

Derek Paget

## 'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques

'Verbatim Theatre' has been the term utilized by Derek Paget during his extensive researches into that form of documentary drama which employs (largely or exclusively) tape-recorded material from the 'real-life' originals of the characters and events to which it gives dramatic shape. Though clearly indebted to sources such as the radio ballads of the 'fifties, and to the tradition which culminated in Joan Littlewood's *Oh What a Lovely War*, most of its practitioners acknowledge Peter Cheeseman's work at Stoke-on-Trent as the direct inspiration – in one case, as first received through the 'Production Casebook' on his work published in the first issue of the original *Theatre Quarterly* (1971). Quite simply, the form owes its present health and exciting potential to the flexibility and unobtrusiveness of the portable cassette recorder – ironically, a technological weapon against which are ranged other mass technological media such as broadcasting and the press, which tend to marginalize the concerns and emphases of popular oral history. Here, Derek Paget, who is currently completing his doctoral thesis on this subject, discusses with leading practitioners their ideas and working methods. Derek Paget teaches English and Drama at Worcester College of Higher Education, and has also had practical theatre experience ranging from community work to the West End, and from Joan Littlewood's final season at Stratford East to the King's Head, Islington.

*You get this grim sense of people fighting against the dark to remember the past. And that seems to be one of the functions of what the actual play is doing, to deliver it back with a bit of light on it to the people who have experienced it.... That seems a very democratic and decent thing to do.*

Rony Robinson<sup>1</sup>

VERBATIM THEATRE, which makes fascinating use of taped actuality recording as its primary source material, is the latest manifestation of documentary theatre. This article is based on interviews most generously given by directors, writers, actors and musicians over the past year,<sup>2</sup> and aims to trace the development of this distinctive form, to give an account of its characteristic working methods, to indicate the thinking of theatre workers concerning its methodology, and to examine the scope of its influence within, and at the edges of, the professional theatre.

### Introduction

*In our earlier shows, we had painted onto the set, the backdrop: 'Everything spoken in this play was*

*spoken by people in...whatever.' So the audience knew they were hearing real stuff.*

Rony Robinson, a playwright who can be considered a pioneer of the method, sets out here the boundaries of Verbatim Theatre: it is a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place.

As often as not, such plays are then *fed back* into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance *in* those communities. In Verbatim Theatre, the firmest of commitments is thus made by the company to *the use of vernacular speech*, recorded as the primary source material of their play.

In performance, the dynamics of the actuality recording govern the nature of staging, movement, and characterization. Clive Barker, whose practical experience of Documentary Theatre

reaches back to the original production of *Oh What a Lovely War*, sees these plays as

*a whole new area of documentary opening up – the direct communication, or second-hand communication, of lived experience through the actor as instrument.*<sup>3</sup>

Through the systematic display in performance time of the source material (which becomes the *true* protagonist in the drama), the actor is freed not only from some of the burdens of conventional playwriting within the naturalistic mode, but also from some of those attendant upon the characteristic economic determinations of theatre production in this country.

In common with other manifestations of documentary theatre, Verbatim Theatre can thus offer to actors a greater share in the *means* of production, in the Marxist sense – it offers that ensemble method of working still so painfully lacking within a profession more subject than most to the pressures of the market place. As Rony Robinson puts it,

*The collective method of doing verbatim shows seems to remove the difference between performers, directors, sometimes designers if they've been in on it from the beginning. Some of the warmth of the generosity of the stuff that's been given to you passes into the rehearsal room. I am sentimentalizing, but there is some of that!*

## Development

*The greatest reservoir of creativity inherent in the people [is] their linguistic abilities.*

Peter Cheeseman<sup>4</sup>

Since the mid-1970s, there have been many examples of verbatim plays in a number of significant performance contexts in the UK. Although the development of Verbatim Theatre can be said to have been facilitated by the portable cassette recorder, it undoubtedly owes its inspiration to Peter Cheeseman's local documentary work at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, from 1965 onwards. As Cheeseman defines it, 'The key to our work is the painstaking use of primary source material – painstaking, protracted and scrupulous use of historical evidence.'

Although they were not called verbatim

plays, the Stoke documentaries *Hands up – for You the War Is Ended* (1971) and *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974) could claim to have been the first in the field. Rony Robinson:

*Peter really hit the method in order to report a complex industrial dispute – he found that was the way to get at it.*<sup>5</sup>

Certainly these productions – and, indeed, the 'Stoke method' of documentary theatre – inspired two director-playwright teams to explore in the late 1970s their own versions of Stoke's 'puritan' approach to documentary theatre. The teams, both of which worked at the Gateway Theatre, Chester, during Chris Honer's tenure there from 1976 to 1980, were Honer himself with Rony Robinson (the first to explore the implications of the later Stoke plays); and David Thacker with Ron Rose. Arguably, all other work in Verbatim Theatre has relied on the context created by these theatre workers.<sup>6</sup>

They found themselves in contact with an essentially *non*-theatrical tradition of social observation and oral documentation coming to them through Cheeseman's work at Stoke and Theatre Workshop's pioneering efforts both pre- and post-war (in which Ewan MacColl was every bit as influential a figure as Joan Littlewood).<sup>7</sup> As Peter Cheeseman says,

*The whole tradition of documentary that I was following I think probably had much more to do with the work of Grierson embedded in the work of Philip Donellan and Charles Parker, as well as other things through Ewan MacColl – because that's the other thread, from Theatre Workshop, isn't it?... So it's part of the same set of general ideas, and I think one of the interesting things about our documentary work is that it's, like, ideas that have come out of film and radio, and the work of people like the Radio Features Department.*

Cheeseman emphasizes the debt he feels to the work of people like Charles Parker,<sup>8</sup> and it is clear that the importance of such forms as the 'radio ballads' of the 1950s and the British documentary film movement of the 1930s and 1940s have been underestimated in past accounts of the development of documentary theatre in the UK.

One would not, of course, wish to minimize the wider impact from the late 1950s onwards

of the European epic and political tradition of Brecht and Piscator; however, film and radio are perhaps as much the sources of that interest in vernacular speech and 'ordinary' people present in post-war British documentary theatre (in however problematical a form) as the sudden realization that the theatre of Brecht and Piscator was relevant in a British context.

What is significant is that work such as Charles Parker's and even Cheeseman's is now often being received by younger practitioners through the *tradition* it established, rather than from direct experience of the work itself. Thus, David Thacker says he heard of Parker through Cheeseman,<sup>9</sup> and Chris Honer, while he saw *Fight for Shelton Bar*, was, he feels, influenced also by ideas made available in the early 'Production Casebook' on Stoke in *Theatre Quarterly* and, even more significantly, by working with an actor who had worked on the original production of *Hands Up*:

*I remember being fascinated to hear about that, fascinated to hear about the research for it, fascinated to hear about this scene which has now become a legend in this kind of theatre – where four people tell overlapping stories.*<sup>10</sup>

This occurred during Honer's time at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry (1971–72). He later moved on to the Gateway Theatre, Chester, via the Studio at Birmingham Rep. All the time:

*I had at the back of my mind this idea of doing a show which involved taped interviews and which in some way was able to recreate some sort of community experience in the words of the people that had experienced it.*

At Birmingham, his attempts to 'get at a community experience' had included two non-verbatim shows, one of which – *Events Following the Closure of a Motor Cycle Factory*, by David Edgar (1976) – had made significant use of tape recording as a method of research:<sup>11</sup>

*The bits that approached most closely to what I think I was after (although I don't think I knew I was after it!) were those that described the actual formation of the Meridan Co-operative.*

When he moved to Chester, Honer wished to institute a policy of 'small scale community tours' from the main theatre, a project materially

assisted by the beginning of his partnership with Rony Robinson:

*We decided to go absolutely for taped interviews and really that there should be pretty well no word spoken in the show which would not be given to us.*

Thus began the process which culminated in the production of *Cheshire Voices* (1977).

Rony Robinson had had his own contact with Stoke while at Coventry during 1974–75. He worked in the production archive at Stoke while seeking to 'uncover the methodology' of *Fight for Shelton Bar*. Cheeseman was very helpful, as he has been to the succession of theatre researchers who have beaten a path to his door:

*As far as I know, the use of oral history to make plays from, to make documentaries from... was not being done anywhere... What I found there was this, I would say 'puritanism' about it... the meticulous way in which the material had to be collected, had to be transcribed – and certainly at that stage they were using the methodology of linguistics to actually annotate the stuff, so that you can see how you speak it.*

In 1977, at the same time that he was working on *Cheshire Voices*, Robinson was involved with another verbatim show, *One Day in Sheffield*, directed by Rex Doyle at the Crucible Theatre.<sup>12</sup>

On 6 May, the company of actors, the production team, and a veritable army of schoolchildren/researchers (organised by their Drama Adviser) went out into Sheffield and 'meticulously tape recorded' its citizens:

*It's by no means the most original idea if you're making television documentaries... but it's not that common in theatre... The beauty of it was that all the material was collected inside a day. We added little bits, and some of the tapes came in later, but we knew what we'd got by the end of that time.*

In one year, Robinson had provided two separate but comparable methodologies for Verbatim Theatre: *Cheshire Voices* took a small number of characters through a large segment of history, while *One Day in Sheffield* looked at a short segment of time through a large sample of people.

*The Rose between Two Thorns*, David Thacker's

1980 show at Lancaster, followed the former model. It was a production of which Peter Cheeseman also approved:

*The vital influence [from Stoke's work], the one where there's a great through-line is the work of David Thacker...who's done the most brilliant documentaries, or productions, collecting material from ordinary people with the tape recorder, and turning it into a play...absolutely and directly out of our work and Charles Parker's, via Rony Robinson, the Sheffield writer.*

David Thacker, who was working at the Gateway, saw *Cheshire Voices*:

*That provoked the interest in me – I did one at Chester, and then at Lancaster I did The Rose between Two Thorns, which was the first entirely verbatim play that I've done.*

The Chester show was the Ron Rose/David Thacker collaboration of 1978, *Down at Our School*, a mixture of 'verbatim and fictional material on the educational system in Cheshire within living memory'.<sup>13</sup>

When *The Rose between Two Thorns* was performed at a conference on Documentary Theatre held at Milton Keynes in 1980, Social Documents Ltd.<sup>14</sup> became interested in using it as the centrepiece for a proposed Channel Four presentation. Sadly, the projected television programme was never realized, but through Social Documents the play was revived for a month in 1982 at Lancaster, and the final performance was videoed.

In 1985 Rose and Thacker collaborated on *Enemies Within* at the Young Vic. Thacker acknowledges *The Rose's* debt to *Cheshire Voices*:

*It was of the same form as...Cheshire Voices. The idea of that play was that it was to look at life in Cheshire between the wars. It seemed a very good format, so when I was in Lancaster I thought we'd use the same starting-point for this show.*

Both shows are thus framed by two dates: Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, and the start of the Second World War, 3 September 1939. Both shows used music – composed for *Cheshire Voices* by musical director Gary Yershon:

*At those nodes, or points, where one [section of the play] intersects with another there would generally be a feeling that you need to paper over that with a song of some kind.<sup>15</sup>*

In *The Rose*, popular songs like 'Pack Up Your Troubles' were used for similar structural purposes. The whole format is easy to adapt to different areas, relatively straightforward to research, and joyously celebratory to perform, if the audiotape of *Cheshire Voices* and the videotape of *The Rose* are anything to go by.<sup>16</sup>

Both *Cheshire Voices* and *The Rose between Two Thorns* were essentially 'road/community shows' – part of that 'disposable' theatre distinctive to the early 1970s in which new, or newish, civic repertory theatres, partly working off fringe theatre methodology, sought to justify their claims to serve a region by demonstrating their willingness to go *outside* their immediate bricks-and-mortar environment and into the community.

This accounts not only for their celebratory orientation but also for a structure which makes use of such transformational aids as songs. All concerned acknowledge the influence of Theatre Workshop, and in particular *Oh What a Lovely War*:

**Honer:** *A lot of the 'entertainments bias' goes back to Theatre Workshop – that sort of attitude which says that it's fun, but at the same time it's got something to say.*

**Robinson:** *I think Oh What a Lovely War is a key influence in all this as well, one way or another – the recognition you can have a bit of fun as well as dealing with history.<sup>17</sup>*

Robinson identified another important fringe influence – Mike Alfreds's Shared Experience company's *Arabian Nights*. Four versions of this show toured between 1975 and 1977. Honer and Robinson travelled down the motorway from Chester to see Shared Experience at Keele in 1976, and Robinson recalls

*The realisation that you could just have a little bit of space and four performers or whatever – one lighting state, no props, no change of costume – and you could just tell stories, and you could share narrative was, I contend, a major breakthrough for us... I think we both, on our way home, knew that*

*we'd got something important to that show we were working on [Cheshire Voices] – and it was.*

The release into a portable form of theatre, deriving its ingenuity from the adeptness with which its actors perform (with their audience's willing collusion) rapid transformations of time, place, and scene, explains the apparent plainness of Verbatim Theatre's characteristic settings. According to Honer,

*All the shows I've done have been quite ridiculously puritan! I don't think we've ever had any props at all – everything has been mimed.... You would need so much, in the shows that I've done, in terms of visual support that, in a way, it's better to have nothing. Because what you imagine is better, I think.*



Right: from *Cheshire Voices* (1977). The cast are children at Saturday-morning pictures. Back row: Richard Avery, Dinah Handley, Gary Yershon. Front row: Trevor Nichols, Annie Tyson (later in Thacker/Rose's *Enemies*), and Stuart Richman. Below: the tour cast of *The Rose between Two Thorns* (1980) in their 'home' positions. Beneath the datelines are the 'through-characters'/narrators Edna May (Jane Maud) and Alice (Lottie Ward). Centre-stage are Andy Readman, Lesley Nightingale and Gary Lucas. With director David Thacker, these five performers devised the show.



*You've got to have actors who are very good at mime, of course.*<sup>18</sup>

### 'Celebratory' and 'Controversy' Shows

It is not to devalue the Chester and Lancaster plays mentioned above to compare them to 'human interest' stories in journalism: in celebrating locality, and in seeking out discourse not normally privileged by either the journalistic or the entertainment media, these plays are recognizably part of what might be called 'the Stoke tradition' of documentary. Particularly in a theatre profession in which success tends only to be fully recognized when validated by and from London (where it then tends to be ruthlessly commodified), it is vital that the work of people like Peter Cheeseman and Chris Honer be not just appreciated, but assessed accurately in terms of what they have reclaimed from the margins of local and national experience.

Cheeseman defined the political importance of his work as an attempt to promote

*That sense of pride and self-confidence that every district outside London desperately needs – so you don't feel you're a nonentity.*

Mainly because of London-based companies which to some extent cater for a metropolitan audience with its sense of presiding over issues of 'national' importance, another kind of verbatim play has developed. Again to take a journalistic parallel, such plays are 'investigative', or address some *present* national 'controversy'.

For example, *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinhas* (Royal Court, 1982) used the letters of David Tinker as the source for its first half – a legitimate primary source, but not the hallmark of the verbatim play. For its second half, however, tape-recorded interviews provided the source material. Further examples are two plays dealing with the 1984–85 Miners' Strike – *Enemies Within* (Young Vic, DAC Theatre, 1985) and *The Garden of England* (7:84 England, 1984, and National, revised version, 1985).

All these plays were taken outside their metropolitan contexts – to interested groups of naval personnel in Plymouth in the case of the Court play, and to miners in Yorkshire and

Kent in the cases of the Young Vic and National plays – but this tended to be overshadowed by their London runs and reviews. *Falkland Sound* was even televised.

Despite their apparent similarities to the 'celebratory' plays, the 'present' context of the subject matter of the Falklands War and the Miners' Strike, as well as the metropolitan nature of the main performance context, ensured for all three 'controversial' plays a very different performance style from the road-show style of the 'celebratory' pieces. Music, for example, no longer facilitated transformations from one section of the play to another, while direct address was even more the staple mode than tends to be the case with verbatim plays.

David Thacker thinks that the 'tone' of *Enemies Within* tended to preclude use of the 'road-show style' devices of *The Rose*, but he rejects accusations that this makes the resultant style untheatrical, saying:

*The play will be dramatic if the content is interesting and if the acting is of a high quality. So it doesn't bother me now, I'm quite happy to have a lot of people standing on stage just talking to the audience for two and a half hours. The fact that you've got a variety of different people, a variety of different stories, experiences – the collage effect that you get together – must contain variety, difference of tone and shape. If that's the case, I'm very happy just having actors standing there talking to the audience.*

'Present controversy' verbatim plays are not necessarily confined to the metropolis. Ron Rose's DAC company, amongst others, has explored such subjects while continuing to make sure that the resultant production is 'rooted in the contemporary life of the community'. *Never the Same Again*, using material taken from interviews with the wives of striking miners in 1985, is an example. Rose also vehemently disputes David Thacker's view that the material provides its own, intrinsic, interest, believing that it is necessary to make very careful selections: 'you can't leave the dross in'. He saw *The Garden of England* as being particularly guilty of doing just that.

### Working Methods

*What I love about the form is that every word is as*

## A Chronology of Selected Verbatim Productions

The criterion for inclusion in the following checklist is that *substantial* elements of the professional productions mentioned shall have consisted of purely verbatim material, tape-recorded and transcribed. The operation of a *completely* verbatim criterion would have meant excluding some of these productions, and the spread of activity which the verbatim movement has generated would not then have been so accurately reflected.

1971	<i>Hands Up –For You the War Is Ended</i>	Victoria Theatre, Stoke
1974	<i>Fight for Shelton Bar</i>	Victoria Theatre, Stoke
1977	<i>One Day in Sheffield</i> <i>Cheshire Voices</i>	Crucible Studio, Sheffield Tour, and Studio, Chester
1978	<i>Down at Our School</i> <i>Happy Valley</i> <i>At Your Age/Snapshots</i> <i>They'll Never Believe Me</i>	Tour, and Studio, Chester Theatre Mobile, tour Theatre Royal, Stratford East Gateway Theatre, Chester
1979	<i>All Our Loving</i> <i>Crewe Cuttings</i>	Theatre Royal, Stratford East Rolling Stock Theatre, tour
1980	<i>The Rose between Two Thorns</i> <i>Keep the Home Fires Burning</i>	Tour, and Duke's Playhouse, Lancaster Doncaster Arts Co-operative, tour
1981	<i>Miner Dig the Coal</i> <i>Lennon</i>	Victoria Theatre, Stoke Liverpool Playhouse
1982	<i>When Can I Have a Banana Again?</i>	Tour and Studio, Derby
1983	<i>Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinhas</i> <i>Echoes from the Valley</i>	Royal Court, London Major Road Theatre, tour
1984	<i>The Garden of England</i>	7: 84 England, tour
1985	<i>The Garden of England</i> <i>Never the Same Again</i> <i>Enemies Within</i>	Cottesloe, NT, revised version DAC, tour DAC Theatre, tour, and Young Vic.
1986	<i>The Time of Our Lives</i> <i>The Northern Trawl</i>	Age Exchange. Remould Theatre
1987	<i>Close to the Bone</i>	Remould Theatre

*spoken by a person – so what you're doing is editing and doing a collage job on it.*

'Collage', in the sense here used by David Thacker, is frequently the key descriptive term for practitioners of Verbatim Theatre. As with most variants of documentary theatre, the essential difficulty in the working process is the reduction of a mass of source material to some sort of viable theatrical shape, producing a very real uncertainty at the outset, when a company initially assembles with no material at all beyond a basic subject area.

For *Cheshire Voices* and *The Rose between Two Thorns*, this comprised two large geographical regions and twenty-one years of history – a

potentially daunting prospect, and one impossible to contemplate within the exigencies of the normal three to four weekly rep cycle of rehearsal and performance. Verbatim shows therefore follow the kinds of principles laid down as part of the Stoke documentary method: a longer period than usual is arranged, in order to facilitate what is essentially a three-stage process of material-gathering, editing/compiling, and rehearsal. Honer in Chester and Thacker in Lancaster both sought five weeks of rehearsal.

**Honer:** *The actual process that you go through is a bit of a head-bending experience. Say, the first two weeks of rehearsal as such are spent almost*

entirely with the company going out, interviewing people, reporting back, and sharing their experience.

**Thacker:** *The rehearsing and devising took five weeks, so the first two weeks were intensely to do with just interviewing, but also, the difficult thing about it is that you have to transcribe these interviews, which is extremely laborious.*

Even before this concentrated devising/rehearsing comes a good deal of initial preparation. In his introduction to *The Knotty*, Cheeseman recommends up to six months for preliminary research. Honer and Robinson began their project five months before performance with letters in local papers advertising for people willing to talk about their lives. This brought in 50–60 responses, and Honer recalls:

*They were quite varied – although, of course, you tended to get people who read letters in newspapers answering, which did limit it a bit! We could see that there were holes.*

Robinson, unsure at that early stage how strong the verbatim material was likely to be, turned for *Cheshire Voices* to the more usual sources of the documentary dramatist – ‘quite a big read through of the local papers for the ‘twenties and ‘thirties’.

The period up to the time of the company assembling was taken up with this kind of orientation work, and with the identification of certain ‘holes’ that would assuredly need to be plugged. For example, Cheshire has an important rural, agricultural aspect, so it was recognized that information would have to be sought by direct means. The company followed up contacts in the farming community in Malpas, and thus discovered one of the characters who provided a ‘throughline’ in *Cheshire Voices*.

If this was an ‘objective’ necessity for a show about Cheshire, there was room also for more ‘subjective’ sampling as well. Rony Robinson:

*The communist woman was, I think, the dominating voice of Cheshire Voices because in her quiet way she went through history during that period, while everyone else was not really aware of it... We found her on purpose. I actually knew of her and found her and interviewed her. Because I wanted...that kind of voice. What you end up with is*

*not a ‘random sample’, but you do find it randomly – chance and good fortune come into it!*

The ‘sampling’ would probably horrify a sociologist, but the end in view in a verbatim show is very different from a sociological survey, since an awareness of *theatricality* is ultimately informing the whole operation.<sup>19</sup> But this is not to say there was not an awareness of certain historical imperatives early on. According to Honer,

*There were things you felt you had to have in a show about the ‘twenties and ‘thirties – obvious things like people’s realization that there was going to be a war. There had to be some experience of the Depression, of unemployment... But I wouldn’t make any claims beyond just a vague sense of, ‘Well, surely we should have this kind of material in, shouldn’t we?’... Both of us [himself and Robinson] were largely guided by our own agreed sense of it – of what was worth going for and what wasn’t. And also, of course, guided by one’s sense of theatre.*

Often both companies found that naive formulations as to what interviewees might want to talk about had to be replaced once interviewing started by a recognition about what people manifestly needed to talk about,<sup>20</sup> and to be open to that which was freely offered. Thacker:

*I think the only way to approach it is to be completely open to what they’re telling you, what they’re trying to tell you about the period... It doesn’t mean that you then show everything... you are selective about it and you are making artistic choices to heighten what you want the audience to perceive as being life between the wars and what perspective you want them to put on that.*

The *Cheshire Voices* company finally began their information gathering with a necessarily sketchy agenda of questions which had arisen out of the preliminary work done by director and writer: ‘There were fifteen or twenty questions which we thought everybody should be asked.’ And this basic agenda was aided by one particularly important exhortation:

**Honer:** *What we were very anxious to get at all the time – and I can remember saying this to the*



From the 1982 revival of *The Rose between Two Thorns*, itself 'documented' in a Channel 4 pilot video. Top: Matthew Marsh, Lesley Nightingale and Andrew Secombe enact courtship rituals. Bottom: songs are an important part of the dynamic of a verbatim show, whether specially composed (as in *Cheshire Voices*) or, as here, historically authentic.

*company a lot – was 'Go for the story!', because people can generalize forever.*

**Robinson:** *I think what happens in specific terms is that you're on the lookout for good stories, and that is what will shape and condition it.*<sup>21</sup>

The whole team also has to have its theatrical antennae working, for, as Thacker warned,

*Just because you go out and interview real people, it doesn't mean to say you're going to come up with*



interesting stuff. Ninety per cent of what you get is incredibly boring, it's platitudinous.

Actor-musician Gary Yershon indicated how stories from the research connect readily in an actor's mind with *episodes* for the show:

*You just instinctively know what's theatrical, I think – what an actor will be able to play and whether it will make an episode... I see it in terms of episodes... dynamic enough to be shown on stage.*

Actress Alwyne Taylor, who has been in three verbatim shows, felt that they grow through a kind of dual accretion. She describes here the Derby Playhouse Second World War show of 1982, *When Can I Have a Banana Again*:

*Somebody had talked about rationing – we made a scene out of that. So you've got scenes growing.*

*You've got rations – food – black market. Can we bring the through-character in? So you've got a sequence growing.*<sup>22</sup>

The working method relies on the shared certainty that, sooner or later, the richest of testimony will be found.

**Thacker:** *But the one-in-ten interview throws up someone who, without having any self-conscious awareness of this, is a natural poet and speaks with a kind of joy about the past that is... unmistakable.*

**Robinson:** *Middle-class people... can't tell you things that've happened without theorizing about them.*

Good material tended to come, perhaps, from those not normally accustomed to having their experiences validated by having others seeking them out. Chrys Salt suggests

*One of the interesting things about the genre... is that you actually bring working-class history to the stage. It's the language of the common man – something that would never in normal circumstances become material for the theatre.*<sup>23</sup>

For the theatre, then, the necessity to find the concrete story, not the abstract opinion, has been paramount. Interestingly, the Oral History project of the magazine *History Workshop*, part of a similar 'set' of current ideas about the cultural value of 'living memory', has made similar discoveries about what memories are likely to be particularly vivid:

*Besides memories of the ingrained habits of everyday life, people may have a fund of stories – incidents or episodes – which have taken on symbolic meaning in the context of their life histories, but they are unreliable when it comes to time sequences and fickle when it comes to disconnected facts.*<sup>24</sup>

The projects of both the Oral History and the Verbatim Theatre movements are to some extent predicated upon the technology of the tape recorder, and both are operating in and seeking to extend the space left by the 'official' recording and reporting media.

Verbatim Theatre seems particularly well-suited to the demystification of history, given its ability to foreground its sources while simultaneously utilizing them for entertainment. As an editorial in *History Workshop* reminds us:



From *When Can I Have a Banana Again?*, the result of Honer/Robinson's second collaboration, focusing on wartime Derby. Opposite page: Alwyne Taylor, Wendy Brierley, and Andy Readman (the first and last named both verbatim 'specialists') perform one of Gary Yershon's songs. Above: these performers are joined by Alexandra Carling and Ben Roberts. Gary Yershon is at the piano on the right. Note the corrugated iron set, with its wartime posters.

*Memory does not constitute pure recall; the memory of any particular event is refracted through layer upon layer of subsequent experience and through the influence of the dominant and/or local ideology. As such – impure and inconsistent though it may be – [oral history] forms part of that most elusive of all historical phenomena – human consciousness.*<sup>25</sup>

David Thacker's formulation is strikingly similar:

*What was interesting to me about it was how people's memories, even though you think you're doing a 'memory show', people's memories, the way they describe the past, is very coloured by their present experience.*

### Interviewing

*There is, I would contend, a direct connection between the collecting of the material and the successful performing of it.* Rony Robinson

The inclusion of all members of the company in the process of interviewing people was seen by

everybody consulted as a fundamental precept of Verbatim Theatre. This not only sets up a circle of direct interaction with the community which achieves completion in the performance of the play, but also gives actors an input into the very creation and shaping of the theatre piece – something more usually denied to them as 'interpreters' rather than 'makers':

**Honer:** *One of the things which was behind the success of Cheshire Voices and a lot to do with the success of subsequent shows which I was involved in using this technique, is that fact that everybody is involved with the interviewing.*

**Alwyne Taylor:** *We live, as actors, such privileged lives – even though we might be out of work for some of the time – and it's so good to see another side of life. It just opened my eyes....I find it so important to go back into the community and find out what life is about – if you're going to present it on stage, you know?*

**Gary Yershon:** *You are nervous, I think, as you are in any situation where you're going to meet*

a complete stranger....They were all 'chores', I suppose because of the social – because of the new skills you had to use! I gradually began to enjoy it....It's a social effort, and a technique you feel you ought to acquire (and...when you haven't got it, you feel you haven't got it).

**Taylor:** *The art is to get them to forget about [the tape], which is no art because it's just relaxing with them.*

Interviews were organized and appointments made by the companies and then 'booked' on large wall charts. Random street interviewing sometimes took place,<sup>26</sup> but the major means of collecting material was by interviewing people in their homes by prior arrangement. The favoured method at Chester was for interviewing in pairs, so that, as Honer put it, the partner 'can see what you're missing, or take over for a bit'.

Since companies doing verbatim plays do not normally seek broadcasting standard taping, virtually any machine will do for interviewing, and actors' own cassette-radio machines have even been pressed into service.<sup>27</sup> Chrys Salt observed that the advent of the Walkman-type of machine has reduced the obtrusiveness of the recorder in the interview situation, as well as having the advantage that 'It's often one hour before people will talk and the pause button on small machines allows you to edit on the spot.'

## Editing and Compiling

*The script...has been condensed from nearly fifty hours of taped interviews recorded in the Kent coalfield in September/October 1984 and in May 1985.* Programme for Garden of England

In all, the company amasses a vast amount of material, much of it of questionable value:

**Thacker:** *You might do a hundred interviews as a company and maybe seven or eight of them are key interviews.*

**Honer:** *Most people in the company will have interviewed about seven or eight people...It would probably average at about half an hour each, because with some you realize you're never going to get anywhere, and others will be much longer.*

The 'key interviews' often provide not just

substantial, actable material, but also the 'through-line characters' favoured by some practitioners – characters who will eventually provide a structure for the play, a 'biographical' chronology for the audience to follow.

Jack Clayton-Smith, the 'Bredbury boxer' of *Cheshire Voices*, was interviewed for a total of three hours. Mark Jones, father of the first miner to be killed during the recent Miners' Strike, was interviewed for a similar period, the material he gave forming a major element of *Enemies Within*.

The interviews are transcribed initially by the interviewers themselves. Gary Yershon interviewed 'Lofty' Snell for *When Can I Have a Banana Again?* at Derby in 1982. The interview, a very important one for the company as it turned out, yielded eleven typescript pages:

*I knew it was going to be used! I typed up the lot.... You go back, and you do your home-editing in fact; you do an initial edit of things which you think are going to be interesting. You know right from the word go whether this interview is going to be useful.... It's to do with the structure that's set out by the writer and director.... With Cheshire Voices, and with Banana as well, there was constant reference back as to whether this stuff was going to be useful.*

Only when typed or written up as close as possible to the actual interview will the content still be fresh enough in the mind of the interviewer for problems of inaudibility to be overcome and for the sense of a person received during the interview to remain powerful.

In the next stage, the 'raw' script is converted into roughly-numbered pages for use in the company meetings which in the first weeks replace rehearsal:

**Honer:** *Once they're transcribed...everything, and we were quite religious about this, everything had to be read through by everybody out loud.... With Cheshire Voices, I have this very clear memory of this room we worked in, and these sheaves of transcripts!*

**Thacker:** *We sit around and read the material as it comes in. And what we used to do was to itemize it. Every piece that came in, we would sub-divide it.*

Every numbered page will thus carry several

numbered paragraphs, and items tend to fall into the designated structure of the show. Thus, on *Cheshire Voices* and *The Rose between Two Thorns*, questions which sought information on, say, experience of education between the wars produced numbered items. When the company began work on the scene relating to education, the calling of a page and item number allowed rapid reference to a piece of research material on the rehearsal floor.

Both companies then made use of a rough-and-ready, but effective, collective editing technique:

**Honer:** *Two weeks before opening, we went through this process of literally going through everything and saying do we want this in? What does this story tell us?*

**Thacker:** *What we also did, as a kind of game, really, a kind of useful little thing, we'd mark them as we read them.*

So, the mass of material begins to resolve itself into three piles, each accorded a priority: one of material which the company believes *must* be included in the show; another of material about which the company are undecided; and the final pile of material of no further immediate use.

It is important to stress two things: first, that the processes of information gathering and rehearsal are, after the first week or so, simultaneous and not consecutive. Yershon:

*Every so often we would...just stage things – just to see what they would look like, just to see what methods we could use...It's like two things set in motion at different times.*

Second, that no value-judgement necessarily attaches to the sifting of material, it is simply part of the process of attenuation.

A 'working script', is arrived at by accretion; once enough interviews have been done, a provisional running-order of scenes can be produced. It may then change from day to day in the light of new interview material. Gradually, the sections of verbatim material which comprise the rough sequence are refined down into more succinct, playable form, and this continues until within a week or so of opening.

The script then becomes something to be 'pruned'. Its structure and sequencing estab-

lished, considerations of length become paramount during the final run-in of technical and dress rehearsals, etc. Since the actors, having done the interviews, know it so well, it is even possible to *reclaim* material from the 'reject pile' relatively late in the process.

## Acting

*It's an extraordinary process – far more than rehearsing a play and blocking it – because people bring their own personality to the show without feeling restricted, you see.* Alwyne Taylor

In common with any collectively-devised show, Verbatim Theatre can bring a tremendous sense of company solidarity, almost regardless of the merits of the final piece. Verbatim shows also have that element of interaction with a community which brings with it certain pleasures and certain responsibilities – responsibilities towards the real people whose thoughts and feelings have been sought for the show's material. This is particularly the case with those people who might be directly portrayed on stage as part of the show's continuity – the 'through-characters', who as often as not come to see the show as it is 'fed back' into that community from whence it originated.

Most of the theatre workers make much of the necessity for 'respect' for what has been freely given, and for 'restraint' in performance. According to Rony Robinson,

*if you allow your attitude towards the performance, towards the part in performance terms, to come out, the thing falls apart and it becomes deeply patronising. It becomes middle-class actors taking the mickey out of working-class people or whatever.*

This respect, according to Robinson, is increased by the person-to-person contact of the interview:

*It seems to me that at some stage the people who're good at it – and most are, most are enthused by it – need to acquire the same sort of respect that comes with that puritanism for people's memories and people's lives that in our best moments we've all got.*

In the rehearsal room a sort of rough-and-ready democracy applies,

Whereby you don't take the piss out of somebody else's material if they don't take the piss out of yours – and somehow you end up not acting the verbatim material in the way that...you would normally if it was a script.

**Yershon:** You end up coming away with a tremendous respect for the thing that somebody has told you. You tend to guard it. Especially if you've done the research on it, you want to be as true to the spirit of that as you possibly can be.

The other major check against any potential exploitation of the material in terms of easy laughs (or tears) is the sheer joy experienced by actors, writers and directors alike of working with the rich textures of ordinary speech. Workers in Verbatim Theatre speak with tremendous enthusiasm of this factor, and its recognition turns any writer involved into part of a process, rather than the sole provider of a commodity which belongs at some point to him/her:

**Thacker:** I'm only interested in the writer doing it if they see themselves as an editor rather than a writer. Their skills as a writer come into play with their editing, as it were. If they're happy in this instance to be the most highly-skilled editor in the process, then it's great.

**Robinson:** Because the method is so utterly collective in creation – even though there are roles played during the course of the editing and all that, and every word's passed through my typewriter – it's so collective that I just feel that I'm part of the company.

### Speech and Its Varieties

The writer's ability to 'be an editor' is dependent upon a restraint and humility in the face of the verbatim material which parallels similar qualities in the work of the actors. Writers must recognize that, however good their ear for ordinary speech, it is unlikely that they would ever be able to introduce into a conventional play the variety of speech patterns and rhythms emanating from the verbatim technique:

**Salt:** Real talk is not the same texture as the language of the dramatist. The language of the dramatist is actually highly stylized. When you listen to real talk you hear these extraordinary juxtapositions, loops, little circumlocutions.

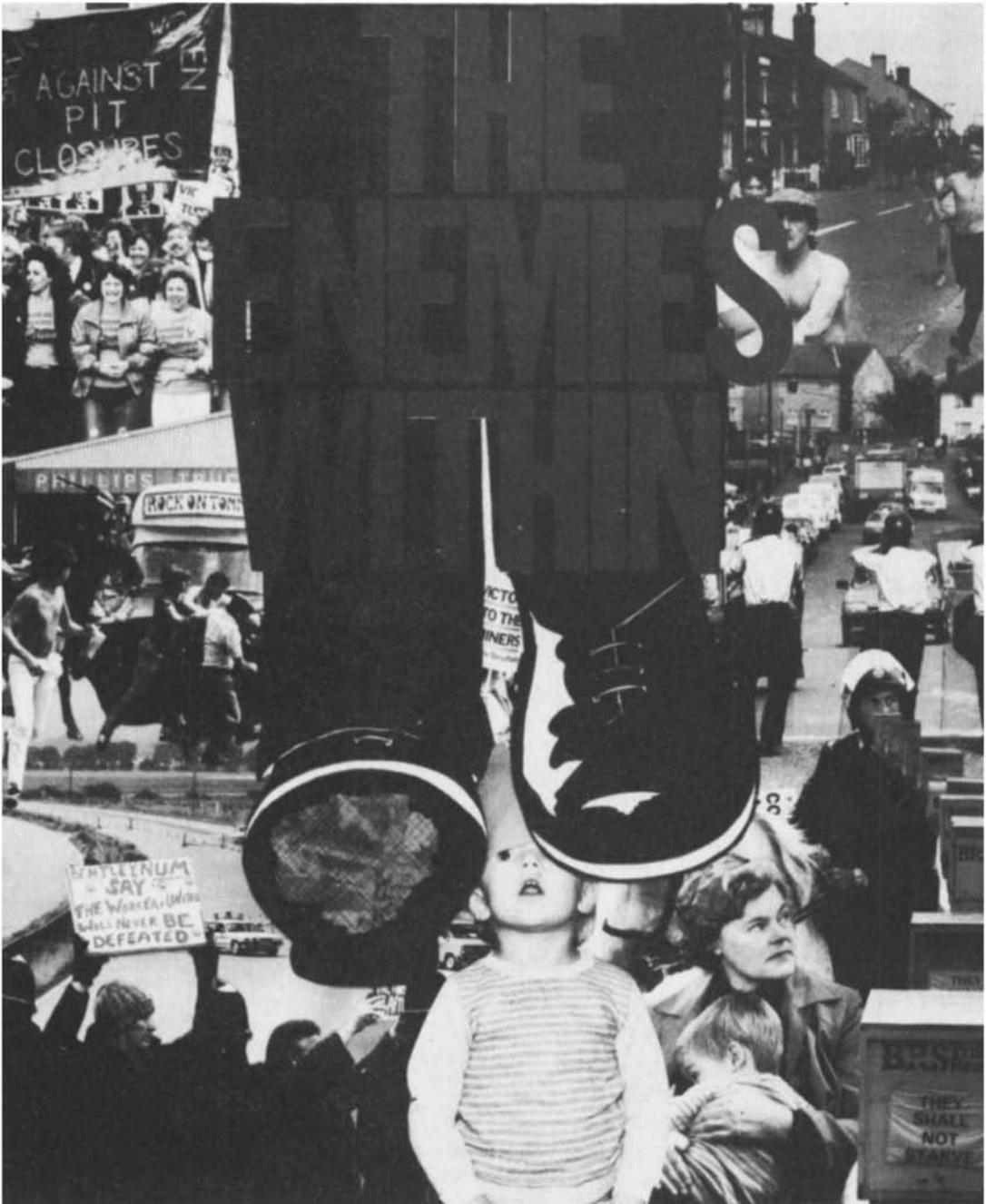
**Robinson:** I think there has to be in the process for actors a realization of the differentness of the material they've come up with and that is being delivered to them – a recognition that the way in which people talk, the repetitiveness, the stumbling, the oddity, is something that if they want to get...to make the verbatim stuff work on stage, they've got to acknowledge.

**Yershon:** That's something I've really learned from it, and not only as an actor, as a writer, as...everything! It's something to do with the extraordinary language people use when they speak – especially, quote, 'uneducated' people, who have this amazing, Chekhovian gift for picking out an isolated thing and filling that out.

David Thacker quoted a section of *Enemies Within* to illustrate this point; the speech was originally taken from a woman in the Yorkshire mining community whose fourteen-year-old son was killed when scavenging for coal on a waste tip.

*I were in the bath. I could hear this lad talking to him and I could hear him say, 'He's been buried. Two men tried to get him out but they couldn't.' Malcolm Turner. Malcolm Turner said to me, 'I tried to get him out, Lily.'* [She bursts into tears – recovers after a while] *Who do I blame? I've always said it and I'll say it till the day I die, in fact, she's to blame. And McGregor. I'm going to tell you another thing. You know them two men down in Wales? That driver that were killed? Now then, she called that murder, didn't she? She called it murder. Now then, I don't believe for two minutes those men meant to kill anybody. She calls them murderers. Now then, what do I call Mrs. Thatcher and McGregor who killed my lad?*<sup>28</sup>

As Thacker pointed out, 'No writer would have the nerve to write, when this woman's virtually on the verge of tears, "now then...now then...now then" – like that.' The phrase, 'now then', used as a 'filler', sometimes even as a greeting, is a Yorkshire idiom – a writer would have to know the area and the idiom first, but it is still unlikely, as Thacker says, that it would find itself used repetitively in an emotional speech as it is here. Just as remarkable is the pointed use of 'she': there is genuine deictical power in the woman's unwillingness to name



Programme cover for *Enemies Within* (1985), the second Thacker/Rose collaboration. The cover collages images from the Miners' Strike. In the programme there is this sentence: '*Enemies Within* consist of the words of the following people', followed by the names of 57 Yorkshire miners and their wives.

the person ultimately responsible for the cause of her grief.

There is something almost musical in these idiosyncratic rhythms. Whereas 'ordinary' speech requires the actor to learn, interpret and 'play' them through his/her vocal and physical

skills, here it is a case, indeed, of 'the actor as instrument'. The moving and at the same time sinewy speech material above clearly represented a significant challenge to the actress called upon to portray it – and on one of the few occasions in Verbatim Theatre, the tape

rather than the transcript was used in rehearsal. Thacker explains:

*It was a kind of clue, help, to her about it because there were things that...people say in real life that no writer would say, really....It just helped to get the sense of the woman; but normally you don't necessarily do it like the person who gives it to you.*

Transcripts are normally sufficient for three reasons: firstly, much of the verbatim material has been 'collaged', so a speech in performance may be made up of actuality fragments from several different sources, making access from the original tapes virtually impossible; secondly, some difficulties can be resolved immediately by the actor/actress who did the interview in the first place; thirdly, *impersonation* is very far from the aims of Verbatim Theatre. Within a theatre of rapid transformations, it would be something of a contradiction in terms, anyway; but, more important, within the complex rhythms of a verbatim play, the actor's own speech rhythms are often located in subtle balance with the speech rhythms of the original source. The dialectical richness of Verbatim Theatre is inherent in that presentation in performance time of both actor/researcher and character/'real person', both by and through the source material.

It is not, entirely, a question of the actor constructing a character, nor is it, exactly, that they are playing themselves. Yershon:

*In this particular case, you're dealing with the rhythm you've heard, which you don't do in a written text from a playwright. You've heard the speech rhythm of this particular person. But the actor has got a contribution to make as well, and the actor's speech rhythm is actually quite important. So you have many conflicting things about rhythm, and I suppose impersonation, or just parroting, is not part of the process, really. You have to make the rhythm your own, while at the same time preserving its integrity.*

It is partly this that makes the acting style of Verbatim Theatre a Brechtian one. Honer quoted Brecht's article 'The Street Scene':<sup>29</sup>

*It seems to me that the shows always work best when you've got the kind of attitude that...Brecht talks*

*about, actually. It's a slightly detached thing on the part of the actor...very lightly sketched in, but very precise. At times it seemed to me that the actual hesitations that you got when somebody is telling you a story – the whole way in which they will use quite individual ways of expression, is absolutely crucial.*

The contact between performers and 'real' characters clearly functions as part of an artistic control-mechanism that might almost have been designed by Brecht to illustrate the viability of his notions of acting.

The very demeanour of ordinary people in the face of the major challenges of their lives profoundly impresses many of those connected with Verbatim Theatre, causing them fundamentally to re-examine the nature of acting. Thacker:

*The people who talked about having a terrible time didn't usually talk about it from a kind of self-satisfied, morally-pompous point of view. Normally, the people who are interesting or wonderful people can deal with their sadness and their sorrow without having a great chip on their shoulder about it.*

Observation of this led Alwyne Taylor to feel

*You can give too much to a speech. People say something very serious and moving – they're not crying! They might be crying inside. But it's meant – it comes from the gut. You give too much and the audience doesn't have to work, or has to shy back.... There's an awful lot to learn...particularly how to underplay.*

For Alwyne Taylor, the point as regards acting, particularly the acting of *emotion*, had to do with the inherent difference between forcing energy through a performance to signify the presence of emotion, and allowing the words, like an iceberg, to mark the *position* of emotion: 'When people get upset in interview, it's not adrenalin-upset, like actors – it's emotional memory.'

Provided that sufficient preparatory work has been done by the company, actors, it seems, will usually respond in this kind of way to verbatim material. Says Thacker:

*Actors are always slightly nervous when they go into a devised show or a show where they don't have the*

script at the beginning of the thing. But once they got into it they were really committed to it.

And Rony Robinson sums it up:

*The strength, the boniness, the quiriness, the oddity of the words that you've got are what will make it work or not; and that's directly connected to how long you go on finding it. If you go on a long time you will eventually come up with the perfect nugget on how the trams used to work, but you might have to go through 50 people first, or you might not. Or you might get someone who can't remember at all how a tram works and the way in which they struggle in their old age to remember it can be delightful, and can remind you of your own search for the past as well – in a way, a Brechtian way, of actually revealing to the audience the way in which you got the material as well.*

### Final Stages

Some interviewing may occur during the final stages; both Robinson and Honer believe that re-interviewing can be a useful exercise, especially when an actor or actress is to play a 'through-character'. An initial interview can activate the process of remembering in a person, as Robinson explained:

*Peter Cheeseman does that – he did that on Shelton Bar, there was quite a close relationship between Ted Smith, Chairman of the Shelton Works Action Committee, and the actor who played him, Graham Watkins.*

In general, however, interviewing ceases and rehearsals take over completely. As they progress towards opening night, there seems to be no loss of the feeling of collectivity, but there are changes. On *Banana*, Yershon defined this transition as follows:

*As an actor, I felt the bizarre thing of that directorial control slipping away. I had to let it slip away, because I had to let Chris and Rony, from outside, control the whole piece in a way that I could no longer do. And I was, yes, making contributions from the research, I suppose, but, in a way it was more useful for me to forget it and concentrate on what I thought would work as an actor in the given situation.*

The actors' concentration on their part of the

job is greatly facilitated both by their understanding of the material and by the rhythms of everyday speech. Taylor:

*What you can do is assimilate it a bit in rehearsal. The actual learning of words is no problem, verbatim is quite easy if you get into the rhythms of the way people speak. And the structure of the play helps you learn.*

The final process of attenuation affects writers, too. Even if the verbatim company had not employed a writer as such, there was a consensus that it was necessary at some point for the material to be 'put through a typewriter' by someone, in order to consolidate it. As Robinson put it:

*In the course of editing, it becomes yours by putting it through the typewriter and not including everything that was there. You lose the sense of the person who told you, they go into the distance...at that stage it becomes your own, because what you're doing is trying to make it say itself as well as possible. And at that stage you're doing a trick with words... Usually over a weekend (sometimes a long weekend – Thursday to Tuesday) there'll be some crucial collecting by me of the material, shuffling of it, and especially cutting it.*

The 'penultimate script' of *Cheshire Voices* bears this out: it has a shape and a recognizable cohesion about it, but it is studded with deletions and with Robinson's instructions to himself to 'Prune it'. It remains, in other words, provisional – a cloudy medium through which the performance can be occasionally glimpsed. In strikingly similar ways to the scripts of, for example, Theatre Workshop and Mike Leigh, verbatim scripts are marginal to an understanding of their performances.

### Audiences

Audiences are likely to be asked to collude with any theatre which eschews elaborate scenic effects and relies heavily on the skills of its actors to 'shift the scene', both literally and metaphorically. The celebratory style of some verbatim shows, of course, tends to receive the most willing of all possible collusions:

**Robinson:** *For some audiences, the nostalgia is all*

they relish, and why not? The fact that their street is named and the courting alley that they used to go down, someone else remembers after all these years – delightful!

**Yershon:** *There was the tremendous warmth that you get back from an audience! When we went to certain venues local references went down, stories of those areas went down, with a tremendous sense of recognition. I've never experienced anything like it.*

The 'road show' verbatim plays often proved so popular amongst their community audiences that directors were encouraged to bring them into the main house for short runs. This occurred, for example, with both *Cheshire Voices* at Chester and with *The Rose between Two Thorns* at Lancaster.

In the kind of Verbatim show dealing with 'present controversy', the entertainment aspect is not such a high priority, and nostalgia may well be absent. Differences in subject matter, performance style, location of performance, and composition of audience all make for differences in how these particular shows are received.

*The Garden of England* and *Enemies Within* provoked almost predictably hostile press reactions in the London and national newspapers. Metropolitan critics, perhaps even metropolitan audiences, have never responded with much enthusiasm to theatre in the Brechtian manner, unless transmuted and anodysed in commercial vehicles like *A Man for All Seasons* or *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. 'Present controversy' verbatim plays are also, by virtue of their very contemporaneity, denied access to what Robinson calls 'the sepia-ness of the oral-historical stuff'.

Often, they tend to be attacked on the grounds that they are not plays at all. The *Evening Standard* review of *The Garden of England* reveals an ideological stratum beneath this (apparently) aesthetic judgement:

[The] regurgitated accounts of picket-line campaigns and hardship at home come across about as moving and monochrome as a sack of nutty slack. Police, scabs, Mrs. Thatcher, are painted coal-black in what is called a documentary collage. There is little attempt at dramatization: the actors sit and earnestly spout the words as if taking part in interviews for a BBC programme. Only in that case at least one

voice from the other side of the picket line would be heard.<sup>30</sup>

Thacker found a similar line taken when *Enemies Within* was reviewed. The factual nature of the verbatim material, that which always constitutes the bedrock strength of any form of documentary theatre, was more or less ignored:

*It's extraordinary how it was received, politically, as a play – particularly what was revealed about the press in relation to the criticism of the play. They found it politically objectionable, in a way that was indefensible, really, because they almost forgot that it was real.*

The fact is that this kind of verbatim show, too, represents a 'fighting against the dark' – in this case, the darkness imposed by a hegemony which persistently marginalizes anything not manifesting 'official' attitudes. The testimony uncovered by Thacker, Rose and Cox (and their companies) blasts open the cosy consensus of the broadcasting media on controversial political issues of the day. The only recourse for the metropolitan critic with the jaded palate is to pour scorn on the method of dramatization, emasculating the organizing dialectic in verbatim by conveniently ignoring it.

The *Sunday Times* review of *Garden* epitomizes this tendency:

*The co-directors Peter Gill and John Burgess have tried so hard not to dramatize that there seemed little reason for these actors and actress [sic] to be sat on chairs repeating words at second hand, when their force lay in the authentic tones of the original.*<sup>31</sup>

But, as David Thacker responds of *Enemies Within*, 'that's what it said'.

*Look, people believe it to be the truth that the police behaved in this way. That's what people wanted to scream at you when you met them.... And that story was told over and over again in different forms, different versions, different experiences of it.*

And Rony Robinson sums up:

*The use of verbatim with contemporary material has a peculiar strength for the playwright in that it is a quick way of getting on top of the complexities of a piece of material. Because it has a dialectic inside itself, it gives a series of different points of view, or a series of different voices on a particular thing.*

## Verbatim and the Documentary Tradition

*Documentary theatre is a theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary films and other contemporary documents are the basis of the performance*<sup>32</sup>

Peter Weiss

If the late Peter Weiss were writing his 'Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre' today, the list he suggests of the kinds of sources available to the documentary dramatist would surely have included 'actuality tape'. In the various contexts described above, writers, directors, and actors, professional and non-professional, have been interrogating this 'new' oral historical source material for at least fifteen years.

Documentary occupies a key position in the arsenal of oppositional theatrical (and filmmaking) techniques. It is part of the 'Samizdat of the West', in Steve Gooch's phrase.<sup>33</sup> Part of the price paid for this cultural location is lack of access to certain fairly important means of production – notably dissemination of ideas through publication. By 'publication' is not only meant the lack of interest in the preparation of play texts for study, etc., but also the lack of a helpful reviewing context within arts journalism. One is not calling here for praise, merely for that identification of a *bona fide* project and accurate description of its characteristic concerns which would promote understanding and (perhaps) interest in a wider public.

Rony Robinson, while acknowledging marginalization, suggests that for working-class voices to be heard the need is for 'lots of shows' rather than the repetition which might attend the publication of one particular text:

*I think there's an area of the theatre that should be throwaway, that should have a journalistic touch.*

After the almost endless typing and re-typing of the verbatim text, 'It becomes part of the air again – it becomes *talk* again.' He also believes that the submerged nature of the documentary tradition is a source of some strength:

*There's an acknowledgement of its pedigree by the practitioners of it, as far as I know. And so it survives as a sort of underground form of theatre.*

Nevertheless, pressure can, and ought, to be brought to bear to make one or two 'model' texts available. Osmosis has undoubtedly been a powerful factor in the continuation of the documentary tradition. Peter Cheeseman:

*I think a lot of people pick up the idea – they may not have seen anything, but they think, Oh, that sounds like an interesting idea, I might like to try something like that.*

However, there seems no harm in helping osmosis along. Cheeseman has remained stubbornly, admirably, committed to his local project at Stoke, but the dissemination of his key ideas has undoubtedly been partly facilitated by the publication of articles about Stoke (such as the *Theatre Quarterly* 'Casebook' and the published editions of *The Knotty* and *Fight for Shelton Bar*<sup>34</sup>). This possibility is even more important given the labour-intensive nature of Verbatim, a feature it shares with most kinds of documentary theatre.

The way our culture is constructed tends to valorize the individual enterprise over the collective, and, of course, the theatre at large in Thatcher's Britain is under pressure, making it less and less likely that the sheer financial risk of an unknown, let alone a group-devised, show will be taken by any but the most confident and committed of civic repertory theatres. As Honer puts it,

*I think there is a natural resistance in regional theatre – which is fairly hard-pressed at the moment – to doing anything of controversy, or indeed of anything which is particularly grim. I think that's largely because there's a feeling that people won't come and see it.*

The fringe, too, is under financial pressure, and many groups are likely to find the exigencies of the verbatim technique difficult to contemplate. The large number of non-professional and professional 'neighbourhood' groups, 'specific community' groups (like Age Exchange), and youth theatre inside and outside schools and colleges seem most likely to take up the 'little fluttering torch' of Rony Robinson's phrase.

To make available to a wider theatrical public some of the experience outlined in this article would, surely, also be 'a decent and democratic thing to do', given it involves nothing less than the continued reclaiming and celebrating of that history which is perennially at 'the margins of the news'.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes and References

1. All Rony Robinson quotations are from an interview at his home in Sheffield, 21 January 1986.

2. Leading towards a Manchester University Ph.D. with the projected title 'Documentary Theatre in England, 1963 to the Present Day: its Antecedents and Characteristic Techniques.'

3. Interview with Clive Barker at Warwick University, 18 September 1985.

4. All Peter Cheeseman quotations are from an interview at Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, 27 March 1985.

5. The dispute referred to by Robinson was the struggle between the Shelton Works Action Committee and the British Steel Corporation over BSC's proposals in 1972 to close down steelmaking at the North Staffordshire steelworks. Use of tape-recorded material for documentaries at Stoke actually dates back to *The Knotty*, first performed in 1966.

6. Several other writers and theatre groups seem to have made early use of verbatim material for plays, however. The entry on Chris Hawes in the *Directory of Playwrights, Directors, Designers I*, ed. Catherine Itzin (John Offord, 1983), p. 52, includes a 1969 Radio Sheffield play 'based on verbatim material', and York Shoestring's *Life in a Chocolate Factory* used taped interviews with Rowntree workers in 1972 (see R. Drain, 'The Chocolate Guerrilla', *Gambit*, No. 23 (1973), p. 40–3).

7. While both Littlewood and MacColl worked in radio before the Second World War, MacColl's post-war work was more significant. It included the Radio Ballads and documentary films such as the *Mining Review* programmes.

8. Charles Parker was producer and prime-mover of the radio ballads, the first of which, *The Ballad of John Axon*, was broadcast in 1957.

9. All David Thacker quotations are from an interview at the Young Vic, London, 12 December 1985.

10. All Christopher Honer quotations are from an interview at Derby Playhouse, 20 January 1986. The 'Casebook' on Stoke's *The Staffordshire Rebels*, was in *Theatre Quarterly*, I, No. 1. (Jan.-Mar. 1971), p. 86–102.

11. David Edgar is a playwright who has made a good deal of use of the tape recorder when researching a number of his plays. His efforts since *Events*, however, have been towards a *transmutation* of source material in a more far-reaching sense than that of a verbatim dramatist. He says: 'I think that what I've done is to move from writing documentaries to writing plays based on documentary sources' (interview with David Edgar, 19 September 1985). He feels that *Events* needed 'at least two more levels of abstraction', and this 'abstraction' of taped material has been a feature of his work on, for example, *Maydays* (1983).

12. The *One Day in Sheffield* model has been copied at least once, Robinson told me, in Manchester.

13. Itzin, *op. cit.*, p. 91. Ron Rose's view (telephone conversation, 21 April 1986) is that it is often better not 'to stick rigorously' to verbatim material. This ties in with his second belief that a writer is a necessity on a verbatim show whose job it is to find (and if necessary make) a telling context for the verbatim material.

14. Social Documents produced a pamphlet called *Word of Mouth* in 1983, in support of their proposal to Channel Four. This contains a great deal of information about Verbatim Theatre. The editor, Chrys Salt, is well-qualified to write on the subject, having herself written and directed verbatim plays (notably the 1983 Women's Co-operative Guild Centenary play *Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope*).

15. All Gary Yershon quotations are from an interview at his flat in Bristol, 5 February 1986. Interestingly, his *Cheshire Voices* song, 'Henry Farrell's Mystery Tour', can lay claim to being a verbatim song; the lyric was taken directly from a taped interview.

16. Chrys Salt allowed me to see *The Rose* video at Royal Holloway College, Egham, on 18 November 1985, and the actor Trevor Nichols gave me a sound tape of *Cheshire Voices*.

17. *Lovely War* had, of course, exerted a profound influence on the Stoke-style local documentaries of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies, a fact acknowledged by Peter Cheeseman.

18. Although Verbatim Theatre does not appear to make conspicuous use of the full theatrical vocabulary of epic theatre (slides, film, placards, etc.), Gary Yershon pointed out that, as the M.C. figure in *Cheshire Voices*, his dramatic function was frequently that of 'verbal placarding'.

19. See especially *Older Learners*, published jointly by Help the Aged and the National Council for Voluntary Organizations, edited by Susanna Johnston and Chris Phillipson (Bedford Square Press, 1980). Help the Aged have also published the collection of reminiscences used by Age Exchange for their *Fifty Years Ago Show* (1983).

20. For example, while the General Strike of 1926 was sometimes not remembered at all, *everyone* remembered (and had strong views on) the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936.

21. Ron Rose was sceptical about 'stories', feeling that people's oft-rehearsed versions of events were far too unreliable *because* so well-rehearsed.

22. All Alwyne Taylor quotations are from an interview at her flat in Bristol, 6 March 1986.

23. All Chrys Salt quotations are from an interview at Royal Holloway College, Egham, 18 November 1985.

24. Editorial in *History Workshop*, No. 8 (Autumn 1979), p. i.

25. *Ibid.*, p. ii.

26. Gary Yershon recalls this happening in the early stages of *Cheshire Voices*, but it was obviously a far more important technique for *One Day in Sheffield*.

27. Rony Robinson sees this lack of really good equipment as a matter of regret. Although the interview material for two of his shows, *One Day in Sheffield* and *When Can I Have a Banana Again?* has been taken into the local archives at Sheffield and Derby museums, he suspects that poor audio quality will prevent the tapes being used as much as they might be if their quality was good.

28. This speech was read to me from the script of *Enemies Within* by David Thacker.

29. See Eric Bentley, *The Theory of the Modern Stage* (Penguin, 1968), p. 85–86.

30. *Evening Standard* review by Lynda Murdin, 15 November 1985.

31. *Sunday Times* review by Robert Hewison, 17 November 1985.

32. P. Weiss, 'The Material and the Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', *Theatre Quarterly*, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1971), p. 41.

33. See Steve Gooch, *All Together Now* (Methuen, 1984).

34. *The Knotty* (Methuen, 1970); *Fight for Shelton Bar* (Methuen, 1977).

35. This phrase is taken from a speech by the journalist in the second act of *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinhas* (Royal Court, 1982).