And then the piece went on. Anne Marie Foy's children we asked permission to use her voice. When we did the verbatim piece, the readings, they'd done interviews with girls and punters for Red Light Liverpool, this late night show on Radio Merseyside we were talking after. During the course of the interviews, some of the girls that we'd interviewed who you could hear speak on the radio... one hung herself. We'd had relationships with these people, so it was a terrible thing. Anne Marie Foy was one of these women who was saying, 'Well, I've been beaten up and this has happened to me and you know I've been clean for a couple of years and now this happened and I've gone back on smack and crack and now I'm out there again.' She was very articulate, she was 45 years of age. So her voice was... you just can't compare it to the actor's really, no matter how good the actors were. When you listen to the tapes you know. We had some fantastic

actors to work with but the truth was it was too harrowing and amazing to listen to. So we asked her children, her grown-up children and her sister, if we could use in a section of the piece Anne Marie Foy's voice, and they said yes.

Meanwhile, through the BBC, I went out with the producer Pauline Harris to do a walk with Ali, the girl who's named as Ali the prostitute – to do a night with her. She had a hidden mic. We sort of stayed back and then we would talk, just to get a feeling of describing Liverpool for the radio mainly. This crossover with the theatre piece we thought would be powerful if we used the moment... because obviously the girl that we went out with was a smackhead. She was on smack so she was off her head that night and she took us to the tree where Anne Marie had been found. It was just covered in teddy bears and notes from all of the girls, because this was the place where girls go to do their business. It's very dark, the University just off Hope Street. You heard some of the girls crying, 'This is the tree!' and that is the real person saying that. What we did was intermingled the actress who would say that with Anne Marie's real voice afterwards. That was really, really powerful because her children came. It was only in September that she was killed, and her children came in March to see the show and listened to that for the first time. That was quite harrowing but very powerful. We actually said to her children, 'Look, is this a good thing, or is this a bad thing?' They said, 'No, this is a good thing because no one knows the real truth of these stories.'

DR: Thank you very much. Four very interesting presentations, on four very different types of work. My name is Dan Rebellato, a teacher at the University of London, and also a playwright. Last year I wrote a verbatim play about the London bombings called *Outright Terror Bold and Brilliant* – I say 'wrote' but as Gillian said, it's a very odd relationship you have with a verbatim text. I wondered if I could just ask you to think about in what ways is writing a verbatim play similar to writing any other form of fictional text? And in what ways do you think it is very different?

TG: I have a problem with verbatim dramas actually, in that I think that they can be very dry. I think it can be a lot of preaching to the converted and I think that monologues are not dramatic. That is kind of where I stand. I have been to see a lot of verbatim drama. I am not being critical at all but I'm talking about it from my point of view. I have been to see a lot of verbatim plays where I have thought, 'Well, this isn't very entertaining actually and they're not really telling me anything I didn't know.' I think it is very hard to write verbatim drama. I disagree [with Dan Rebellato's point]. I think that you do write verbatim plays, because if you are writing a play for the theatre you have to entertain the audience. So you have to pick the way that you tell those stories and what you chose to put forward that will then... You watch people sit forward in their chairs and watch them slump back. I mean that is what you do all of the time as a playwright: you are also watching the audience. So, I still think that it is writing. I think it is about the choices that you make as to what to use... because when you are doing interviews or you're collating information... you could have a play that goes on for about twenty years. It's about what you chose to put over your arguments and what you think is moving and all the rest of it.

On another point about verbatim drama, *Gladiator Games* was not a hundred-percent verbatim. The reason was because I was very keen not to do pure verbatim, because I think that it is not very dramatic and theatrical. So I dramatise scenes. Actually what was interesting was going between dramatisation and verbatim actually underlined your case. As long as you're very clear in your text as to what is verbatim and what is dramatisation, as long as people know where they stand when they are listening and it's very clear in the production, it's very clear in the text, people respond to it. And it's almost like illustrating your point. So that's where I stand on verbatim drama.

DR: David Hare with *Stuff Happens* does a similar thing. I think that was controversial for that reason.

TG: But you are not sure where his stuff comes from. I mean, you read his text but there's no list... Did Bush really say this, or is this a Hare-ism?

GS: Since I am used to, in a novel, inventing the world, the characters and the plot and the narrative and putting words into their mouths, for me it was a very different process. The rules that I was given were that I can't make up any words. There was no way. You know, I would have loved to do a bit of dramatising, but it was not what I was allowed to do. But I think there is a creative process in the editing and selecting of the material and the selecting of the order of the material, which is very similar to doing, for me, fiction or drama, in the sense that it's the story that you choose to tell out of all the interviews that you have done. We interviewed a lot of people. We didn't use all of the interviews. Mostly the interviews that I selected were the ones that I thought were the most interesting and also which would feed into the other stories that I was using.

I was very conscious for example, that verbatim theatre is, as we heard in relation to the radio plays, often incredibly serious and difficult to hear, because you often do it about very difficult subjects, I chose any bit of humour that I came across in the interviews and you could see the audience's relief when they got to laugh. In fact I think that the difficulties were for the actors who were saying the funny lines because there weren't that many, because a lot of the people we interviewed were in incredible distress and couldn't actually be funny. But for the actors who did have the funny lines, the danger was that they would really start milking them because they would feel this tremendous relief that the audience suddenly relaxed. An example: I was interviewing somebody, the first interview we ever did, a man called Wahab Hawari, whose brother is actually still in Guantanamo. Contrary to everything that I had thought about a Muslim, we interviewed him in a pub (his choice). While we interviewed him, he was smoking. A few sentences into the interview, somebody came up to him and said this was a no-smoking pub. And he said (and he said it on tape, which luckily I could use), he said, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I'll put it out then. I don't like to break the law.' And it was an

absolute gift for the play, because this is about people who seem to have broken the law so badly they have ended up in this no-man's land of Guantanamo, right? I think that is what the dramatic eye has to do: you have to be able to pick out those moments that are given to you as a gift and find a way to use them in a way of livening up the story.

But I agree, it is very difficult to make it alive. Really what you have to do the whole time is to be very conscious of using every narrative skill you have and being able to tell a story that has an emotional story inside of it. So that the narrative takes you somewhere as opposed to just keeps on and on bleating at you about how awful it is. I mean, I hate that kind of thing. I don't like political meetings because I don't like being told what I know.

DR: You used to work to rules, which I think is very interesting. In a production you do sort of set yourself rules about what you can use and what you can't.

CL: [Question directed to Esther Wilson] I was interested in the introduction to *Unprotected*. You talk about the first wave of interviews producing six hundred pages of transcripts and then in the second wave there was a thousand pages. So you are having to boil down a massive amount. You must have had some principles as a writer, and as writers, about what to use.

EW: To be honest, we didn't, because it was our first... each writer involved... we were all verbatim virgins, if you like. So we were all going, 'Oh, God!' After the reading, which was really productive, I thought, 'Oh, so that's what rehearsed readings can do for you – they can tell you where not to go.' We knew then exactly what both of you have just said: you watch it and you say, 'Oh, come on, give me a pamphlet and I'll go home and read it!' It's not entertaining. Similarly, with monologues. So what we did (sort of on the hoof really)... for instance, I found out about the Armistead project, which is an outreach project that operates for women who want to go for a cup of hot soup, or a needle exchange, or condoms, or whatever. We had had some

dealings with the people who run this organisation and they were really great in helping us.

They told us that there was going to be an informal memorial service for Anne Marie Foy, just for the girls. Tony (one of the other writers) and I went. Of course they said, 'It's not for blokes, actually,' so he very kindly waited for me and had a beer. It was great, because there were just these women who had done a big pan of scouse and some soup and all of these little hippy-type cards about the Crone – women's cards that you could pick up and gain some strength from as a woman. And boxes of chocolates. Of course these women came in and just went, 'Fuck that.' They just had the chocolates because they're smack heads and they need sugar. They didn't want to light a candle and they didn't want to talk. But the point is, as the evening wore on they were arguing. They were rough women, arguing about... 'Well, you didn't give her a condom, so you didn't give a shit about her, what are you talking about?' But clearly those women actually walked a mile and a half, some of them, in the rain, to get there for that night. To me that was really moving. They were all rattling, all waiting to go out to... So there's humour in this.

On the hoof, we said we have to go back to this drop-in; we have to look for that sense of language that they shared. They were very touchy feely. They were very... they were hilarious actually – very, very quick witted. Stupidly, I thought, 'Well, you know, they are very different from me.' Of course they are going to be far more intelligent than I could ever hope to be, because they live at such a level of existence that all of their skills are very well honed. This surprised me, shocked me. I said, 'We have to get more of that in.' So we went back and did more interviews. There was a heart of it, and there was also the humour, and there was some drama. They were actually dramatic with each other in terms of arguing over what they considered their truth. 'What is this?' 'Oh, who are you? You from the Everyman? The more upset we get, the better for you?' 'Well yeah, actually, that's the truth.' 'Right, OK, well go on. I'll talk to you.' They were alright actually. They were fine. It was about being open with them and trying to go back to capitalise on something

that you knew would make the piece stronger. Not just, 'Aren't we poor girls?' when in actual fact a lot of them are very strong, powerful women.

DR: I wanted to pick up on something that Tanika was saying about dissatisfaction with some types of verbatim theatre. [Directed to Conor] It was interesting you were talking about *The Conversation*. You were saying that, you had this transcript and at some point the decision was made that you didn't want to get a playwright involved. We have also heard about a moment in *Unprotected* where you played the original recording of the murdered woman, rather than have her portrayed. I wonder if you feel there is a sort of anti-fictional, almost anti-theatrical quality to some of this verbatim stuff, a sort of earnestness about it?

CL: I have no idea. Not to completely sidetrack your question onto a different one... What Tanika was saying about verbatim and when you are talking about using testimony: I think there is always the question, on broadcast radio, "Why not just do a feature?" We are talking about constructing a narrative entirely in the edit, or substantially in the edit. I think a lot of the time you have to say, 'Well, surely a feature would be more powerful.' When you are playing the actual testimony on radio, you think, 'Wow, how can we possibly replicate that?'

I had this discussion with Toby about *The Conversation*: why didn't you just edit the recorded material and make that the drama? Toby felt firstly the sound quality was very bad, so it wasn't broadcastable quality. Secondly, the interest for Toby was that through the course of this interview, this man suddenly finds out that his grandfather was murdered by other Jews – and this guy didn't know that. To get the original people back to recreate that would not have been... they wouldn't be able to do it as well as the very good actors that Toby got for recreating that purity of the shock. On reflection, I think that's right in this case. But that is just in this case. I think that on radio, if we're talking about a verbatim project, you have always got to say, 'If we

could do this with real people and do it as a feature, would doing it as a drama with actors really be the most emotive way of doing it?’

DR: You’ve saved money anyway for the BBC, haven’t you!

CL: Always important.

EW: We did keep saying that we have to avoid being earnest and worthy at all costs. Because that was in the reading, the thing that was horrible...

TG: But that’s what you learn as a playwright anyway, because if you don’t have any politics, then how can you write anything? How can you have anything to say? That doesn’t go just for verbatim drama, that goes right across your work. You learn along the way not to be desk thumping about everything, and to have a subtext and all the rest of it. I do think it is interesting, this thing about whether or not you use real people or not real people. It’s all about story-telling at the end of the day and how you tell other people’s stories.

I remember certainly with *Gladiator Games*, when I was interviewing the family, they were very, very suspicious of me. You can imagine: ‘Who is this strange-looking woman that comes into the house and starts asking questions?’ The only way that I could alleviate their fears was by actually offering to show them every single draft. There’s always loads of drafts in a script, so it doesn’t necessarily mean that they would read every single draft, but it meant that I was being open with them. Quite often, what was really useful was that they would say, ‘Oh, erm, this didn’t happen.’ For example, the night before Zahid Mubarek was killed, apparently the prison, Feltham, allowed them to watch this film called *Rompa Stompa*, which is an Australian film with Russell Crowe where he plays a skinhead. The opening scene is of him kicking the shit out of a bunch of Vietnamese kids. It is supposed to be an anti-racist film, but it is actually a glorification of fascism as far as I can work

out, which has slightly gone a bit skew-whiff. So they watched this in their cell, Zahid and Robert Stewart watched this in their cell, in Feltham the night before he was killed. I included this in the script and we got a little bit of the film. The family read it and came back to me and said, 'I think you should know actually what happened was that Robert Stewart booked that film with one of the prison officers.' He booked the television for that evening and the prison officer in charge said, 'Yes, *Rompa Stompa* is on tonight, you can watch it.' So there was kind of a collusion going on. That tiny piece of information I would not necessarily have known just by reading reams and reams of enquiry.

GS: I think that there is something interesting about using real people's words in relation to who they are and where they... I'm struggling to find a way of expressing this... in the sense of whether you can then universalise who they are. I'll give you an example: in *Guantanamo*, there is one person that we interviewed called Tom Clark who's a young man. Very, very English in his being. He has a very English way of talking about what happened to him, which is basically that his sister was in the Twin Towers and was killed on September 11. It was when he was in England... his Englishness, his sort of quiet way of speaking and his complete refusal to use any dramatic language at all – in fact, in many ways to speak elliptically about what he was saying – worked incredibly well on an English audience, because they knew who that man was, but it was a total failure in America. If I had been writing him, even for an English audience, I would have dramatised more what he was saying. Then you have the difficulty when you have it in another audience, that this is a verbatim play – you can't actually change the words to make a difference.

One of the things he did is he started by saying, 'I don't call it 9/11. I never called it 9/11 before, I have this thing about American dates and I'm not going to call it that now.' An English audience immediately got what that meant. A New York audience just... it got their backs up. They didn't understand what he meant, because they don't understand there's a different way of doing the months and the day. They felt attacked, and the only choice we then had was

to take out those things. I think that is a very interesting thing about using people's words, because I think at its most powerful, it can really tell an audience that knows that culture who that person is. But the downside is that it is more difficult for an audience who doesn't know that person, because you don't have a playwright doing the work to translate to the audience who this person is. You only have the words.

DR: What makes it so different from writing an ordinary play, I suppose, is that in an ordinary play if you've got character that isn't working, you can start thinking through those things... what if they were in prison, or what if they're having a relationship with an underage child, or something like that. These ways you start opening up these characters. Obviously you can't do that with verbatim plays – it could be a very strange first night for people.

### **Questions from Audience:**

Audience Member 1: You all talked about how one of the pitfalls of verbatim theatre is that you can come across as being didactic and kind of boring. I wondered how early in the process do you consider the aesthetics and the theatrical conventions and how this might be placed in theatre? Or do you just focus on gathering information?

GS: For me, that is my job. It always comes into play with me: how to get the story so that the structure of the story is right, but always thinking, 'How is it going to play? What is the best way to make it interesting and moving for an audience?' I think that is what the writer's job really is.

EW: Which is one of the difficulties we had with four: we all had our different aesthetic. You come to the table and would say, 'What about...?' and they would go, 'No, what about...?' With full permission, I was appointed lead

writer because we could've gone on for three years arguing about what to do aesthetically. We all had a different viewpoint.

DR: I also think that there is another way of thinking about it, which is that sometimes the use of verbatim material is itself aesthetically interesting. In particular the way that... I was thinking this right at the beginning during the introduction. I was noticing that there were a couple of 'ums' and 'errs' that actually I filter out ordinarily. On stage, you kind of don't filter out. You notice those things and people's hesitations and their bad grammar and their wrong vocabulary choices and things. It puts an extra focus on them, which I think itself becomes reflective about language in a way that is quite interesting in the theatre.

Audience Member 2: All of you have spoken a lot about narrative and language. I am wondering: when you're writing, how you envision theatricality? We have spoken about a lot of verbatim theatre. Not all is direct address; plays can be done in a million different kinds of ways. Do you or don't you have a vision of what a director might do with your production? What costume, or what kind of *mise en scène*?

TG: Absolutely. You think about theatre all the time when you are writing a play because that's what you are writing it for. Particularly with this play, I knew I had only five actors, which doesn't really help when you've got 35 characters. I knew exactly who was going to play what, and how they were going to double up... whether it was going to be physically possible for one man to play four different people within ten minutes. I knew that I only had two Asian actors, two white actors, and one woman, so immediately you're in trying to physically make it work on stage. As a playwright, you don't write plays without thinking theatrically. You've got to have things happening on stage, dramatic action and all the rest of it. And structure it so that it's entertaining. That's what you think about all the time when you're writing a play.

GS: For me it was slightly different because of the time constraints of the piece, because I was actually writing this at the same time as the Tricycle was casting it. So there were these very awkward phone calls when Nick Kent would phone up and say, 'I don't want to push you, but how many characters are you actually using? I'm trying to cast this.' Because of the time constraints, the designer was designing the set without having ever seen the script, made more awkward by the fact that we had two directors and they had a very different visual approach to this play. Nick has come from tribunal plays where really there is no scenery and they are very plain on the stage and they really are about people behind desks. And Sacha Wares, his co-director, had come from a completely different tradition. There was an awful lot, shall I say, of discussion between all four of us – me, Victoria, Sacha and Nick – about how this play would be. And then of course, somebody else takes the play. Because it was done in such a hurry, it's got no stage directions in it. It was published almost as soon as it had finished. In fact the play we actually had on stage is very different from the published play because we changed it in rehearsal.

And then we all went off for a beano to Florence where they'd put it on in a place where they had done it completely and utterly differently – because there was no constraint of telling them how to do it. I mean, we arrived in this theatre, which was an orangery. Of course, it being Florence, for some reason the performance actually started at midnight and there was this black curtain that was hiding what I thought was the stage. I had come earlier and looked behind. I thought, 'Oh my God, they've had fire! This is not the stage, this is something else.' There was burnt furniture everywhere and these huge beams and weird things hanging up. This is their interpretation – it's rather brilliant, actually. In fact, it *was* the stage, and the burnt beams that were like this... I don't know if that rings a bell for anybody because it did eventually visually for me... they said, 'Oh, yes, we saw that in a picture of London in the Blitz. This was the remnant of a library that had been burnt, that was all that was left. We decided: perfect.' Where London in the Blitz and *Guantanamo* come together I

don't know, but it worked. And they had certain actors positioned in the audience, which also worked very well.

Audience Member 3: My question is about this search for the truth. Don't you think there is a great danger of people misrepresenting themselves by having their words actually transcribed word by word? That actually could be not be a truthful representation of themselves? I think that is a danger, a misconception of them being who they actually are. Because it's a very, very tenuous line: interpretation, who actually people are... they're not who they think they are by what they just say they are. If you think about it, if it was so easy to represent themselves, you don't need lawyers to do so. People have difficulties so they have problems, impairments... they have problems of communication... I mean I'm pretty sure the *Guantanamo* situations are dramatic. I am a criminal lawyer myself, so I have heard a lot of criminal stories. I interview families and parents and criminals, etc. I have been in this environment. I know it is pretty dramatic. They have a whole story they know, because it is a life and death situation. So it is pretty much there, the whole story is there, you don't need to do anything.

Actually, I must say, they are really good liars, so they are really good actors themselves. I don't even know if they are who they say they are most of the time. If you check, they're not exactly true, so the whole thing is very relative. The search for the truth is a very difficult thing to claim in the circumstance: who they are, who they say they are. Are they being very well represented by just prescribing their words, or as a fictional writer would it be better if you sit there, listening to their stories? Would it be a better job for you to read through your eyes as a fictional writer, through a poem, or from your reading of the situation, through your sensitivity, who they are? Isn't it more truthful to say, 'I don't know who you are but I am going to take an interpretation of who you are,' than claim 'I know who you are because you are who you say you are.'

DR: It's a good question. If you are interviewing someone and you think 'They're lying, they're deceitful,' or you're picking up something, is there a way

in which you could ever... do you feel it would be appropriate to...indicate that?

EW: I think that every single person in the text had lied at some point. Lied to themselves, because we were talking to women whose daughters had been murdered and felt enormous amounts of guilt. They were telling the stories of their daughters' lives to us over a period of time. Sometimes you could see, just in the way they said something, or the way they broke down, that they were almost...

There was a particular moment where Dianne Parry, one of the mothers, wanted to meet Angela, the girl who was represented as Ali in the piece. So we got them together and we taped it and that was fine. But one of the things that Angela did for Dianne was she offered her a release. It was very moving. None of us could have got Dianne to come to that point of view, which was that she felt enormous guilt and Angela kept pushing her. Because Dianne felt an affinity with her, this was a representation of her daughter if you like, she could push her more, this prostitute could push her more. She said, 'You know, I should have brought her home, but I didn't want the kids knowing she had...' and Angela said, 'That's rubbish. My mum used to bring me home, I'd be out of the back door.' 'No, but you don't understand' – she kept pushing her. In the end she said, 'She wanted to come home and I wouldn't let her,' and you realised then this woman's guilt. She was absolutely drained after it. It took that girl to be able to push Dianne to say to herself what she knew, but wasn't able to consciously say to herself, if you like. I do take your point that there is that problem, but I think that is a human thing anyway.

GS: To me it seems to me that the words 'truth in reality' can often seem to be interchanged, but they are not interchanged. You can have somebody lying and hear the truth, and I think that's what you have to be careful with and what you have to go for. Also, you are not using those exact people's words, because you interview somebody for two hours and you use maybe five or ten minutes of it. So for me, the truth that comes is not so much about whether

they are telling 'reality,' or the absolute truth. The truth that comes is from the cumulative experience of what's happening on the stage. People get very different things from seeing the same play or reading the same book; they get very different truths. That is the miracle of working in the arts.

AM3: So if you are editing and if you are using just bits of it, why don't you dramatise it, as I said? Why don't you make it more reachable to my heart? Why don't you do the complete job?

TG: Well, then you're not doing verbatim theatre.

AM3: Then I ask why the vanity of the whole process? Because the problem is: I am here, I am watching, I want you to reach me, I want to feel for it. And sometimes... I am here to learn, I am here to understand the process. And we are humans and I think the whole point of the whole thing is to feel, is to reach, is to be there, and to empathise. I think everything is valid as far as you reach me, you know?

GS: I actually think you can do that by the words that you chose. For example, the man who said, 'I don't want to break the law.' Now, my experience of interviewing him is that he said that for a very particular reason, he was trying to show to us that he was law-abiding. It wasn't something that was casually said, it was an opportunity. That's what happens in life. People say all sorts of things for different reasons. I chose to use it one, for the laugh that I knew it would get, but two, because I think that told an awful lot about who that person was. I think I know what that told about who that person was, but for somebody else in an audience it will tell something else.

I think the other thing I would say is that in *Guantanamo* we interviewed some people who had been interviewed a lot and who were actually campaigning for their relatives. And I know what this is like. You know, when I have a novel come out, I go and get interviewed about a book quite a lot; what you learn in

the process of interviewing is which lines work and which lines don't work. Gradually you filter down to use the lines that work. Well, relatives of people in *Guantanamo* are just like that. They are trying to tell you something and they're doing it in a way that that they think tells the story best. So they have filtered the story for you and you just have to be aware of that. But that is part of what you are doing anyway.

Audience Member 4: I wanted to ask a question about constructing dialogue. I have had a very limited experience of verbatim in both an applied theatre setting and a mental health setting. What I found I was doing... I thought, 'I'll use verbatim because...' I don't know if this is a shared feeling, but it is a more ethical way of capturing the truth of this character and what this person's saying. I sit there and write down every um and err. Then what I found was on occasion, the text produced actually reduced the character because it focused on the fact that the character was saying ums and errs. I think quite often we expect that the actual annotation of the dialogue within verbatim has an authenticity around it because it is filled with these sorts of nuances. And I was struck with a dilemma: do I keep it in and make the character sound less articulate than he seemed when he actually spoke to me? Have you ever changed the text? And how did you set your own principles in determining that decision?

TG: When I interviewed Imtiaz Amin, who was Zahid Mubarek's uncle, he ended every single sentence with, 'D'you know what I mean?' and said um and err about 50 times in a sentence. And said 'Innit' as well. I thought if I wrote, 'D'you know what I mean?' and 'Innit' they'd think I was writing an episode of *Goodness Gracious Me!* And he's a perfectly intelligent, very articulate man who's been campaigning on behalf of his nephew for five years. But what I didn't want to lose was the nuance of his language, so I think it is perfectly alright to take out the ums and the errs, as long as you don't lose the way of the accent or the way that they speak. Because that's so specific and it's such a... the one thing that verbatim drama can do, which I don't think you can do in a million years if you just try and make up a sentence

that somebody speaks: you immediately tap into the way that someone is and who they are. I mean, the other thing that he did a lot was he would use Urdu, when he couldn't actually articulate a word. It's not that he was first-generation Pakistani – he was like myself, second-generation. So it's very important to keep the flavour but not to go overboard and write every um and err because then they just sound a bit odd.

GS: We had typists who were typing up the tapes that we had done and they were instructed to put every um and err and gap in it. Then I chose which ones to use, because I wasn't using the whole interview anyway. So that was perfectly OK to do that. Then what happened in most cases, well, certainly in England, the actors listened to the tapes so they could hear what I had left out. They could also hear... they could add back in some of what I had left out without adding any words in because they could add the sense of it in. So I think we actually got the best of all worlds by doing it that way.

EW: That's a similar situation to us: all our actors listened to the tapes and we had transcribers. We had to, because the play would have been a year long. There were a couple of times where I was a bit concerned at the beginning – because I had never done verbatim theatre before – that if you have a character who has a political opinion that's opposed to your own, you automatically think, 'That woman's mad. She's a fascist. I don't like this woman.' You'd have to tell yourself, 'No, I can't do that. I have to be as open with her as I am with the others.' But then you'd get to a bit where she'd ramble, some really horrible vitriol about these girls. And you knew things about this woman as well, that she'd done things – you know set dogs on girls – because the girls had told you. You'd have to go, 'No, don't be like that.' But then I'd have to stop myself from taking bits out and letting her see her madness. So I'd go, 'Oh, I have to keep the sense of that and keep that sentence and bit in there,' because it was bad-minded of me at times.

DR: I had a slightly different experience on that issue, with the London bombings. The text was very different because I went to the message board

for the boyband Blue from the morning of July 7 and I got every single message that had happened from about eight in the morning until about midday (because Blue were supposed to be playing at Wembley that evening) and so on. My rule was I couldn't change the order, but I could cut entire messages out. What's really interesting about that is, of course, that's a written form that then actors have to speak, but the key thing was emoticons. They would use a lot of these smiley faces and things like that. What happened over the course of that morning was increasingly that people started only posting in emoticons. And emoticons – this is so nerdy – but there is a bit of html that produces them. They're all called things like 'shocked,' 'happy'. 'Crying or very sad' was one of them. So you ended up with a really interesting... a very, very articulate inarticulacy. Someone's entire message would be, 'Crying or very sad, crying or very sad, crying or very sad, shocked, shocked, shocked.' That's how it worked and that ended up becoming aesthetically quite interesting as well as being evocative of the confusion of that morning and that rapid rollercoaster of feelings that people had.

Audience Member 5: Esther touched on it actually – I was quite curious about your own process as writers. How important it was to be 'on the same side' of the material and what level of sympathy you might have had at the beginning. Because of the political and emotive nature of the subject matter, I was just curious how much of you own... were you aware of your own judgements and any feelings?

EW: Absolutely definitely at the beginning. Yes, I was.

AM 5: Did you feel that you had to have an open mind when you came to the material? Was some of the material so emotive, so painful? How did you deal with that as writers too?

EW: Because I live in Liverpool, I saw a lot of people who were drug addicts and homeless people. I had a very different opinion about them than I do now.

Equally, I met people who would say, 'The zone won't work because it will exclude young girls.' Because you had to be 18 to be in the zone. 'You know, there's a lot of young girls out there who are under 18 who will just put themselves in more danger.' So I was fluctuating constantly, politically, with where we were going. And then the government came out just before Christmas and said, 'That's not going to happen, we're not even considering a zone.' I constantly changed throughout. 'No, it has to happen because it's saved lives.' Then the girls would say they wouldn't use it and the punters would say, 'I wouldn't use it.' So it was just, 'Well, there has to be some way of reconciling this whole mess.' Personally I came out the other side thinking it's about drugs. It's got to be about drugs – it's about this so-called war on drugs that's ridiculous. So my political affiliations were changing as well – not so much affiliations, I was just changing constantly. But yes I did have to be very, very careful once I had got involved emotionally with the women and the people I was interviewing. When I got the opposite opinion I would get quite emotional and had to stop myself from being one-sided.

TG: I don't think of it as a journalistic style of writing verbatim, because I think that you do have to have a passion about the subject. It's very hard to be, 'I'm going to be very balanced here and I'm not going to take sides.' You wouldn't be wanting to write that play if you didn't believe in what you were writing about. But there was one instance, for example, when I had to – well quite a few instances – when I had to go and interview prison officers. Talking about this thing about people lying – I mean that was just fascinating seeing how they would respond to me.

The whole point of the enquiry into Zahid Mubarek's death was that the family were saying this was institutional murder: that this was proof of institutional racism within the prison service. And the prison service were constantly saying, 'No, no, we're not racist. We're not racist – we love everyone.' All that kind of stuff. Then you go and you interview a prison officer. There was myself and there was the director Charlie Westenra, who's a blonde white woman. Never would those prison officers look at me. I was the one who was asking

the questions but they would never look at me – they would look at Charlie. And when they mentioned Zahid Mubarek, they would wave in my direction as if I was him, or Muslim, or whatever. What does that say about where they are coming from? This happened every single time. The most fascinating time was when I interviewed Colin Moses, who was the head of the Prison Officers' Association. He was a black man who was going on and on and on about, you know, how he was the first black trade unionist. He never once looked at me in all the time he was interviewing with me; he always looked at her. Then at one point he said, 'And I want to apologise to the family,' and he looked at me. It was just bizarre, and I think that says it all, really, doesn't it?

GS: What I would say to your question is that it is an interesting thing. I do feel that if you do that kind of interview, you have to do something with yourself so that no matter what your sympathies are, you have to ask the questions that often feel very difficult to ask in that circumstance. If you don't, you are going away with half a story. You do have to harden yourself because you are talking about people who are in distress and you might have a lot of sympathy.

In one case, for example, Victoria and I interviewed quite an old man, who was not very well. He was talking about his son and he became very distressed and started to cry. We had very different reactions. I, well, I think probably I do have a little more ice in me when I'm doing something. I felt the play could do with this, you know, this is important as well. This is his real reaction (actually he didn't seem to mind himself that he was crying – he didn't apologise and he didn't try and withdraw, which he could have done). I think he came from a culture where men crying was not so bad. Victoria felt very much more that this wasn't right: that we were intruding on him.

I don't think there's an answer to which one of us was right. I think you have to get your own balance for that, you have to find a way. But I do think if you really are going to make a play of somebody's real words, you can't just take what they say for granted without questioning them. Sometimes you do have

to go places where you know they don't want you to go. But if you don't go there, then you are doing what we discussed before: not really telling the whole story. You've not really made an attempt to find the whole story. I think it is a difficult ethical issue.

**END**