Bringing Politics to the People: Verbatim Theatre as Democratic Participation

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program of Cultural Studies in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Queen's University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

September 2022

Abstract

This research project examines the state of contemporary verbatim theatre in relation to the genre's connection to political issues and the overall potential such works have to model and inspire democratic participation. I argue that despite an observed drop in popularity over the past decade, verbatim theatre remains a relevant genre that is uniquely situated to facilitate political discourse, which will in turn foster a sense of democratic participation among audiences through public political discourse.

The project addresses gaps in the literature on verbatim theatre by identifying unique verbatim characteristics, which sets the genre apart from other documentary-based theatre. In terms of verbatim's connection to politics and democracy, this thesis examines the historical connection between documentary genres and other forms of political theatre, arguing that verbatim has long demonstrated a commitment to grassroots political issues which impact ordinary citizens on an everyday level. This study examines the rise of post-truth, specifically the movement's impact on political discourse, while considering the role verbatim theatre plays in legitimizing the shift away from singular objective understandings of truth. Finally, the thesis concludes with a consideration of what's next for verbatim theatre in this context, and the ways I will continue to grapple with these issues both as an academic and a practicing theatre artist.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to start by thanking Jenn Stephenson and Kelsey Jacobson. Your support and encouragement throughout this entire process has been nothing short of extraordinary. Jenn, without your incredible knowledge and insights over the past two years, this project would not be where it is today. I have learned so much from working with you throughout this entire process, I will miss our insightful chats about verbatim theatre. Thank you for agreeing to supervise my thesis and all of the additional work that came with that. Kelsey, your knowledge on spectatorship studies helped add an interesting perspective to the project. While the thesis did take an unexpected shift, I hope to one day realize the spectatorship project you helped me map out. I would also like to thank Jonathan Rose from the Political Studies department for rounding out my defence committee. Dr. Rose, you have always been a strong supporter of mine throughout my time at Queen's, thank you for joining the committee and adding a unique perspective to the group.

I want to thank my mom, dad, and brother for their countless hours of support over the year; thanks for encouraging me to follow my passions and to always strive for excellence. Thanks to all of my grandparents, Jim, Denise, Bev, Lise, and Frank; I wouldn't trade your wisdom and guidance for anything in the world.

I want to close by acknowledging all of the friends and family who have acted as a "mentor" to me, in various capacities, over the years. Whether that be in academia, theatre, business, or just life in general. I can't possibly name everyone, but you know who you are!

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Chapter One: Introduction to Verbatim Theatre as a Field of Study

Introduction

Through the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century, verbatim theatre emerged in western liberal democracies as a kind of theatrical journalism, providing a venue for artists to explore real-life issues and events in an ostensibly authentic manner. A commitment to accurate replication of real people's words and actions sets up verbatim as a genre closely aligned with truth and authenticity. As Carol Martin states, these works often aim to "set the record straight," on matters often ignored by other genres of theatre and the mainstream media (Martin *Dramaturgy of the Real* 23). Verbatim theatre is not the only genre to showcase real people and events in a manner that is committed to truthfulness and reliability. However, in this type of drama, there is often a focus on replicating the exact words and actions of real people, which are then ventriloquized on stage by the artist: a performance technique that differentiates verbatim works from other documentary-based forms of theatre. The documentary genre rose to prominence in the 1920s throughout Europe and North America, establishing a number of traditions committed to examining current events and issues through a theatrical lens. Understanding the trajectory of this genre will establish verbatim theatre as a clear successor to early documentary practices, but also a unique sub-genre with its own dramaturgical features.

This chapter will examine the historical trajectory of verbatim theatre. After starting with the initial documentary works of the early twentieth century, I will then explore the rise of the contemporary verbatim plays, considering the ways artists have successfully crafted a new theatrical genre: one that is committed to truthfulness and authenticity. Early documentary practices, including collectivist creation theatre, continue to inspire twenty-first century verbatim

artists. While the aims of the contemporary verbatim movement find their roots in early-twentieth century documentary theatre, there are key differences which separate verbatim from documentary. After examining the rise of documentary theatre throughout the twentieth century, I will consider the ways contemporary verbatim practices are influenced by the works of early documentary artists. The chapter will then trace the rise of verbatim and its unique characteristics, such as the genre's commitment to the exact replication of ordinary citizen's testimonies, to establish a clear understanding and definition of verbatim theatre. Where politics is concerned, this chapter will then examine the ways contemporary verbatim has emerged as a genre uniquely situated for political debate.

HISTORY OF DOCUMENTARY THEATRE PRACTICE THROUGHOUT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Documentary theatre as a genre finds its roots in the agitprop[1] and living newspaper works of the 1920s and 30s, which used theatre as a truth-telling medium, often meant to interrogate the ruling class, while exposing important issues. Gregory Mason connects the roots of documentary theatre to Erwin Piscator's work with revue in the early twentieth century. For Mason, Piscator's *In Spite of Everything* (1925) represented a novel innovation among documentary theatre artists who combined a number of distinct media into one theatrical work (Mason *Documentary Drama from the Revue to the Tribunal* 263). Using "speeches, articles, newspaper clippings, slogans, leaflets, and films of the War and the Revolution" (263), Piscator wove together a tapestry of documentary material, crafting theatrical works based closely on real life events. Instead of creating fictional stories as analogy for real-life, Piscator's performances sought to provide a

[1] While agitprop is now understood as broad political propaganda, Filewod notes that the term originated in the Soviet Union, as a combination of "agitation (exciting an emotional response to the issue)," and "propaganda (raising awareness of an issue)" (2016).

more accurate depiction of reality (263). Mason argues that this "truth" was communicated through a "rapid and incisive presentation of factual material" (264). Unlike conventional fourth-wall realism which may place strong characters in recognizable life-like situations through drawn-out dialogues, Piscator's works, and those of other documentary artists, often deal with facts in rapid succession, much like the emerging news media of the time. Transcripts and other recorded testimonies allow artists to draw on the words of real people, which are then incorporated into the script. Attilo Favorini notes Donald Freed's use of court documents to craft the script for his 1970 work *Inquest,* a documentary play about the Rosenberg trial (*Representation and Reality: The Case of Documentary Theatre* 32). This use of transcripts and other original documents, from its beginnings in the early twentieth century to today means that documentary artists are able to craft works based closely on reality, with the theatre resembling the tone of other truth-based media, adding a sense of legitimacy and authenticity to the work.

Documentary artists are often afforded a great deal of flexibility in terms of where they draw their source material from and how it is incorporated into the performance. Favorini suggests that this flexibility unites documentarians in their quest to assert historical fact and invite political activity (33). However, with a diversity of source materiel comes a greater range of perceived authenticity within documentary works. If documentary artists are left to draw from a variety of different sources and incorporate said materials to different degrees, some works may rely more on objective facts than others. As a result, some plays may be highly factual and informative, while other productions draw more on artistic license to convey a message. Where Favorini is concerned, flexibility unities documentarians in a single mission, however the opposite is also possible as the genre may become too varied, with certain works potentially seen as more *truthful* than others, depending on how material is sourced. Perhaps the emergence of

more specific sub-genres of documentary, such as verbatim, is indicative of the fact that the documentary genre as a whole is too diverse.

Unlike documentary film or other long-form journalism, early truth-based theatre artists were most inspired by the faster-paced, shorter form of newspaper reporting. Newspapers were the most popular form of mass media at the time (Davis), communicating the news of the day in short-range articles, often daily or twice a day. A desire to bring the news to life inspired documentary artists of the time, such as Piscator and Crede, to find ways to blend drama with news footage and other documentary materials, creating performances that blurred the line between fiction and reality. The result, as Mason suggests, is a performance in which "the stage becomes a three-dimensional extension of the screen" (264), with living newspapers creating a physical and immediate alternative to newsreel footage. This claim is consistent with the sorts of media that were popular at the time. While television had yet to emerge, early documentary artists were inspired by newsreel and longform documentary film works, and some even incorporated aspects of film into their plays, blending newspaper style reporting with the visual elements of film and other media. By removing the "aesthetic distance between the auditorium and the stage" (Mason 267) Piscator turned the theatre into a political forum, the stage became a direct reflection of the audience's reality. In turn, such documentary theatre had the potential to appeal to audiences in a direct and political manner. Mason draws on an example from Carl Crede's *Paragraph 218*, a 1929 play about abortion in Germany, to suggest that works that draw on real data (such as abortion statistics) can appeal to audience's political sensibilities, due to the ways reality is reflected in the performance. By showcasing identifiable statistics to audiences, the drama takes on a greater sense of reality, which may elicit stronger reactions from audiences.

The strategy of building theatrical works on news data and other information is what inspired a distinct era of the early-twentieth century verbatim movement: living newspapers. Living newspaper performances, first introduced to US audiences by the American Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s, sought to "animate the newsreel" by bringing to the stage a wide range of facts and information meant to interrogate various issues of the day (Mason 265). These productions often focused on an overarching issue of the day, like the Depression, and then introduced several different news events, such as unemployment, line ups for food, and evictions, often shown in rapid succession, to provide a "typical but non-factual representation" of the issue (265).That is to say, these performances were focused on dramatic recreations of real events, which likely kept audiences entertained but also compromised the work's commitment to factual accuracy. Living newspapers were also self-referential, with the "little man" character representing the "average citizen," often asking questions about the content of the piece to better understand the issue at hand (Jordana Cox *The Loudspeaker and the Little Man* 123). Conversely, the character of the "loudspeaker" often represented the documentary interests of the piece, being the ultimate holder of most factual information, providing key facts and statements without actually appearing on-stage (Cox 130). These two distinct characters were a unique element to the living newspaper drama and allowed the works to present complex information to audiences in a manner that was easy to digest. If something did not make sense, or elicited further explanation, the little man could pose a question thus saving the audience from potential confusion.

Living newspapers were a highly popular and overtly political form of documentary theatre that presented the news as a live and visual medium, as opposed to the newspapers and radio coverage which were popular at the time. Prior to television's introduction of broadcast

news, living newspapers were a way for artists to present information on stage, using theatrical elements to consider the ways individual stories and events are connected to larger issues of the day. Such productions also sought to bridge the gap between audience and artists, by creating devices that directly represented the audience members within the action, ensuring their interests were taken into consideration. In connecting the stylistic features of living newspapers to the genre's political aims, the visual style allowed artists to present information in an immediate and public setting. Where politics is concerned, living newspapers exposed political issues to audiences in a manner that encouraged some form of further political action. The introduction of hot-button political issues in this dramatic format, had the potential to turn the theatre into a public forum where facts could be presented in a visual manner, and political debate could ensue. As audiences are made aware of their own political realities through the presentation of facts on stage, they can ponder their own involvement in these systems and institutions. These works were also much more relevant at the time, as society didn't have access to this information in the manner we do today. Through the advent of mass media, news and other information is now regularly brought to life in a visual medium through television, film, social media, and streaming. Contemporary documentary artists no longer use the theatre as the only relevant venue for disseminating visual news information. Other forms of media exist today which are more immediate and widely accessible.

Moving towards the mid-twentieth century, documentary theatre artists began experimenting with new ways of incorporating the 'real' into their performances. Lead by society's continued desire for documented reality, artists found new ways to incorporate real figures and events into their works. As Gary Fisher-Dawson states in his historical overview of documentary practices in the United States, such theatre rose in popularity at a time when many

other art forms were also concerned with depictions of reality. “The leaning toward documented reality is represented practically everywhere in the arts and other medial cultures at the time,” which often led to a blending between fiction and documentary, with many traditionally fictionalized artforms becoming increasingly focused on reality (*Documentary Theatre in the United States* 6). The genre of documentary theatre most popularized throughout the mid-twentieth century often focused on historical figures and events in a manner that both taught and entertained (Fisher-Dawson 5). An example of this type of drama is Emily Mann’s *Still Life* (1982), a documentary play that examines the effects of the Vietnam War. In *Still Life* Mann weaves together the testimonies of three people: a Marine veteran, his estranged wife, and the vet’s mistress. The play is an examination of the real-life effects of the Vietnam war, and an emotionally “gripping drama” focused on the way the war ruined the lives of these three people (Fischer-Dawson 190-191). The play presents factual information in an entertaining theatrical format that relies on sixties nostalgia to convey the human devastation felt by the war. Where living newspapers sought to dramatize real-life events in a manner that was both factual and entertaining, works from this era tended to provide a more accurate reflection of reality, by getting “as close as they can to history as it actually happened” (5). Drama derived from documentary material, such as official transcripts or recorded interviews became the norm, with artists using the theatre to examine issues closely related to events of the day.

While mid-century documentary works like Mann’s *Still Life* tended to dramatize political issues in a manner that focused on high-profile events, such as the Vietnam War, the documentary tradition in North America was much more focused on ordinary people and everyday issues. In tracing the history of Canadian documentary theatre throughout this time, Alan Filewod observes many community-oriented traits which characterized the genre

throughout the 60s and 70s. Works of this era often featured artists immersing themselves within a chosen community, building relationships with community members, and then crafting a play out of their experiences (Filewod *Collective Encounters*, 22). The notion of collectivist creation stems from the ways companies worked as collaborative groups, with the performers also serving as researchers and playwrights, contributing to each stage of the production. A key element to productions of this era was the ways artists took the stories of the chosen community and then performed them *back* to members of the community. The reflexive nature of documentary works from this era allowed artists to expose issues of the community to the very members of that community. By presenting the stories publicly to the very community members who were the subjects of the piece, the plays also created a sense of accountability; artists had to be truthful in their depictions as audiences would likely have a greater sense of the real story. This specific community focus that Filewod explores is consistent with the artist's commitment to giving ordinary citizens a voice.

A prominent example of this type of community-focused, collective-creation style of early verbatim theatre is Paul Thompson's play *The Farm Show* (1972). The play, produced by Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille, is a work of verbatim theatre about farm life in Clinton, Ontario. An early example of collective creation, the work saw Thompson lead a group of theatre artists to Clinton, who embedded themselves in the community and crafted an original documentary play based on their experiences. Thompson says, "the idea was to take a group of actors out to a farming community and build a play of what we could see and learn" (Thompson and Johns 1998). The majority of artists involved were actors who got to witness the very subjects they would be portraying first-hand, resulting in a more authentic replication of real people. The company wasn't so much focused on the exact replication of the subject's

testimonies, instead, they sought to provide authentic recreations of people based on their humanity. Actors paid close attention to the subject's speech patterns and word choice, as well as the ways they represented themselves: "We spent a great deal of our time trying to imitate these people both in the way they move and the way they speak. We wanted to capture the fibre of what they were" (Thompson and Johns 1998). *The Farm Show* provides examples of several characteristics unique to the type of verbatim theatre originating in Canada at the time. These early productions were often focused on the issues of a specific community and were almost always conducted by outsiders working as members of a collective who would come in and observe organic community life, with portrayals based closely on these recorded observations.

Another major distinction between mid-century Canadian documentary plays and earlier works by artists like Piscator, is the ways both styles of documentary derive a sense of authenticity. While plays like *In Spite of Everything* focus on analysis of objective facts taken from existing documents, works such as *The Farm Show* are more concerned with human emotions related to current events and history (Filewod, *Collective Encounters* 62); a feature we arguably see featured prominently in contemporary verbatim works. These early forms of verbatim theatre present history "in emotional terms," as opposed to "explicit analysis" of fact (62). Prior to the 1990s, these collective-creation and community-oriented plays dominated the genre, at least in a North American context. At present, while these earlier forms of documentary and verbatim have certainly influenced contemporary works in the genre, the principles of collective creation and community-focus of early-to-mid twentieth century verbatim plays are no longer the central tenets of the movement. The next section of this chapter will examine the rise of contemporary verbatim theatre, considering the ways the genre has been influenced by

previous documentary eras, while also establishing itself as a unique and independent sub-genre of the documentary movement.

Rise of Contemporary Verbatim Movement: Late-90s to Mid-00s

Towards the end of the twentieth century, different practices began to emerge in the documentary and verbatim movements, creating a "new documentary" (Bruzzi). This developing movement, which rose in popularity in North America following 9/11, built on the documentary traditions of the previous century to carve out a new space for verbatim performance (Tomlin *Acts and apparitions* 116-117). Inspired by artists of the previous era, prominent verbatim companies adopted some of the characteristics unique to earlier twentieth-century documentary work, such as the use of collective creation methodologies, while focusing heavily on grassroots, community-oriented storytelling. It is not uncommon for today's verbatim companies to take on cooperative roles, especially where local community-driven stories are the focus. Common practices of this contemporary movement include the recorded testimonies of "ordinary" people, community-based creative practice, as well as the inclusion of a wide range of voices and perspectives. Just as Thompson and company went to Clinton Ontario to speak directly with real people, verbatim companies like Tectonic Theatre Project also involve themselves in the communities and locations they are focused on. However, while the aim of previous community practices may have been to heighten the authenticity of the work by speaking to real people, verbatim's inclusion of ordinary citizens is done with the intention of bringing marginalized voices to the stage. Through the use of word-for-word testimony, verbatim theatre is able to provide a platform for the voices of people who are typically silenced by other, more mainstream, forms of media. This new documentary movement prioritizes the recreation of actual verbatim testimony, with the vast majority of dialogue comprised of the voices and

perspectives of ordinary people. Thus, verbatim derives its authenticity from the presentation of words exactly as they were said by the real-life individual. While these words are communicated by actors, creating some form of distance between subject and audience, audiences know that what they are seeing, and hearing is real, with performers attempting to provide accurate representations of the original subject. The words and actions on stage are simply a recreation of recorded testimony, as opposed to the artist's interpretation of what may have happened. The remainder of this section will further examine the key differences between verbatim and earlier documentary genres, establishing verbatim as its own unique subgenre.

One of the most significant ways in which verbatim establishes itself as its own independent subgenre of the documentary movement is through the formation of identifiable dramaturgical practices. While artists are clearly inspired by traditions established in the previous documentary era, there are different dramaturgical strategies between the two genres, with contemporary artists establishing their own traditions, such as the prioritization of ordinary citizens testimonies. Quite often verbatim artists embody the role of journalists, or documentarians, going directly "into the field," and engaging with subjects and documents (Stephenson *Insecurity* 93). Unlike the collective creation works of the mid-twentieth century, contemporary verbatim practitioners tend to follow more traditional theatrical practices in terms of writing a succinct script, which is then taken up by actors and other artists. While companies like Tectonic Theatre Project do embed themselves in communities, these interrogations differ from earlier works like *The Farm Show*, which focused on a singular locality. One of the ways contemporary works like *The Laramie Project* advance the notion of a specific verbatim dramaturgy is through its depiction of community. Like those behind *The Farm Show* or *Paper Wheat*, the artists involved in *The Laramie Project* immersed themselves in a specific locale in

order to tell that community's story of a particular event. The notion of artists working together with members of a community is similar to the work of collective creation artists in the previous century. However, these contemporary works often take the stories of a specific community and bring them to a larger, non-local, theatre audience. No longer are artists making stories about a specific community, for that community. *The Laramie Project*, for example, was premiered in New York City and has gone on to become one of the most produced plays around the world (Carlson 32). It is also important to consider the very definition and understanding of community that is at play in these works. While plays like *The Farm Show* understand communities largely in terms of location, *The Laramie Project* may embody a broader understanding of the term which has less to do with locality and more to do with other connections between groups of people. For example, while communities like Laramie, Wyoming are included in the piece, the work is also focused on a more global LGBTQ+ community and the effects that Matthew Shepherd's killing as had on queer people, not just in Laramie but elsewhere. With a retooled focus on community, plays like *Laramie* and other contemporary verbatim works have helped to separate the verbatim movement from earlier examples of documentary theatre.

Another example of the contemporary movement's departure from previous documentary traditions has to do with reliance on documents and other truth-based material. Unlike other forms of documentary theatre which draw on existing documents to examine history or current events, verbatim works produce original insights through the testimonies of ordinary people, with originally recorded voices gathered first-hand by the artist. Instead of interviewing politicians or other high-profile public figures, verbatim theatre often seeks out the perspectives of regular *everyday* people These testimonies are then recreated on-stage by actors, verbatim, such that they are as close to the originals as possible. Contemporary works tend to be less

concerned with abstract statistics and second-hand presentation of documentary media, including photographs, television and film footage. Verbatim works often represent the physical document on-stage, whether that be through the use of original tapes (*300 Tapes*), court transcripts (*Seeds*), or audio/video recordings (*Out the Window*), allowing audiences to witness the actual recordings that are being referenced. However, contemporary verbatim works differ from traditional documentary theatre in terms of their primary source material. According to Derek Paget, verbatim theatre tends to "make use of taped actuality recording as its primary source material" (*Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques* 317). Citing Roy Robinson, Paget establishes verbatim as a genre concerned with the voices of "ordinary people," done in the context of ethnographic research (317). The connection between verbatim theatre and research is another unique characteristic of the genre, with artists conducting interviews and other investigatory work, which is then communicated via the theatrical piece.

The use of verbatim testimonies is also consistent with the genre's commitment to authentic language, with real people's words and phrasing being preserved as much as possible. For Paget, this use of "real talk" not only reiterates verbatim's commitment to recreating authentic testimony but also represents a desire to showcase the words of everyday people. While interviews are often the most popular source material for verbatim works, Carol Martin suggests that artists may draw their words from a number of sources, including "documented public records such as inquiry and trial transcripts, public speeches, and private records such as diary entries, letters, and emails" and the words of individual people as well (*Theatre of the Real* 120). While the source material may work to include documents typically found in other forms of documentary theatre, what makes their use in verbatim unique is the way the words and actions of ordinary people are preserved in the production. The presentation of these words,

verbatim, is what sets the genre apart from other forms of documentary theatre. The recreation that exists within verbatim is as close to the original as possible, while remaining a work of theatre. Although verbatim artists strive to maintain a high degree of authenticity in their works, they cannot completely recreate real-life on stage as the work remains a piece of theatre. While verbatim productions are likely to draw on a wide range of source materials, such as individual testimonies, personal essays, our previously recorded transcripts, the use of interviews remains a constant among many popular productions.

Another major distinction between contemporary verbatim theatre and documentary works of previous eras are the individuals whose stories the works showcase. Both verbatim and documentary tend to draw from diverse groups of people when gathering source material for the production. As previously stated, while documentary tends to feature high-profile public figures, including politicians, verbatim is much more concerned with the voices of the masses. In terms of source material, this means verbatim artists tend to have to embed themselves in the work in order to extract the necessary testimonies, whereas documentary practitioners are able to draw on existing records and documents. As a result, verbatim plays often form scripts around words and human emotions, as opposed to objective fact, which is more aligned with previous documentary traditions. Official records and other pre-existing documents are often devoid of the raw emotions that original verbatim testimonies are able to capture. In drawing truth from emotion, verbatim theatre is much more a reflection of humanity than other forms of documentary theatre. This reliance on emotion also further connects the contemporary verbatim movement to the mid-century Canadian documentary theatre era, as observed by Filewod. While verbatim works attempt to deal with objective facts in a way that is similar to that of past documentary works,

often through the recreation of exact testimonies, there is the potential for a clearer focus on the emotions of subjects.

By featuring the voices of ordinary citizens, verbatim theatre often takes on an important responsibility: the amplification of marginalized voices and perspectives. According to Paul B. Makeham, verbatim theatre provides an "expression of voices normally marginalized by dominant process of historiography," (*Community Stories: Aftershocks and Verbatim Theatre* 1). While Makeham is particularly concerned with theatre in relation to the study of history, this notion also connects to the aims of verbatim artists in relation to other dominant forms of media. While the mainstream media has a tremendous influence on our understanding of events and issues, theatre also has the ability to shape how we respond to the world around us. Those in control of the history-making process and the mainstream media act as gatekeepers in terms of what information we are given. Through these processes, a number of voices and perspectives are silenced, removing an important platform from marginalised communities, and prohibiting the rest of the public from experiencing the full truth. In a sense, verbatim artists are trying to rectify the silencing of voices that has occurred over time and has led to a distorted view of history. For example, *Being Here: The Refugee Project* (2021) presents the voices of refugees who have sought asylum in Canada, and the Canadians who helped them get here (Chamberlain). Allowing actual refugees to share their stories in their own words ensures that the narrative is shaped by those experiencing the issue first-hand, as opposed to journalists and other reporters who may be too far removed to accurately depict the experiences of refugees, or whose perspectives may reinforce western power dynamics. This is particularly relevant when dealing with subjects that audiences already have an existing understanding of. Alison Jeffers furthers Makeham's point about marginalized perspectives, arguing that verbatim theatre gives a voice

"to those who would otherwise remain unheard" (*Looking for Esfrail* 95); without these works audiences are likely to remain ignorant to the plight of certain individuals and their issues. Given that verbatim theatre tends to be explicitly community minded, it is likely that these marginalized voices will thus resonate with audiences more so than in other genres. It is quite possible that audiences will either experience new things for the first time, or they will witness as their own stories are told back to them, potentially legitimizing their experiences.

Given the rise in popularity of contemporary verbatim works, the practices of artists will differ; there is no one size fits all approach to the genre. Some pieces continue the documentary tradition of twentieth-century collective-creation projects, while other works may blur the line between verbatim and other forms of documentary or "theatre of the real." Just as some verbatim artists embed themselves within a specific community, forming important relationships with their subjects, other artists may choose to combine interviews with other forms of testimony, such as court transcripts or reports. Despite the range in approach to verbatim, there are several characteristics which apply to most, if not all, contemporary examples of verbatim theatre. Among the pieces explored in this essay, and many examples of the contemporary verbatim movement, there is a commitment to the authentic replication of ordinary' citizens' testimony at the heart of these works.

In summary, this chapter has worked to establish verbatim theatre as its own independent genre of theatre. While earlier eras of truth-based theatre often found ways to incorporate real people and events, the contemporary verbatim movement has prioritized the perspectives of ordinary citizens, with original interviews providing a dialogue that is taken closely from the words of real people. Artists sometimes embed themselves within the subjects' locale, in order to bring these authentic, grassroots and community-oriented stories to light. Considering the

recording techniques utilized by verbatim artists, plays of the current movement have a tendency to focus on the people's emotional response to the events and issues the works are focused on. The next section will examine one of the most well-known examples of contemporary verbatim theatre, Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, considering the ways the play represents the current verbatim movement and its departure from earlier documentary traditions. Ultimately, *Laramie* will act as a key example of the ways contemporary artists have established verbatim as its own independent theatrical genre, through identifiable verbatim dramaturgical practices.

Case Study: The Laramie Project

Considering the dramaturgical practices unique to verbatim theatre as established in the previous section, I will now explore the ways Moises Kauffman and his Tectonic Theatre Project have put these strategies into practice, and the impact these decisions have had on the formation of verbatim theatre as a popular subgenre of the documentary movement. Considering the prominence of *Laramie*, as well as its role in the rise of verbatim theatre throughout the early 2000s, this case study will explore verbatim theatre through one of its most well-known and influential examples.

On October 6, 1998, Matthew Shepard, an openly gay student at the University of Wyoming, was beaten and left for dead. The following morning, Shepard's unconscious body was discovered tied to a fence post on the outskirts of town in Laramie, Wyoming (Marsden). The case quickly grabbed national attention, with media focused on whether Shepherd would survive, as members of the public kept vigil outside the hospital. Shepard's ultimate death would resonate with members of and allies of the LGBTQ+ community: the story of a young gay man's murder providing a springboard for anti-hate crime advocacy (Sheerin). Led by director Moises

Kauffman, members of Tectonic Theatre Project travelled to Laramie around the time of Shepard's death, as well as the subsequent murder trial, in an attempt to "learn more" about the events (Kauffman 19). With a desire to speak directly with citizens, the artists behind *The Laramie Project* sought to use verbatim practices to interrogate the issues at hand and better understand the community in which these heinous crimes occurred (Kauffman 19). Through the play, Kauffman and company wanted to know how a town like Laramie differs from the rest of the country, in particular the company's familiar home of New York City. They also wanted to consider what ways Laramie is "the same;" asking whether there are universal characteristics within society that would allow a crime like this to take place (Kauffman 19). Ultimately, the artists were concerned with the ways the case may impact the rights and perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, as the play is very much a story about a young man who was murdered for being gay. Over the course of a year-and-a-half, members of Tectonic Theatre Project traveled to Laramie several times, conducting over 200 interviews, which were eventually edited into a three-act play featuring over 50 characters (22).

The methods deployed by Tectonic Theatre Project were considered ground-breaking at the time, with Marvin Carlson describing it as one of the first popular uses of verbatim testimony providing the basis of a completely "originary text" (32). At the same time, some of the practices of Tectonic Theatre Project are consistent with the work of earlier documentary artists, particularly those focused on collective creation. The artists behind *Laramie* deployed many similar practices to those who worked on *The Farm Show*, specifically the use of a collective company traveling to a remote location and recording testimonies with members of the community. This practice not only provides a clear sense of the community's response to the murder, but the voices showcased in the piece are likely different from the ones included in the

mainstream media's coverage of the events. For example, there is a strong sense of *ordinariness* in terms of the subjects interviewed for the piece, the majority of whom are regular everyday people sharing their thoughts on the situation. At the time, the mainstream media devoted a significant amount of coverage to the killing, with particular focus on Shepherd, as well as the perpetrators of the attack. While the play does include some of these easily identifiable figures, most characters are either residents of Laramie, or members of communities with a particular relationship to the case.

The Laramie Project is a key example of the contemporary verbatim movement as it was one of the first truly popular forms of the genre to take off in North America. While there are many similarities between *Laramie* and other earlier documentary works, the play also offers insight into the ways verbatim practices differ from other genres. For example, *The Laramie Project,* focuses on a highly specific contemporary issue which was playing out in during the play's production. However, nearly two years had passed since Shepherd's death by the time the play was first performed in Denver, Colorado in February 2000. Given the time associated with writing and producing a project of this nature, the play focuses on more broad issues related to Shepherd's murder and the events surrounding it, as opposed to objective analysis of the crime. Despite the fact that the play differs from the mainstream media's coverage of the events, the playwrights do embody the role of theatrical journalists, in terms of their travelling to Laramie and reporting on the issues.

Another prominent characteristic common to contemporary verbatim projects, which is on full-display in *Laramie,* is the representation of the playwriting process within the work. The play features members of *Tectonic Theatre Project* as characters, who are seen conducting interviews with members of the public. By representing interviews and other elements of the

creative process within the work, the play provides a sense of transparency by showing audiences how it was formed. While the play uses verbatim testimony as its primary source material, such accounts are not used to authenticate a sense of objective fact as to what specifically happened. Instead, the testimonies are used to capture a community's subjective response to the horrific event. Much of the play's dialogue is concerned with the raw emotions associated with Shepherd's killing, how it made people feel and what they thought about Matthew and his killers. According to Stephen Bottoms, this process allows the artists to consider the ways theatre can contribute to process of dealing with a heinous act such as Shepherd's murder (*Putting the Document into Documentary* 65). Not only do the artists state this intention at the beginning of the play, but the showcasing of the creative process is a way for artists to consider their own role in this very public process.

The Laramie Project is also very much concerned with notions of community, however the idea of community at the heart of this work is different from other examples of documentary theatre. Plays like *The Farm Show* deal with community in explicit ways often focused on location; the main subjects of the play are farmers in Clinton, Ontario, with the playwrights embodying the role of the outsider. This tension is included in *The Laramie Project*, many of the subjects are residents of the community, or hold some sort of connection to the town based on location. Members of the Tectonic Theatre Project have traveled to Laramie to report on the stories of its residents. The role of the outsider is still important in *Laramie*, just as it in plays like *The Farm Show*, as the artists can use their position as strangers to "illuminate things about a community that are invisible to the people within it" (Nagel *An Aesthetic of Neighbourliness* 160). Erica Nagel's theory is consistent with the notion that artists are exposing something about the community, in the case of *Laramie* it is typically the town's bigotry and the attitudes that

may have contributed to Shepherd's murder. In this sense the play may be illuminating a sense of bigotry that most residents are blind to. However, the play also features surprising moments of acceptance, such as the comments made by Father Roger Schmit, who states "Matthew Shepard has served us well. You realize that? He has served us well. And I do not mean to condemn Matthew to perfection, but I cannot mention anyone who has done more for this community than Matthew Shepard" (154). This moment may serve to illuminate a sense of tolerance that members of Laramie, particularly queer residents, may not always feel. However, while these illuminations come from Laramie residents, they speak more to the play's focus on social groups of people as opposed to geographical communities. *The Laramie Project* is about much more than one particular town or person, it is a play largely about issues related to anti-LGBTQ+ hatred, and the ways people deal with the grief associated with such bigotry. The notion of community within *Laramie* is less about a specific geographical location, but more focuses on the social characteristics that bind groups of people together. The playwrights, and other figures, as "gay people," "queers," "fags" represent members of an LGBTQ+ community. As identified members of this group, their interest in the case is likely to differ from members of other social communities. The play explores issues through a highly specific lens, but ultimately much of its dialogue can be universally applied to broader issues and communities. The use of some citizens in this manner, as opposed to geographical understandings of community which were more common throughout the previous century, is reflective of verbatim's focus on humanity as a source of realness and authenticity. The focus is on people's reaction to the murder of a defenseless individual and how these communities react to the loss.

Overall, *Laramie* provides a glimpse into the contemporary verbatim movement and the ways the genre differs from other forms of documentary theatre, even earlier examples of

verbatim from the twentieth century, such as collective creation works like *The Farm Show*. *The Laramie Project's* biggest innovation for the verbatim movement is its representation of community, one that differs significantly from the geographically community-based representations observed in before the rise of verbatim theatre and helps shift the genre's focus away from location-based representations and toward the ways community can be felt on a deeper social level. However, as I will argue later in the thesis, the practices we see in the late 90s and early 2000s do still act as a bit of a bridge between twentieth century documentary drama, and the state of verbatim theatre in the late 2010s. While *Laramie* marks a departure from previous documentary methodologies, newer works I will examine later in this thesis go even further in their departure from existing documentary traditions. But in terms of establishing an independent and easily identifiable twenty-first century verbatim movement, the practices observed in *Laramie* help to establish a clear understanding of what verbatim theatre is, specially how it will be understood throughout this thesis.

Chapter Two: Bringing Politics to the People: Verbatim Theatre and its Impact on Democratic Participation

In the previous chapter I examined the rise of the verbatim theatre movement and the characteristics which establish verbatim as its own unique subgenre of documentary. As a genre connected to the testimonies of ordinary people, as well as its commitment to community, verbatim is well-positioned to explore issues related to politics and democracy. In this chapter, I will closely explore the relationship between verbatim theatre and politics, considering the ways the genre contributes to democratic participation. To begin with, I will first provide an overview of the longstanding relationship between politics and theatre, considering the ways theatrical traditions established in ancient Greece are still influencing contemporary artists. As part of this section of the chapter, I will closely examine the genre "political theatre," explaining how verbatim relates to the genre but stands on its own as an independent form of theatre. Before considering the relationship between verbatim theatre and politics and democracy, I will also briefly provide some theories of democracy and explain exactly what I mean when referring to politics. Then the next section of the chapter will examine the ways verbatim theatre is used to explore contemporary political issues and the ways the genre facilitates democratic participation. To close out the chapter, I will once-again examine Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, this time considering the play's relationship to politics and democracy, and the ways *Laramie* puts into practice the political and democratic characteristics I will identify in this chapter. Overall, the chapter will consider whether there is the potential for verbatim theatre to facilitate a sense of democratic participation amongst audiences. Where pressing political issues are concerned, such as LGBTQ+ rights or extreme widespread polarization of political views, how can verbatim

foster a sense of democratic participation and inspire political change? As a genre committed to the authentic testimonies of ordinary people, how is verbatim theatre uniquely situated to take on these political tasks?

The Relationship between Theatre and Politics

The historical connection between theatre and politics, at least from a traditional European perspective, can be traced back to ancient Greece, an era that gave rise to both democracy and theatrical practice. At this time, Greek playwrights were becoming increasingly influenced by political debate, which is evident in the works of Athenian playwrights, such as Aeschylus (c. 525-c. 455 BCE), Sophocles (c. 496-c. 405 BCE), and Euripides (c. 480–406 BCE) (Long). Many of these works embody the principles of deliberative democracy in an attempt to bring politics to the people through theatrical performance. Greek drama festivals throughout the mid-500s BCE often provided the opportunity for citizens to engage in political and social debate through works that presented audiences with "a picture of society protected by the gods - a hospitable and democratic state" (Allern *Theatre and democracy in the Athenian city state* 160). These festivals allowed members of the public to gather in a communal setting, observe thought-provoking theatrical works, and participate in a form of identity and unity building. Many plays of this period were concerned with the political issues, such as the cost of war (*The Persians*), responsibilities of leadership (*Oedipus Rex*), or the shift from personal retribution to distributed justice (The Eumenides). While these works present political issues in conventional formats, inviting some form of citizen engagement in political debate, other playwrights went further to interrogate the political efficacy of theatre. Euripides used the theatre to engage audiences, both physically and emotionally, in a manner that was unseen in the centuries prior. For example, in

The Suppliants, Euripides uses the form of political tragedy to provide a commentary on the "possibilities and limitations" of such drama as a mode of "political representation" (Wohl 108). The play focuses heavily on political matters of interest to the citizens of Athens, such as the relationship between the cities of Athens and Argos (Michelini 220). Victoria Wohl in *Euripides and the Politics of Form* argues that *The Suppliants* influences the politics of the city because it "does something to its audience, who are citizens as well as human beings" (109). Audiences of Greek theatre, who "before and after the performance took one side in the decisions or had to deal with the consequences of decisions made by the male democracy," were able to participate fully in these social and political debates presented onstage (Allern 161).

The politically motivated drama of ancient Greece worked to establish a tradition of theatre that focused on issues related to democracy and governance. These traditions established in ancient Greece continue to be experienced in contemporary theatrical contexts through performances that reflect the pressing political issues of our time. Theatre artists have used their works to consider political matters in a public setting for centuries, allowing audiences to gain newfound understandings of the world around them and consider the implications of their own political actions. While theatre and politics may no longer be as directly interconnected as they were in the era of Euripides, contemporary drama can still address pressing political matters in a way that empowers audiences as members of a democratic society. Theatre today plays a powerful role in fostering civic engagement among people, with contemporary drama often directly engaging citizens in political and social debate. Similar to the ways civic engagement occurred during Greek festivals, most contemporary theatrical performance fosters debate and discussion between audiences on pressing social and political issues. Had theatre not emerged in Greece at the same time democratic traditions and institutions were being established, helping to

create an engaged citizenry, it is quite possible that contemporary artists' role as interrogators of social and political issues would look very different today. Next, I will consider the ways "political theatre" emerged throughout the twentieth century as a popular theatrical genre for examining political issues.

Moving Towards Political Theatre. The politically oriented drama observed in ancient Greece has had a profound influence on the contemporary practice of political theatre, which began to emerge in Western cultures in the twentieth century and continues to influence the politically motivated drama of today. As Tara Bracco states, such theatre actively engages and interrogates various political issues and events and is able to shape "the culture around us, as theatre raises the antenna of people's social and political consciousness" (Bracco *The Power of Political Theatre*). Michael Kirby defines "political theatre" as a performance that is intentionally concerned with government, that is intentionally engaged in or takes sides in politics" (*On Political Theatre* 129). Kirby's definition establishes political theatre as a genre that is actively engaged in political matters, not one in which politics is simply an afterthought. For works to be considered "political theatre," there should be a direct exploration of political issues and or events. Artists of this genre may also choose to focus on high-profile public figures, such as politicians, as the main subjects of their work. While the degree to which artists engage in these political matters will differ between works, all examples of political theatre must include these considerations.

As John McGrath writes, drama provides the opportunity for citizens to "come together and contemplate their society" (*Theatre and Democracy* 137-138). While "political" works have the ability to expressly present political issues and debates for audiences to consider, all forms of theatre potentially provide the opportunity for such contemplation. With political theatre, not

only does reflection come from the depiction of relevant political issues and events, but contemplation is also provided by the exploration of desirable political outcomes (133). As such, political theatre has the opportunity to examine contemporary issues and events while considering the potential for change in the future. McGrath advocates for a political theatre that questions the democratic legitimacy of political action, holding governments and other actors accountable through performance. In a sense, this idea of political theatre views artists as activists who are able to present their concerns in a public forum, inviting audiences to consider the arguments being put forward. The advantage of theatre in this regard is its ability to bring together members of the public into a communal space, inviting people to participate in political reflection both as individuals but also as members of a community. The political consciousness raising that is evident in McGrath's article is made possible in part due to the advancements of artists and theorists such as Bertolt Brecht. Writing and directing in the mid-twentieth century, Brecht arrived at a time when audience interaction with political content was lacking (Bradley *Brecht and Political Theatre* 3). For Brecht, theatrical conventions had begun to reinforce "conservative interests," and audiences were encouraged to view productions "passively," in part because the content on stage "suggested that spectators were powerless to change society," (Bradley 3). As a result, the theatre Brecht observed: "encouraged spectators to resign themselves to the status quo by presenting workers as powerless victims of their heredity and environment" (Bradley 4). Instead of igniting a sense of political activism, audiences were largely numb to their powerlessness within society, which they saw reinforced on stage, giving no indication that change was possible. While McGrath argues that theatre can depict the shortcomings of democracy, in a sense to encourage debate and action among audiences, Brecht

initially found that such change would not be possible if drama simply reinforced these "illegitimate" political acts.

Throughout the twentieth century, a wide range of political theatre emerged in North America. Beginning with the rise of social realism towards the end of the nineteenth century, artists like Émile Zola were concerned with issues of representation. Brian Nelson notes that Zola was committed to "the idea that literature has a social function: to represent the sorts of things that preoccupy people in their daily lives" (*Emile Zola and the integrity of representation*). Issues like industrialization, urbanization, consumerism, and justice were at the forefront of Zola's works, with the theatre providing an opportunity to explore these pressing issues in a communal and public setting. While works like Thérèse Raquin (1873) are not expressly *political,* Zola depicts issues such as punishment or morality in a hyper-realistic manner, inviting contemplation on the similarities between reality and the state of the world within the play. In fact, prior to the twentieth century, overtly political theatre was quite rare, with popular *political* works like *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) presenting social issues in a satirical manner while avoiding depictions of specific political activity. With the rise of social realism, thanks in part to the work of Henrik Ibsen, the theatre eventually became a space for artists to engage in political debate through realistic depictions of contemporary political issues and events. However, it was not until the rise of the living newspaper movement of the 1930s that we see artists directly engaged in the sorts of political debates playing out in other forms of news media, as the theatre became a venue for more direct productions of political commentary. Moving to the mid-twentieth century, theatre artists remained concerned with realistic subject matter, depicting issues that were at the forefront of people's minds. Playwrights like Arthur Miller were motivated by contemporary issues and debates, using theatre to contribute to the

discourse on issues such as war and militarization (*All My Sons,* 1946), as well as attacks on communism and intellectual freedom (*The Crucible,* 1953). Several other politically oriented genres also emerge throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century, such as the feminist theatre movement of the 60s and 70s, and the rise of autobiographical theatre, both of which examine contemporary social debates and the underlying political issues which impact marginalized people's experiences. Ultimately, the historical trajectory of political theatre sets up a period toward the end of the twentieth century, with the genre concerned with political debate in an overt and typically realistic manner.

Politics and Democracy

Before examining the specific role verbatim theatre can play in these political debates, I will take the next section to consider some of the theories of politics and democracy, unpacking what these terms mean and the role theatre can play in depicting political issues while influencing debate and democratic participation. When referring to the relationship between verbatim theatre and politics it is important to establish a clear understanding of what I mean by politics, and the sorts of democratic theories I am guided by when examining the potential for verbatim to foster political action within a democratic society. For the purposes of this project, politics should not be understood through the lens of high-profile politicians or the drama of public policy and the legislative arena. Instead, politics in my study is concerned with everyday issues and the ways democracy provides ordinary citizens a voice in the decision-making process. These issues do not always have to be about specific political policy but are of pressing importance to society at a local level. However, while verbatim prioritizes the perspectives of ordinary citizens over those of high-profile political figures, politicians and other policy-makers do play a role in the political

circumstances this thesis is concerned with. Verbatim theatre often examines politics through the ways the masses are impacted by the policy decisions of the political ruling class. By prioritizing the views of ordinary people, the works are most concerned with the ways politics is experienced on an everyday level, and the role we as members of a democratic society may play in making a difference. Through a grassroots view of politics as citizenship, the views and opinions of ordinary citizens are just as important as the perspectives of the ruling class. It is the ruling class who are elected to represent the needs of all citizens, regardless of their status in society. Where verbatim theatre is concerned, artists seek out the testimonies of everyday individuals as opposed to rehashing the statements made by easily identifiable, high-profile public figures. In a sense, verbatim theatre has the potential to include many citizens in the decision-making process, including the views and perspectives of those who wouldn't normally have a voice in the political assembly.

In terms of theories of democracy, this work is primarily concerned with the principle of participatory democracy, which relies on the notion that all citizens participate in the political process; everyone should have a say in how decisions are made. Jean Jacques Rousseau, one of the preeminent philosophers on participatory democracy, argues that legitimacy of the state is dependent on citizens' feeling as though they have a voice in important matters. "As soon as any man says of the affairs of the State "What does it matter to me?" the State may be given up for lost" (*The Social Contract* 126). The strength of our democracy relies on citizens recognizing the power of their voice and exercising it through democratic means. For Carole Pateman, Rousseau's theory of participation also reinforces the notion that citizens participate together as mutually dependent members of society (*Participation and Democratic Theory*). She writes, "the participatory situation is such that each citizen would be powerless to do anything without the

cooperation of all the others" (23). When participating in these democratic institutions citizens are acting as members of a collective society, not solely as individuals. As Joel D. Wolfe states, the theory of participatory democracy "proposes that participation produces popular control of the issue-agenda, decision-making, and implementation. Not only does participation lead to control but it has an educative effect that reinforces and sustains participation" (*A Defense of Participatory Democracy* 371). Fully realized participatory democracies ensure citizens are given a voice throughout all stages of the decision-making process, which fosters a greater sense of political involvement overall. In terms of democracy at-large, one's involvement in these systems ought to be treated equally amongst all citizens; without an equal voice how can one effectively make a difference?

Key democratic ideals stress that people have a voice and that all citizens' voices ought to carry equal weight. Within a democratic society, institutions exist which allow us to use our voice to influence the decisions of the political ruling class. Mark Warren argues that the "constraints of today's large-scale, complex, and pluralistic societies," makes it difficult for the democratic ideals of "collective decision making" to be realized (*What Can Democratic Participation Mean Today* 678). Warren suggests that societies have moved away from wide-scale collective participation in the decision-making process, and that democratic participation within liberal societies has largely been relegated to the act of voting. In terms of verbatim theatre, there is the potential that such works may remedy this by encouraging citizens to become involved at the grassroots level, by modelling forms of democratic participation, such as debate or activism, that stress collective action and ensure all citizens have a voice in the process. While the main form of democratic participation in today's liberal democracies is often voting, there are ways in which citizens continue to have a voice. Grassroots efforts, such as community-based

activism encourage individuals to join together as members of collective society and use their voice to influence the decisions of the ruling class. Such forms of participation have a wide range of political activities, not all of which are publicly visible; activist work varies from public protesting to lobbying local representatives. Ultimately, the notion of activism stresses that citizens have the ability to work together and raise awareness towards important issues, while attempting to influence the decisions of politicians or other officials. However, while these are the ideals of democracy and the principles of participation within democratic society, limitations do exist which constrain the overall ability for citizens to exercise the true democratic potential.

Despite the ideals of participatory democracy stressing that all citizens have a voice, in reality this may not always be the case. A number of factors can limit democracy from being completely realized. First of all, people are not always given an equal voice, some perspectives tend to dominate over others, skewing the true equality of perspectives in the decision-making process. In the ancient Greek context, it was a select group of privileged men who were permitted to vote. While public forms of deliberative decision making were seen in Greece, the number of people able to directly take part in the political process were extremely limited. In a contemporary North American setting, even though citizens are no longer directly restricted based on race, gender, or class, there are age limits restricting the democratic participation of young people. While youth can participate in some forms of democratic action, such as protesting or political activism, they do not have the right to vote. Given that voting is now understood as the dominant form of democratic participation, restricting those from voting based on age means that young people are unable to fully exercise their democratic voice. Despite a lack of explicit restrictions limiting voter rights, underlying structural discrimination also continues to prevent certain groups, such as African Americans, from voting (Newkirk II).

Taking into account these real practical limitations, there is clearly room for improvement if society is to realize its full democratic potential. The art of theatre, especially verbatim, I argue, has the potential to push past some of these shortcomings and realize a form of democracy in its most ideal sense. Verbatim itself is set up to counteract many of these shortcomings, creating an environment where ordinary citizens, in particular those of marginalized backgrounds, are able to share their perspectives free from most institutional or state censorship. A truly democratic theatre aims to involve all citizens in the decision-making process, fostering a greater sense of democratic deliberation and overall political citizenship.

Verbatim Theatre and Democracy

Verbatim theatre is an inherently political example of dramatic performance, both in form and focus. Through the amplification of marginalized perspectives, verbatim represents the democratic principle that every citizen has a voice. Verbatim plays are often concerned with pressing social and political issues, which are explored through the perspectives of ordinary citizens. In terms of politics, such works often focus on the ways political circumstances impact everyday people. The presentation of authentic voices creates the opportunity for verbatim to engage with topics closely related to democracy and civic engagement. In verbatim performances, audiences confront voices they may have been prevented from hearing previously, which allows them to better understand people's perspectives of the political world around them. In terms of the people providing testimony for the play, verbatim theatre allows ordinary citizens the opportunity to be heard on political matters. By sharing their testimonies, these people know they will be heard, often by citizens with the democratic agency to do something about a particular issue. This section of the chapter will examine the ways verbatim, as a form of

political theatre, engages with principles of democracy to further citizens' participation as members of a democratic society.

Verbatim as a Creative Practice. As a sub-genre of documentary theatre, verbatim embodies many characteristics that are representative of democratic principles. In the previous chapter I argued that many contemporary verbatim practices draw on the methods of collective creation companies to ensure that all artists have a say in the creative process. These practices align with democratic principles as artists' voices are given equal weight. Similar to the principle of "one man, one vote" (Howell), companies that deploy collective creation methodologies are committed to ensuring equal representation of artistic voices. While there may be select artists in leadership positions, such as a director or head playwright, the majority of company members work together as a collective. Important decisions may be made by consensus ensuring that all artists have a say in the creative process. By embodying democratic principles through the artistic process, verbatim theatre ensures its own representations of politics and democracy are grounded by the very principles they seek to interrogate. The idea of every citizen having a voice not only guides artists when working with other members of the company, but it also directs the process of gathering testimonies. In fact, the democracy modelled through this creative process has the potential to rectify some of our own democracy's shortcomings. Considering the democratic principles embodied by verbatim artists, I will now explore the ways verbatim theatre examines social and political issues in a manner committed to truth and authenticity through its data-gathering processes.

Verbatim and Politics. While there is a longstanding history of theatre being used to explore social and political issues, in a manner that examines pressing issues of the day, verbatim theatre

is unique in the ways it interrogates such issues. Given the genre's commitment to the authentic voices of ordinary citizens, verbatim theatre often focuses on the ways people are specifically impacted by the decisions of political actors. Theatre director Marina J. Bergenstock states that verbatim specifically seeks out "people who are connected to the subject matter at the heart of the piece" (*The Power of Verbatim Theatre*). In their account of the ways verbatim explores issues related to human rights, Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson argue that verbatim theatre plays a role in human rights discourse by drawing audiences' attention towards rights failures and atrocities (*Performing Injustice* 202). The plays Derbyshire and Hodson study all provide examples of a genre committed to exposing human rights failures, through the direct testimonies of those most egregiously impacted. The two suggest that verbatim often has a "political agenda, drawing on the speech of individuals involved in particular situations in order to give a public platform to their experience of matters of concern to society in general" (199). By including the perspectives of those most impacted by the issues the work is focused on, verbatim plays have the ability to present audiences with an immediate and authentic depiction of political events.

Unlike other forms of political theatre, which may focus on the drama of politicians or other political forces, verbatim theatre examines political issues through the ways ordinary citizens are impacted on an everyday level. As such, the genre is much more concerned with the ways politics is experienced, as opposed to the drama associated with those who make the policies. Unlike other forms of documentary which may examine the testimonies of politicians to better understand the policy decisions, verbatim goes directly to people experiencing these issues in their everyday lives. An example of this would be *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*; while not directly about a particular political policy decision, the play examines the aftermath of the

high-profile Rodney King case through the perspectives of LA natives. Instead of interviewing easily identifiable public figures involved in the case, playwright Anna Deavere Smith opted to speak to ordinary individuals to highlight the ways issues related to race and justice are experienced by people in their everyday lives. Verbatim's focus doesn't even have to be on a particular policy or political event, but instead considers how political circumstances impact people on a day-to-day level.

Political Efficacy. Through the presentation of politics and the impact policy outcomes have on people's everyday lives, verbatim theatre has the potential to encourage a sense of democratic participation among citizens. By presenting these contemporary political concerns, in a pressing manner, there is the potential for verbatim to foster a political discourse among its audiences. When attending a verbatim play, spectators are confronted by the authentic voices of ordinary people, who are sharing their experiences with the political issues the work is focused on. By experiencing these testimonies audiences gain first-hand knowledge of the ways politics is experienced by members of their own community. All forms of political theatre have a history of fostering political discourse among citizens, however, with verbatim the potential for such debate is heightened by the authenticity and reliability of the content. Audiences gain a better understanding of how political issues are experienced by hearing directly from those most impacted. Instead of presenting issues through the drama of high-profile politicians, these testimonies are often emotional and deeply personal. These authentic testimonies encourage audiences to engage one another in discourse as citizens within a democratic society. The circumstances created by public verbatim performance, with citizens attending the theatre en

masse to witness the personal testimonies of fellow community members, creates an ideal environment for citizens to engage with each other in political discourse.

While many verbatim plays include pressing political and social issues, with testimonies from ordinary citizens underscoring the need for democratic action, certain productions explicitly include audience participation to kickstart such debates. For example, Liza Balkan's *Out the Window* invites audiences on-stage in the play's final act to engage in discussions with the characters on the matters explored in the piece. The inclusion of political debate involving spectators while the play is still in progress, encourages members of the broader audience to continue these discussions themselves once the performance has concluded.

While political discourse amongst audiences is one way verbatim theatre contributes to democratic participation, it is not the only way. There are also instances where verbatim engages citizens directly, through specific participation in democratic institutions. Scholars who are concerned with the political efficacy of verbatim performance argue that such works have the potential to present people with political realities and encourage audiences to become directly involved in the issues (Reinelt *The Promise of Documentary* 12). As such, political efficacy is concerned with the ways such theatre may lead audiences to specific political activity, such as a call to activism. Verbatim is able to showcase ways citizens can become involved in political issues themselves, encouraging a direct form of democratic participation, often through the modelling of political action and advocacy. In her examination of verbatim theatre in relation to the refugee crisis, Caroline Wake (*To Witness Mimesis*) argues that such theatre has the ability to elicit a sense of empathy among audiences towards refugees and migrants (105). Wake's theory relies on the empathy that is made possible by the personal and emotional testimonies verbatim prioritizes, in particular the marginalized perspectives audiences may never have encountered

prior to the performance. In her article, Wake uses the play *Through the Wire,* a verbatim piece about Australia's refugee crisis, to consider the impacts verbatim theatre can have on the issue. Wake even suggests that the piece directly influenced the audience's understanding of the crisis and may actually shape people's future political action (118). As members of a democratic society, audiences have tools at their disposal, such as the ability to vote, which they can utilize as part of this newfound political understanding.

Democratic action takes many forms, such as voting, lobbying, canvassing, writing, and protesting. Verbatim theatre models a number of different types of actions, which may encourage citizens to become involved in the issue. For example, the play *E15* (2015) presents the efforts of the Focus E15 campaign, a British social housing advocacy group. The play features a number of testimonies from members of the campaign, in particular the mothers who organized the movement in response to the "aggressive social cleansing policies" of their hometown (Healey, 2017). *E15* is an example of the ways verbatim theatre can model political advocacy as a form of potential democratic action that audiences can become involved in. By modelling the ways ordinary citizens have taken it upon themselves to protest in response to political circumstances, audiences are able to see themselves and their communities represented on stage. Audiences of *E15* may be encouraged to join the movement itself, or support it in other ways, but even with a focus on a specific movement responding to a particular political issue, there is also the potential that the audience will simply witness the power of advocacy and recognize their own democratic potential regarding other political issues. The work can inspire further action not just within the issue(s) it depicts, but any political issue where audiences may feel their action is required. Overall, verbatim theatre has the ability to potentially rectify certain shortcomings of our democratic institutions, by ensuring all citizens, regardless of background, class, race, age, etc.,

have the ability to participate in the democracy being modelled on stage. The forms of democratic action these plays seek to inspire are not dependent on the same criteria as democratic institutions within society. While some types of action relate to specific democratic institutions, such as the electoral system, verbatim theatre could model a wide range of actions, many of which are inclusive.

Why Verbatim works for Certain Issues. In terms of its potential for future democratic action, it is also important to consider the relationship between verbatim and certain political issues. That is to say, specific topics or causes may be better suited for a verbatim production than others. Given the genre's commitment to the testimony of ordinary people, concerns that are universal in nature tend to be a good fit for verbatim, such as healthcare and the economy. When a wide range of citizens can speak to an issue and the ways it impacts them, artists will have a rich amount of source material to draw from. The nature of the issue will also influence the types of testimonies being gathered. Verbatim tends to be best suited to issues that are personal in nature, allowing citizens to speak to the ways they have been affected in their everyday lives. In order for the testimonies to carry wright, the issue should to be one that is directly related to the thoughts and opinions of ordinary people, as opposed to matters which are more policy-driven or focused on raw data. For example, a verbatim play about housing would be a much better fit for the genre than a production about political foreign policy. Housing is an issue that everyone can relate to, but it is also one where the thoughts and experiences of ordinary people are critical (Chenier 43). We can best understand the housing crisis through the experiences of those who are impacted by it. Considering the fact that the issue affects all members of society, the plurality of perspectives which verbatim relies upon are well suited for issues of this nature. On the other

hand, while foreign policy is something that impacts society at large, its effects are not immediately felt the way housing is. Similarly, the thoughts and opinions of ordinary citizens on foreign policy are a lot less relevant than they are to discussions on housing. This is because discussions about housing are more focused on the human experiences of people, the ways housing impacts individuals on a deeply personal level. As such, personal testimonies of citizens from all walks of life are critical to better understand the problem. The unfiltered thoughts and experiences of citizens on foreign policy matters do not contribute to the overall understanding of the issue.

Potential Drawbacks and Limitations. Despite the overall potential for verbatim theatre to influence political action, there are also drawbacks and limitations which may affect the overall democratic potential of these works. For one, verbatim's tendency to give all perspectives equal weight may in fact have a negative impact on the marginalized perspectives the genre seeks to amplify. For example, if the artist gives equal weight to voices that are offensive or misinformed, it may potentially alienate certain audience members, preventing them from taking up the cause. There is also the potential that the inclusion of such perspectives may contribute to spreading misinformation on important political issues. By allowing voices to spread offensive or misinformed rhetoric, the potential for further democratic action may be complicated.

Concern has also been raised over the role artists play in the democratic process, in particular the ways works are reflective of the artists' political biases. Even with the exact replication of citizens' testimonies, the editing strategies used by artists may have an impact on the overall political narrative of the work. As Carol Martin (*Theatre of the Real*) suggests, verbatim artists tend to conceal their editing choices from audiences, as well as any potential

political biases which may influence their decision making (Martin 122). These editing choices have a significant impact on the ways certain political perspectives are portrayed within the work. While testimony may still be presented verbatim, from a wide range of perspectives, artistic choices have the potential to reinforce certain biases. For example, select political opinions may be given greater weight or intensity within the work, while other perspectives are portrayed in a negative or diminished light. Such biases may be extremely subtle in nature, but they likely have shaped the ways artists go about collecting testimonies and editing them into a play. Where the potential for democratic action is concerned, audiences are at risk of unknowingly being led towards the political desires of the artists. As citizens become aware of these biases, there is likely to be a rise in skepticism towards the political aims of the work. When this happens, audiences are more likely to focus on the political biases of the artists and less on their own potential as citizens within a democratic society.

Case Study

Considering the potential for verbatim to foster democratic participation among citizens, the next section of this chapter will once again examine *The Laramie Project,* considering the work's overall relationship to politics and democracy. I will first explore the ways *Laramie* uses verbatim methodologies to explore a pressing political issue; LGBTQ+ rights in America. I will then consider the potential shortcomings or limitations of the plays' overall democratic potential. Lastly, I will explore the ways verbatim as a form of political theatre has evolved in the twenty-plus years since *The Laramie Project* premiered. While the previous chapter considered *Laramie* from a dramaturgical perspective, the case studies in this chapter will examine the ways the production deals with issues related to politics and democracy. How does the play further the

relationship between verbatim theatre and politics? In what ways does *Laramie* relate to concepts of democratic participation?

As explained in Chapter One, the artists behind *The Laramie Project* utilized creative practices similar to those of collective creation companies of the mid-twentieth century to craft an original verbatim piece about Matthew Shepard's murder. The artists traveled to Laramie as members of a theatrical collective to gather testimonies, which they then edited together into a succinct script. Through these practices, the artists employed a number of democratic principles to ensure everyone had a say in the creative process. Even though Kauffman was the lead artistic visionary on the project, all company members had a role to play in crafting the piece. The play itself reflects these democratic practices, by showing the ways the artists worked together collectively to conduct interviews and shape the overall narrative. These practices connect to notions of democracy through the ways all members are given a voice: no one particular artist dominates the proceedings. Decisions made throughout the artistic process result in a work that reflects the principles of democracy, which promise that every citizen is given a say in making decisions. However, just like our own democratic institutions, there are limitations to the democratic potential of the collective creative process. For example, all members are not necessarily given equal weight. While *The Laramie Project* is a work of the Tectonic Theatre Project as a whole, the play is often attributed singularly to Moises Kauffman. While democracy does allow for individuals to hold positions of leadership and power, one must question just how democratic the creative process is if one writer/director has the ultimate say over artistic matters. Despite these concerns, the work has democratic merit in that its practices appear to stress collectivity more so than traditional playwriting.

Where politics is concerned, *The Laramie Project* presents issues related to LGBTQ+ rights directly to audiences, who are then encouraged to take up the struggle as it is shown to them. It is common for verbatim works to engage in contemporary social and political concerns of the day. When such issues are presented in detail through live performance, paths emerge for audiences to involve themselves directly in the struggle. At the time of *The Laramie Project's* debut, the gay rights movement was nearing the height of its political struggle in the United States. While such rights may be more accepted by contemporary audiences, in the early 2000s it is possible that many people still needed some form of encouragement, either to take the issue seriously or become involved in advocacy work. Through the testimonies of Laramie residents, as well as those connected to the tragedy, the artists are able to directly interrogate the "ascription of social negativity to the queer" in small communities like Laramie, thus presenting a "new, and more inclusive form of identity and community" (Lippert 87). The reflection that is possible through this work, both individually and communally, has the potential to lead audiences toward some form of social change. While *The Laramie Project* does not directly advocate for gay-rights legislation or anti-hate crime laws, its content has the potential to shape the audience's perspective on these matters by showcasing the perspectives of those impacted by homophobia and other intolerance. The voices present in *Laramie* provide a sort of rallying cry for LGBTQ+ advocacy, with audiences provided a new/reinforced understanding of the seriousness of the struggle. Given that the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community had begun to manifest themselves as popular issues/debates within the political arena, such as the push for anti-discrimination legislation or gay marriage, audiences were able to take their newfound understandings from the play and exercise their agency as members of a democratic society, to work towards positive political change. Through the representation of issues, such as the fight for

LGBTQ+ equality, *The Laramie Project* has the potential to mobilize ordinary citizens as participants in democracy, in order to achieve some form of political change.

While *Laramie* examines a key political issue of its time, in a manner that may influence political action on behalf of the audience, it is worth examining some of the ways the artists' own biases may have also influenced the ultimate story those chose to tell. When the artists ventured to Laramie, Wyoming to conduct interviews on the murder of Matthew Shepard, they were doing so as members of several distinct communities. Not only were the majority of artists openly queer, but as New York City residents, they occupied a significant outsider status while on the ground in Laramie. Despite the fact that Kauffman indicates that his main inspiration was to understand why a crime like Shepard's murder could occur in a town like Laramie (19), the artists may have been inspired by their own political biases to further a certain agenda. At many moments in the play, Kauffman and the company include perspectives from Laramie residents on their thoughts towards the LGBTQ community. Comments on Shepard's sexuality are common throughout the play, such as "I think he flaunted it," or: "I hope that Matthew Shepard as he was tied to that fence that he had time to reflect on a moment when someone had spoken the word of the Lord to him – and that before he slipped into a coma he had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle" (169). Even statements that are generally positive regarding queer people are often rooted in homophobic language:

> "DOC O'CONNOR: Let me tell you something else here. There's more gay people in Wyoming than meets the eye. I know, I know for a fact. They're not particularly, ah, the whattayou call the, the queen's the gay people, queens, you know, runaround faggot-type people." (70).

By including these perspectives, the artists are inadvertently shaping a particular narrative; a homophobic town fostered an environment where a young man like Shepard could become an innocent victim of a violent anti-gay hate crime. Without providing my own commentary on what really led to Shepard's murder, it is important to consider the possible political motivations behind the artists to fully understand the ways they are engaging with politics and democracy. By choosing to focus on the murder as a gay hate crime, the artists are setting the stage for a play focused on LGBTQ rights, as citizens are asked to consider the ways members of the LGBTQ community are treated within society at large. Specifically, in terms of the play's focus on hate crime, the artists are inviting us to take the case of Shepard and the situation in Laramie and consider the ways the story connects to the broader fight for equality. Ultimately, as audience members, we are forced to consider the role we as citizens can play in bringing about change.

In considering the potential for *The Laramie Project* to inspire future political action, it is also important to examine one of the key criticisms the play has faced and the ways such a critique impacts its connection to politics. One of verbatim's key drawbacks, as examined previously in this chapter, is the fact that plays may reflect the political biases of the artists. Where *Laramie* is concerned, some critics have pointed to the artists' commitment to a gay hate crime narrative, which is now disputed. Evidence that has emerged in the years since Shepard's death challenges the notion that he was the subject of a hate crime. Given the fact the play is 20-years old, it is understandable that new information may have come to light after the fact, especially considering the play's specific focus on the "here and now." Liz Tomlin points out, however, that the artists have doubled down on this narrative with an updated version of the piece, which ignores this new information (Tomlin 121). As a result, these narrative desires may skew the audience's understanding of the events, which may threaten the overall potential for

political mimesis. If audiences recognize the inherent biases in the piece, they may begin to doubt the work's overall legitimacy. This is especially the case if the artists continue to stand by their original narrative while the mainstream media's coverage begins to reflect new theories on why Shepard was killed. Overall, where the potential for future political action is concerned, audiences benefit from being given a complete and accurate picture, which they may lack depending on how biased the play's politics are. However, regardless of the exact details of Shephard's murder, elements of his life explored in the play are undeniably shaped by the ways LGBTQ+ people are treated in communities like Laramie. By exposing these circumstances, through the testimonies of real people, the work is expressing the need for social change. While specific political action is not directly advocated for within the play, LGBTQ+ rights legislation is one way to ensure members of the community are treated better within society.

In some ways, *The Laramie Project* is a bit of an outlier where verbatim theatre is concerned. For one, it is a rare example of theatre acting as a form of mass culture, meaning it has the potential to reach and influence far more people than the other works that will be considered. *The Laramie Project* inspired a popular HBO film in 2001, which was viewed by over 20 million people; the published script has sold over 100,000 copies (Moore). As such, the play has been able to reach a much larger audience than it would have if it remained solely a traditional theatre production. As a result of this mass popularity, the messages of LGBTQ+ acceptance continue to resonate with a wide range of audiences. Despite the fact that the play is somewhat dated by today's standards, with regard to explicit LGBTQ+ rights and legal protections (Rau), *Laramie's* core messages of acceptance and inclusion continue to remain relevant to audiences, regardless of how far such legal rights have advanced. Overall, while *The Laramie Project* is no longer as politically pressing as it may have been when it made its debut,

in large part due to advancements in LGBTQ+ rights in North America since the play's premiere, it still has the potential to shape the audience's understanding of and response to the LGBTQ+ community.

Chapter Three: Verbatim Theatre and Reality: Situating the genre in relation to the emergence of post-truth

In the previous chapter, I examined the ways verbatim theatre explores issues of political significance, working to foster a sense of democratic participation among audiences. Overall, the genre presents political events and issues in a manner that people relate to; spectators are often hearing from other members of their own community and connections are made through the sharing of lived experience. As such, these works can often generate political discussion between spectators. While many forms of theatre, both fictional and non-fiction, generate discussion, the characteristics of verbatim make it a genre uniquely situated to foster political discourse between members of a community. A major element of verbatim's ability to incite discourse and debate is the genre's commitment to presenting reality on-stage. That is to say, audiences are led to believe that what they are seeing and hearing is based closely on real life. When the issues and events being explored are perceived as real or true, they may be more likely to resonate over other subject matter, inspiring a greater sense of connection to the content of the piece than one might see with other genres, especially fictional works, which overall will help verbatim in its quest to facilitate political discourse and democratic participation.

This chapter will examine verbatim theatre's ability to represent truth on stage, at a time when the public seems increasingly skeptical of what makes content true or false. Amidst the rise of a so-called "post-truth" era, one in which emotion and opinion trump fact, how does the genre fulfill its mission to represent reality? If the public is becoming increasingly wary of media's ability to represent objective truth, how does verbatim theatre move forward with its intentions to foster political discourse and democratic action among its audiences? First, I will closely

examine the ways verbatim theatre represents truth and reality, considering how specific productions implement the "real" in their works. I will also explore the ways verbatim theatre attempts to create experiences of authenticity for audiences, through the recreation of ordinary citizen's testimonies. Next, I will consider the impact of post-truth sentiments on the perceived veracity of truth-based media, questioning the ways verbatim's theatre's prioritization of opinion and empathy relates to current public opinion surrounding truth. I will then move on to examine the overall impact such post-truth has on verbatim's ability to foster political discourse and democratic action. Overall, the chapter will argue that as public sentiments begin to challenge the legitimacy of truth-based media, verbatim theatre must continue to focus on emotion and empathy as its main source of truth and authenticity. Unlike other forms of documentary theatre, verbatim does not rely on the reporting of hard facts and data, however, its authentic recreation of ordinary citizens' testimonies displays a commitment to affective truth and reality. This chapter will examine the many challenges faced by verbatim, ultimately arguing that genre can avoid some of the challenges of other truth-based media at a time when the very notion of truth is extremely complicated.

VERBATIM AND TRUTH

The main objective for verbatim artists is to take the words of real people and recreate them on-stage, verbatim. The genre's commitment to truth comes in the form of dialogue that is taken directly from real people, often those who have provided testimony for the purposes of the play (Paget, 317). The artists often seek out subjects for the work, interviewing them, and then transcribing their testimonies into a script. The purpose of the genre is to allow people to speak on issues that affect them, particularly those from marginalized communities whose testimonies

are not often sought by other forms of media. These testimonies are then replicated by actors on stage, as close to the original as possible. The replication of real people's words, verbatim, is one way the genre clearly communicates its truth-based intentions to audiences.

Another way for spectators to accept the verbatim work as truth-based is through the representation of familiar events and issues. The genre is understood as one that promises to represent issues and events that are familiar to its audiences; everyday matters that most people have a deep understanding of. For example, Porte Parole's *The Assembly* looks at political divisions within society and the impact of mass polarization. The notions of division and polarization are likely familiar concepts to audiences, it is quite likely that people have felt the same concerns as the artists at one point or another. When spectators arrive at the performance with an existing knowledge of the content, they may be more willing to accept the production as a work of non-fiction theatre. Audiences understand the play's premise as one based-on reality if they recognize the content being presented and are able to relate to the subject's testimonies.

The everyday issues that contemporary verbatim theatre tends to focus on are often broad in scope, allowing a wide range of audiences to relate to the content in one way or another. While such broad focuses ensure the work is more relatable, issues that are unfamiliar to audiences or too narrow in scope may bring an increased sense of skepticism from spectators, which may lead people to question the overall accuracy of the piece. Without prior knowledge before the play, people cannot effectively judge for themselves whether things are presented accurately within the play. However, verbatim works tend to prevent these sorts of judgements by avoiding the hard facts and data of other genres. Instead, such plays often focus on the human-interest elements of issues and events. Even with plays that do include a narrow event or issue, the focus is often on broader themes. An example of this would be Alecky Blythe's

verbatim musical *London Road*, which is set around the 2006 Ipswich serial murders in Suffolk, England. While the work was inspired by specific events, the ultimate focus of the play is on the overall impact of the events on the town's residents (Blythe and Cork). The work is not investigating the murders themselves, nor is it seeking to provide definitive answers as to what happened, instead the artists are concerned with the human experience of the community members and the impact of these events on their lives. The overall fabric of the community is at the heart of this piece; a topic anyone can relate to. By avoiding the investigative reporting styles that may be common in other forms of documentary theatre, verbatim prioritizes broad issues and themes, ensuring greater relatability on behalf of audiences, leading spectators to accept the work's promise of truth.

Ultimately, verbatim theatre uses certain strategies, such as the preservation of ordinary citizens' testimonies as well as a focus on familiar issues and events, to provide accurate depictions of the everyday. If the works succeed in their mission to present accurate depictions of reality, providing an impression of truth, audiences are likely to accept the narratives as true, allowing spectators to form meaningful connections between the stories presented on stage and their own lives, which may ultimately lead people to future democratic action.

VERBATIM AND AUTHENTICITY

While the previous section of this chapter explored the ways verbatim theatre represents truth on-stage and the ways audiences are led to accept the works as accurate portrayals of reality, this next section will focus more closely on issues of authenticity, examining the ways verbatim aims to provide audiences with experiences of authenticity. As a truth-based genre, verbatim theatre offers up authentic portrayals of real people, as evidenced by the genre's

commitment to verbatim recreations of subject testimony. The notion of authenticity is concerned with the ways these representations feel real and genuine to the audiences. By staging highly accurate representations of real people, verbatim theatre allows spectators to hear directly from the those who are impacted by the events the work is focused on. According to Amanda Stewart Fisher, the representation of interviews and testimonies, verbatim, "promises a more direct and authentic access to actual lived experience" (*Trauma, Authenticity, and the Limits of Verbatim* 112). It is the preservation of real people's testimonies, in a manner that focuses on putting ordinary citizens front and centre, allowing audiences to engage with perspectives in a live and communal setting, emphasizing the genre's commitment to authenticity.

In the previous section I stated that verbatim's almost exact recreation of subject testimony is one of the genre's key truth-markers. While the genre focuses heavily on recreating as much of the original testimony as possible, simply rehashing original words verbatim is not an effective indicator of a work's true authenticity. Ultimately, verbatim plays feature many different perspectives, with testimonies altered and edited to provide an authentic picture of the diversity of perspectives within a chosen community. As Michael Anderson and Linden Wilkinson argue, "verbatim recounting" is not a good metric for evaluating a work's authenticity as it ignores the ways testimonies change when they are adapted for the stage (*A Resurgence of Verbatim Theatre* 155). As a theatrical medium, verbatim theatre promises close replication of subject testimonies, in a manner that uses creative practice to foster empathetic connections between subject and audience member. The artists capture the essence of the subject's humanity through the staged recreations of their testimonies. These works often combine dozens of people's stories into a succinct performance, as such, artists may edit or further alter some of the testimonies to fit within the play. Ultimately, what is left is a kaleidoscope of different

perspectives, with a coherent narrative that is capable of evoking emotional reactions among audience members. While the content on stage closely resembles the original testimony, allowing audiences to accept elements of the truth premise, the enjoyment of authentic experiences comes from the ways artists weave together different voices to highlight issues of common human interest.

Unlike other genres, which may abstract portions of testimony or certain elements of individual's real stories, verbatim theatre promises to limit outside influence, allowing for recreations that are closely based on reality. The interviewee often has a great deal of control over the ways their stories are preserved, at least in terms of the ways testimonies are gathered. Unlike other documentary plays, which build their scripts based on testimonies from transcripts and other pre-existing documents, subjects are often invited by the artist to provide their testimony for the express purpose of verbatim theatre. While the final script is in the hands of the playwright, verbatim theatre goes to great lengths to ensure participant involvement and authority in the recording process, which is unique to the genre. Andrew Potter (*The Authenticity Hoax*) notes that society's hunger for authentic material connects to a desire for experiences that feel "real." As such, individuals are encouraged to "keep it real" or "be true" to themselves (29). Verbatim directly encourages citizens to be true to themselves by allowing people to share their stories and experiences in a manner that prioritizes accurate representations, as subjects often speak directly with the artists, providing testimonies in their own terms. The portrayal is authentic, but so are the testimonies themselves. Participants are often encouraged to share their stories in an organic and truthful manner, free from unnecessary censorship or coercion. Artists often go directly to the subjects, seeking out people for interviews, and then letting individuals share their experiences in their own way. The testimonies featured in verbatim theatre are

"authentic" in that the subject is free to express themselves in an open manner, with the understanding that the artist is likely to recreate the testimonies as accurately as possible.

The recreation of subject testimonies contributes to the overall authenticity of the play, as the words taken from ordinary citizens makes for content that feels real and genuine to audiences. By collecting testimonies in this nature, artists ensure an authentic dialogue, which will feel relatable and familiar, allowing spectators to experience the illusion of authenticity. Kelsey Jacobson's term "real-ish-ness" perfectly captures this tension between reality and authenticity in these works, describing a moment that "feels real even if it is not entirely, factually, historically, or truthfully real" (*Through the Fictive to the Real(ish)* 46). While not writing about verbatim theatre, Jacobson is concerned with drama that holds a close connection to reality but cannot possibly recreate all the elements that make something completely "real." In writing about Rising Tide Theatre's *Trinity Pageant,* Jacobson notes a scene where actors portraying eighteenth-century fishermen mimic many of the process of fishing which were popular at the time. While the scene does not provide an exact recreation of the retrieval and the preparation of the fish - the actors use "fake" fish in their portrayal - Jacobson notes that the performers are authentically recreating many of the labour methods. Aside from the presence of the fake fish, the other elements closely resemble the authentic labour process. Jacobson states that many productions based on reality "ride the line" between truth and fiction (*Feeling Real* 19). While the work is a piece of theatre and thus cannot completely recreate all of the original elements from the initial testimony, the preservation of exact words leads to content that feels authentic even though it is not a complete recreation of reality.

When verbatim theatre succeeds in creating accurate depictions of real people, particularly their words, audiences have the ability to experience moments of authenticity unseen

in many other forms of theatre. Given the contemporary desire many people have for authentic experiences, verbatim is able to offer up these experiences in a truthful manner, allowing audiences to form meaningful connections with fellow citizens through performance. Paired with the fact that such works often focus on issues or events of particular relevance to the audience's lives, these accurate portrayals create meaningful and authentic connections between audience and subject, which in turn will help the genre in its quest to facilitate political discourse.

Challenges to Verbatim's representation of truth

The previous two sections of this chapter have examined the ways verbatim theatre promises truthful recreations of citizens testimonies, which ultimately has the potential to feed into society's desire for authentic experiences. Given the genre's mission to facilitate genuine political discourse and democratic participation, it is critical that spectators accept this premise of truth and authenticity. This next section will consider some of the potential challenges verbatim artists are likely to face in this endeavour, as well as possible criticisms the genre may encounter regarding its commitment to truth, and the ways contemporary works may avoid these sorts of difficulties.

Continuing from the notion that verbatim theatre provides truth-based and authentic depictions of reality, the testimonies prioritized within the genre are often emotional in nature, questioning the ways citizens respond to important issues and events. As such, the genre often relies on empathy and emotion as its main source of truth or authenticity. Unlike other forms of documentary theatre, the genre rarely draws on raw data or other documents for objective analysis of fact. Instead, testimonies from ordinary individuals focus on how people "feel" about events and issues, as opposed to determining the hard facts of what transpired. Where politics is

concerned, testimonies may focus on the ways issues and events impact regular people. While not based on objective data, the personal anecdotes that result from interviews often shed light on the ways policy is experienced by ordinary people on an everyday level and the human toll of issues such as racism or homophobia.

Verbatim's depiction of issues that elicit emotional reactions among participants and spectators connects to another potential challenge, the genre's connection to issues that are familiar in nature. Artists who choose to represent familiar topics, such as events audiences likely have some prior knowledge of, may open the work up to increased scrutiny on behalf of spectators. For example, the play *Seeds* deals with the high-profile case of Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser who was accused by illegally growing seeds owned and controlled by the corporation Monsanto. Audiences at productions in cities like Toronto or Montreal may have some previous knowledge of Schmeiser and the case against him, given the fact that the case was reported on within the mainstream media. In these instances, audiences may remember seeing Percy Schmeiser on television, which could lead them to make judgements about the play's overall portrayal of these people and events. Like the issue of transparency, topics that are familiar to audiences come with increased challenges as the public is more equipped to judge the artists' ability to accurately represent the people and issues the play is focused on.

While the genre is often commended for its commitment to providing a voice and platform for ordinary people's perspectives, verbatim theatre may also be criticized for its lack of objectively verifiable facts and data and an over-reliance on personal opinion and emotion, something which I will argue could be to the genre's benefit. When many different perspectives are given equal weight, and personal opinion matters just as much as objective fact, verbatim begins to complicate notions of truth, which could open the genre up to criticism from certain

audiences. However, while an over-reliance on emotion and opinion may present challenges to verbatim's commitment to "truth," the genre's avoidance of objectivist rhetoric and hard data may increase the perceived authenticity, at least to some audiences. In this context, the artists are taking real people's words and actions and recreating them for a witnessing public. What's being presented is the artist's own recorded data— a glimpse into the reality they have observed through the creative process. By presenting these testimonies in an immediate public format, verbatim artists are inviting audiences into the space, to experience the perspectives of their fellow community members. As such, audiences must trust that the representation of subjects' words and actions is done accurately. Instead of offering up absolute objective truths, audiences are reminded that what they are witnessing is an accurate portrayal of authentic subject testimonies, with words taken directly from members of the community, people audiences interact with on a daily basis. If the work clearly expresses this and the nature of its testimonies, audiences can judge the accuracy of testimonies separately from the work's overall commitment to truth.

In terms of the audience's ability to judge the accuracy of the work, it is important to consider how verbatim theatre acknowledges its commitment to truth. In other words, how are audiences made to know that the play is a work of verbatim theatre? Sometimes, the play's commitment to truth is outwardly stated at the beginning of the performance, as Ellen Peirson-Hagger observes: "Everything that follows is true." Often, these performances will represent elements of the playmaking process to show how verbatim practices are utilized. Ultimately, this directly showcases the play's commitment to truthful recreations of citizens' testimonies, adding a sense of transparency to the work. These representations may include interviews or other elements of the artistic process. For example, in *Seeds,* Annabel Soutar the playwright represents

herself in the work as a character; in the play Annabel is seen conducting interviews with subjects and collecting other data for the piece. As a result, audiences can identify elements of the creative process and see for themselves the ways the artists have attempted to craft a work based closely on real events. This self-referential behaviour allows verbatim theatre to alert audiences to the fact that the work is based on truth; spectators can see for themselves how the play was created and then judge whether they believe the artists have succeeded in presenting a truthful account of the events. Joanna Krakowska suggests that such practices have the potential to expose the "backstage of the theatrical process" (*Auto-Theatre in the Age of Post-Truth* 02) which may bring about an increased sense of transparency and legitimacy. By showcasing how the work is made, artists are legitimizing their creative practices. Where verbatim theatre is concerned, this has the potential to highlight the artist's commitment to truth and accuracy. However, while these verbatim characteristics increase the work's sense of transparency, it may also open the play up to increased scrutiny. In terms of the play's commitment to truth, audiences are more fully equipped to judge whether the artists have done their job to ensure that the work is a truthful recreation of real people and events.

Overall, verbatim theatre may open itself up to potential skepticism from audiences due to the fact that the genre is so openly committed to authentic representations of real people and events. While the works examined in this thesis go to great lengths to alert audiences to their commitment to truth, it is important to note that skepticism on behalf of the audience does not necessarily take away from the genre's ability to foster experiences of authenticity. Connecting back to the notion that verbatim primarily focuses on empathy building as a main source of truth and authenticity, all works provide the opportunity for audiences to "simultaneously reflect on a play's content intellectually and to experience the characters' stories emotionally" (Wilkinson and

Anderson 156). The ability for audiences to take something meaningful from the production rests on the fact that the content connects to a shared reality. That is, what the audience is witnessing is something that connects to everyone's existence as members of a community. By questioning the truth-based elements of the work, audiences are still able to experience the emotional connections that are fostered by the genre, while realizing its potential shortcomings, making for more conscious consumers of media and information. However, it is now possible that external issues related to contemporary society's understanding of truth and authenticity may in fact jeopardize the genre's ability to create authentic experiences based on truthful recreations.

VERBATIM THEATRE AMID THE RISE OF POST-TRUTH

This section of the chapter will consider the ways verbatim theatre is impacted by the rise of post-truth. First, I will seek to provide an overview of the post-truth phenomenon, considering the ways it impacts society's response to truth-based media. Then, I will examine the overall impacts such attitudes have on politics and democracy and the ability for individuals to engage in civil democratic discourse. Lastly, I will consider the ways contemporary verbatim theatre has been and will be impacted by the rise of post-truth, hypothesizing whether a genre committed to truthful recreations of people and events can survive an era where the very notions of truth and reality have become such polarizing topics.

Post-truth is understood as an era in which opinion and emotion matter just as much, if not more, than facts and data. The term's rise in popularity, as well as the emergence of a contemporary "post-truth era," has been attributed to the United States presidency of Donald Trump, in particular Trump and his staff's rhetoric regarding alternative facts, fake news, and the ways his words were interpreted by the mainstream media. According to C.G. Prado, "Users of

post-truth see themselves as expressing their opinions, but opinions that call for no verification, and in being their opinions, are on a par with anyone else's opinions" (*The New Subjectivism* 2). Such opinions may feel true to the individual who holds them, based on their own feelings or emotions, but they often "have no basis in fact" (1). Those who subscribe to post-truth, as Prado argues, have begun to accept it as a "fresh self-assertiveness" (2), which values the ways individuals respond to and understand the world around them. According to Matt Jones, "the importance of emotion over evidence is at the heart of the definition of post-truth" (Jones E-1). Our own emotional response to and understanding of information is critical in shaping whether we understand something as true or false. These sorts of attitudes are not inherently wrong at the surface level; society has taken great strides in recent years to accept individuals' own experiences and lived truth as something which should be respected and taken seriously, especially when dealing with potentially complicated subject-matter. However, on a deeper, and darker level, the rise of post-truth has the potential to erode the public's entire understanding of reality: "post-truth and its correlatives-post-facts and fake news-quickly came to stand in for a culture that values emotional attachment and loud opinionating over knowledge derived through evidence" (Jones E-1). The problem now is that it has become so easy for individuals to cast doubt over the legitimacy of information they do not agree with, so much so that society can't even agree on what actually makes something true. When our very understanding of what it means for something to be true is dismantled, the legitimacy of truth-based media becomes extremely precarious. Where verbatim theatre is concerned, such attitudes have the potential to seriously threaten the very existence of a genre so acutely focused on truth and authenticity.

One of the consequences of the rise of post-truth is that factions within society have become increasingly skeptical of the legitimacy of news media. If opinion begins to outrank facts

and logic, individuals may be more likely to doubt the accuracy of truth-based reporting because it fails to align with their interpretation of events or issues. If people believe something to be true, in a post-truth context they are unlikely to change their opinion despite the presence of contradictory evidence. In these circumstances, such information is likely to be viewed as misleading and biased based on the political leanings of the institution gathering and disseminating the facts (van der Linden, et al., 5-6). While most contemporary criticism of post-truth is shaped by an objectivist understanding of fact, Prado notes other understandings of the phenomenon that characterize post-truth as "describing debate that is based on passion and emotion rather than reason and evidence" (6). Again, the focus is on understanding events that are based on an individual's own emotional reactions as opposed to reasoned analysis. As Greg Kelly writes, post-truth questions the integrity of institutions of power, such as the government, military, news media, and the church (40). In a post-truth era, such bodies come under increased scrutiny for their use of perceived propaganda and forcing their own narrative biases on an unwitting public. Connecting Kelly and Prado, those who hold post-truth sentiments often feel lied to or misled by these institutions of power, which typically manifests through emotionally charged debate. This is especially the case with the mainstream media, as post-truth holders argue that such entities simply reinforce their own political biases over a commitment to truth and accuracy (Kransi 4). This largely becomes a problem when the media's reporting of events differs from people's perceptions of what really happened.

The 2020 United States Presidential Election presents a good case study of the ways holders of post-truth challenge the mainstream media's reporting of events. In the weeks leading up to the election, then-President Trump uttered numerous statements challenging the accuracy of mail-in voting, despite a plethora of evidence suggesting otherwise (Parks). Trump's

supporters continued to utter statements backing the notion of electoral fraud, long after the results had been reported and verified by government officials (Beavers and Wu). Despite the media's calling of the election in Joe Biden's favour, even by conservative outlets, people continued to hold on to the belief that the election had been "stolen" from Trump, due to fraudulent practices, even after these claims were completely debunked (Wolfe, 2022). For the millions of people who hold these beliefs, it doesn't matter that nearly all data on the election proves that Biden won it fairly, these individuals simply believe Trump won and that the mainstream media is complicit in a cover up.

While negative attitudes towards the news media are particularly troubling, and question the very existence of truth and logic, an increased consciousness towards propaganda and other practices may also be seen as a positive where society is concerned. Members of the public are becoming more aware of the potential harmful practices which allow institutions (such as the government) to peddle their own agenda without some form of public questioning. As a result of post-truth attitudes, society is more aware of the institutional spin and are more likely to question these bodies of power. In this sense, such attitudes are seen in a positive light; surely greater accountability and transparency will actually make the public more informed. However, contemporary North American society is filled with examples of such attitudes going too far, challenging the ability of any institution to distribute truthful information. The response towards COVID-19 public health measures from certain segments of the population is a great example of this. Despite measures and communication that is backed by peer-reviewed infectious disease research, for some segments of the population, these efforts simply reinforce the theory of a global hoax (Hunt).

Throughout the entire pandemic, society has been forced to question the truthfulness of a wide range of information, as everyday citizens make judgments on the accuracy of scientific research, the efficacy of vaccines and masks, and the expertise of doctors and other health care professionals. The rise of post truth, aided by the Trump presidency, helped to set up a society that was increasingly skeptical of data, casting aside information that does not align their interpretation of reality, which may have been corrupted by conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation. COVID-19 has also been the most prevalent everyday issue for the last two years, with the pandemic and health measures dominating the public discourse since early 2020. Moving into a post-covid context these attitudes are likely to disappear even as restrictions loosen, and people return to some form of pre-pandemic "normal." For those who have doubted the expertise of doctors regarding the pandemic, how will they react to information on other public health matters? The networks of conspiracy theorists are likely to find new issues to rally against. Even for people who have been forced to "make sense" of complicated public health data, there may be a feeling that expertise is unwarranted, even if average people lack the skills to critically analyze such information. As post-truth attitudes rise it is possible the post-covid era will be one in which these beliefs continue to invade our public discourse, eroding certain people's trust in governments and experts' ability to tell the truth, as people shut out any dissenting perspectives. The entire notion of a post-truth "era" is representative of the fact that such skepticism is perhaps going too far, challenging the very concepts of truth and reality.

Verbatim Practices and Post-Truth Attitudes Given that post-truth often challenges the veracity of truth-based media, such attitudes may threaten the ability for verbatim theatre to provide accurate and truthful recreations of events and issues. However, while aspects of the genre's

mission may be challenged due to the rise of post-truth sentiments, verbatim itself may actually play a role in contributing to the emergence of such attitudes. Given that verbatim theatre often focuses on individuals' own emotional reactions to issues and events, the genre is one that models certain post-truth behaviours. Artists are not necessarily guided by a singular objective understanding of events, instead, they seek to gather a kaleidoscope of testimonies, allowing citizens to empathize with the voices of their fellow community members. These practices align with post-truth in that the focus is often on emotion and opinion, with everyone having a voice and a platform. In verbatim theatre, most voices are given equal weight - often the artists do not seek to identify which perspectives they believe to be true. Given these practices, it is possible that verbatim theatre may inadvertently be legitimizing the rise of post-truth attitudes. If the genre is prioritizing emotional-based testimonies, which stress personal opinion over data analysis, how does this contribute to the public's attitudes towards other forms of truth-based media? One possibility is that such theatre may continue to legitimize opinion as a valid form of truth; if the genre succeeds in creating authentic experiences for audiences, the ways it presents truth may become more widely accepted as accurate.

Verbatim's tendency to prioritize personal opinion over data may play into the narrative that facts and truth no longer matter. Jenn Stephenson (*Insecurity*) argues that in a time of increased uncertainty amid the rise of post-truth, verbatim and other documentary artists are learning to "embrace" such insecurities, to allow society to both "care about reality" but "still be in doubt" (230). As Stephenson observes, contemporary truth-based works tend to embrace the impossibility of knowing. Verbatim theatre is not able to provide a "stable documentary or authentic reality" (17). Instead, these performances actually focus on the impossibility of guaranteed reality, within which it is accepted that multiple truths are possible, and that objective

data is anything but. According to Stephenson, "certainty of knowledge as a goal is set aside in favour of self-reflexive consideration of how can we effectively live in doubt" (17), suggesting that such theatre encourages audiences to accept the complexities of reality, living with comfort in the insecurity. Ryan Claycomb draws on Stephenson to suggest that contemporary verbatim theatre "no longer points the way toward real political progress but toward… insecurity" (*Verbatim in the Lurch* 17). Where post-truth is concerned, theatre that embraces a sense of insecurity can avoid definitive notions of truth and fact, representing reality with a heavy focus on the notion that we cannot know all. It is not theatre's job to provide one objective truth. By accepting and finding comfort in the unknown, it is possible that these works may further legitimize the plight of post-truth subscribers, complicating our understanding of what makes something true.

While verbatim theatre may give rise to some of the attitudes within the post truth movement, the genre can also avoid the overt promotion of some of the more harmful beliefs of the current era, with many of the examples studied in this thesis going to great lengths to avoid a sort of truth de-legitimization. Contemporary verbatim artists tend to steer clear from making judgement calls on the veracity of events or issues; artists are unlikely to use their work to determine what is true or false. Instead, verbatim theatre now has a tendency to provide a snapshot of reality through a deliberate act of neutrality, presenting real people's thoughts and opinions in a rather organic form, allowing audiences of various political affiliations to reach their own conclusions, regardless of their ideological leaning. For example, in *Seeds*, Soutar does not consider whether Percy Schmeiser is guilty or innocent, instead, the work is largely focused on the real people the case has impacted, trying to better understand their own involvement in the affairs, as a commentary on genetically modified organisms. While these practices are not

completely void of risk where truth is concerned— it is still possible for audiences to take these personal statements as absolute fact— the work can steer clear of these concerns if it avoids interviews that take an objectivist, singular, definition of fact. In a contemporary post-truth context, works that provide audiences with a glimpse at reality without making statements on the overall legitimacy of truth, may better equipped at navigating these waters. If these practices are the new norm within the genre, verbatim theatre may be able to survive the current post-truth era, without reinforcing some of its more problematic tendencies.

Post-Truth and its Impact on Democracy The rise of post-truth presents many challenges towards society, from a lack of trust in mainstream media to a spike in political disagreements, society has become increasingly divided as a result of the attitudes created by the post-truth era. As such, the strength of our democracy is being called into question; how can democracy survive an era in which the notion of truth is so complicated, and society seemingly has very little trust in its governments and institutions? Given that democracy relies on many citizens coming together to collectively make decisions, people need to agree on fundamental principles of reality. When the legitimacy of institutions, such as the voting system, are called into question, it complicates the overall functionality of democracy. Believers in post-truth are unlikely to place their trust in institutions and systems they do not see as legitimate. As Paul Valadier notes in his article on the potential threat of post-truth on democracy, a rise of misinformation "removes the possibility of that basic confidence that allows a minimum level of peace and security" without which we have the potential to descend into a "state of nature" (*Post-Truth: A danger to democracy* 7). The threat here is that as the public feels lied to by institutions such as the state or the media, the principles necessary for a democratic society begin to collapse. Without the "peace and security"

afforded by strong institutions, such as a stable bank or electoral system, anarchy isn't far off. Where activities like voting are concerned, post-truth casts doubt over whether free and fair elections can be effectively carried out. Concerns over the legitimacy of the democratic process are neither new nor unwarranted. There is a necessary level of trust between citizens and these institutions, a relationship that Valadier argues "must be tested, and it must demonstrate its fruitfulness" (8). However, the level of mistrust being placed on these institutions as a result of post-truth is cause for concern. One such example of this is Donald Trump's aforementioned response to the results of the 2020 US Presidential election, and the ensuing insurrection that occurred on Capitol Hill as a result. Post-truth attitudes have the potential to cause large segments of the population to doubt or completely disregard the outcomes of the democratic process. When this happens, our institutions are unable to effectively carryout the process required in a democracy. Overall, post-truth sentiments present a difficult challenge for democracies. Not only do institutions come under increased criticism, but the overall legitimacy of democratically elected governments is now being called into question. The results may prove catastrophic.

Where verbatim theatre is concerned, the legitimacy of democracy amid the rise of post-truth presents many challenges for a genre focused on using theatre to facilitate democratic participation. While verbatim may not be subject to the same scrutiny as other systems and institutions, it still relies on public trust in order to attain its political and democratic goals. If the public is distrusting of democracies and their institutions, the ability for verbatim to influence people's participation within democratic settings may become significantly strained, as audiences may be unlikely to accept the democratic principles the work is attempting to engage. When people question the legitimacy of institutions, it is unlikely the work will be able to

facilitate increased democratic action. For example, if one of the goals of the work is to inform voters of an important political issue, in the hopes that they will somehow alter their voting behaviours, artists may become challenged if audiences chose not to participate within these institutions, such as the electoral system. As written about in the previous chapter, verbatim theatre's relationship politics is closely aligned with the principles of democracy. When people begin to lose faith in these vital democratic institutions, the genre may also lose out on its ability to facilitate further action. If audiences are unwilling to participate in the formal processes of democracy, how will these works continue to foster a sense of democratic participation? The answer likely comes by looking at alternative methods of action. As mentioned in the previous chapter, voting is not the only effective form of democratic participation. To take part in democracy, citizens are not required to involve themselves directly with specific bodies of power. What's key is the acceptance of democratic principles, such as everyone having a say in decision making powers, or the grassroots ability for ordinary citizens to effect change. Verbatim theatre is still able to foster a sense of engagement and participation within democratic activities, without explicitly endorsing specific institutions. Returning to the concerns presented by post-truth towards the ability of verbatim theatre to foster democratic participation, artists are likely best off when they avoid specific institutions and view democracy in a broad sense. If artists can do this and avoid reference to topics that take an objectivist view of truth and reality, the genre may be able to safely navigate this current post-truth climate.

Aside from a shift towards broad democratic participation, verbatim's focus on empathy and emotion may prove helpful as the genre contends with the rise of post-truth. While such forms of authenticity bring about certain concerns surrounding the genre's commitment to objective truth, such a focus can mend some of the damages to society that post-truth has caused.

In writing about the impact of post-truth on auto-theatre— a form of documentary theatre in which real people are presented as themselves on-stage— Krakowska argues that such theatre has the potential to re-establish forms of communication which have been lost because of the rise of post-truth movements, and the political divisions that come with it. According to Krakowska, auto-theatre has the potential to reduce society from these divisions through its ability to foster dialogue and empathy-building amongst local communities (03). This is something verbatim theatre actively engages with, using the testimonies to weave together a tapestry of community voices, allowing audiences to hear from people they can empathize with. Considering the need for verbatim to focus on broad issues of community interest, as opposed to specific political events and figures, the genre can facilitate an empathy building exercise on issues that are of vital importance to the community. If the genre can bring people together and allow audiences to learn from the experiences of fellow community members as well as those from marginalized backgrounds, verbatim may be able to repair some of the fractures within contemporary democratic societies.

Overall, contemporary verbatim theatre finds itself in a very fragile situation. Post-truth sentiments have begun to threaten the genre's continued ability to represent the voices of real people, in an attempt to create authentic experiences that foster democratic discourse through empathy building. However, the genre is showing signs that it is capable of adapting to some of these attitudes, while not completely legitimizing the entire post-truth movement. By avoiding objectivist rhetoric on singular truth, and instead focusing on the ways issues and events impact a wide range of people, verbatim theatre can still provide truth-based representations in a manner that may protect itself from intense post-truth criticism. If audiences continue to accept

verbatim's promise of truth and authenticity, the genre's overall ability to facilitate political discourse and democratic participation may be kept intact.

Chapter Four: Verbatim Theatre in Action – A Case Study on Porte Parole's *The Assembly-Montreal* and Liza Balkan's *Out the Window*

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters of this thesis included examples from the play *The Laramie Project* as an examination of the ways verbatim methodologies are used to foster political discourse. As the chapter on post-truth revealed, the genre is at a crossroads, with contemporary works forced to navigate a challenge to verbatim's foundations as a truth-based genre, which then threatens verbatim's quest to meaningfully represent political issues and inspire democratic participation. This chapter will study two recent examples of verbatim theatre— Porte Parole's *The Assembly-Montreal* and Liza Balkan's *Out the Window*— considering the ways each play represents shifting trends within the genre. The first section will explore how each work embodies familiar verbatim methodologies, such as the representation of ordinary citizens' testimonies in a manner committed to truthful recreation. Next, I will analyze the two works in relation to their depiction of political issues and events in an effort to facilitate discourse and inspire democratic participation. Finally, the chapter will look at how each play embodies notions of truth and authenticity, questioning the overall potential for the works to be accepted as truth-based by audiences. Overall, this chapter will provide an overview of the kinds of works being undertaken by contemporary verbatim artists and, in particular the ways artists are forced to navigate many challenges when dealing with the complicated social and political realities of the day. This chapter will help lay the groundwork for the thesis's conclusion which will examine the future relevance of the genre.

Why these plays? By focusing on these specific works as part of this case study, I will draw attention to the evolution that has occurred within the verbatim movement over the past two-plus

decades. *The Laramie Project*, which has been explored in previous chapters, is perhaps the most popular example of North American verbatim theatre. The play utilizes verbatim methodologies to interrogate events surrounding the murder of Matthew Shepard. *Laramie* is a well-known example of verbatim theatre; it is a work that features many of the characteristics that typified the movement in the early-twenty-first century. Practices such as collective creation, local community representation, and 'black box' minimalist scenography are on full display in *Laramie* and worked to inspire a generation of verbatim productions. However, *Laramie* is also representative of characteristics that are no longer common in contemporary verbatim theatre, with modern artists moving away from some of the methods we see in this quintessential example of the genre. Porte Parole's series *The Assembly* and Liza Balkan's *Out the Window* represent a marked departure from some of the practices represented in plays like *Laramie*, with contemporary artists moving away from collective creation and geographic-based representations of community, ushering in a new era of verbatim. There are similarities among most forms of verbatim, regardless of the era, such as truth-based recreations of ordinary people's words. However, the ways *The Assembly* and *Out the Window* represent reality and engage in contemporary political discourse help to set the current movement apart from early examples of the genre. Ultimately, a thorough examination of *The Assembly* and *Out the Window*– in accordance with the three categories this chapter is concerned with: verbatim dramaturgies, political discourse, and truth-based representations– may provide a glimpse into the potential future of verbatim theatre, specifically the ways the genre can confront some of the challenges presented by the rise of post-truth.

PRODUCTION HISTORIES

The Assembly-Montreal by Alex Ivaonvici, Annabel Soutar, and Brett Watson is a 2018 chapter of Porte Parole's *Assembly* series; a verbatim theatre project focused on bringing people of various political ideologies together for a discussion on a wide range of topics. The series first began in 2017 and features artists traveling to different cities to set up and record interactions between complete strangers in which the individuals are encouraged to open up about various political issues. According to the company, "a play script is created from the verbatim content of these recorded encounters and, on stage, actors play the four real-life characters in unique play, specific to each city" (Porte Parole). In total, Porte Parole has completed six editions of *The Assembly*. The project comes at a time in which society has become increasingly divided, congregating at opposite ends of the political spectrum, with those on the left and right constantly pitted against one another on virtually every ideological issue. The specific production brought together four random people from Montreal in December of 2017, for a discussion on contemporary political issues, most notably the rise of Donald Trump and his divisive rhetoric on immigration. The encounters were recorded by playwrights Alex Ivanovici and Brett Watson, with the two acting as moderators throughout the discussion. Ultimately, the work is an examination on the state of democracy amid the rise of mass division and hyperpolarization. *The Assembly-Montreal* was first performed in Toronto and Montreal throughout the fall of 2018 and was directed by Chris Abraham. The cast included Jimmy Blais, Sean Colby, Tanja Jacobs, and Ngozi Paul, with Ivanovici and Watson appearing as themselves.

Out the Window is a verbatim play written by Toronto artist Liza Balkan. The work is a verbatim documentary project focused on Balkan's experience as a witness in the criminal trial of the Toronto police officers involved in the 2000 death of Otto Vass. On August 9th, 2000,

Otto Vass, a 55-year-old father of five was involved in a violent altercation with several members of the Toronto police force, an interaction which cost Vass his life. That evening, four police officers were called to a Toronto 7-11 convenience store where Vass had allegedly been involved in an "altercation with three teens" (Pagliaro). Upon arriving at the scene, the officers quickly became involved in a violent interaction with Mr. Vass, which ultimately resulted in the 55-year-old succumbing to injuries after being kicked and beaten (Dechausay). Toronto theatre-artist Liza Balkan was a witness to the incident between Vass and the officers, as she watched the events play out from her apartment window which overlooked the 7/11. (Rush). As a witness to the incident, Balkan became involved in the lengthy legal process involving the four officers who were formally charged with manslaughter; in November 2003, all four were acquitted of the charges after the court learned that Vass suffered from long-standing mental health issues and had a "predisposition towards violence" (Di Mano).

As a result of being a key witness in such a high-profile case, and the difficulties surrounding the eventual verdict, Balkan struggled with the entire experience. In a 2018 interview with CBC, the artist opened up about the ways the events had impacted her: "I was very messed up from having, first of all, witnessed it, and then going through the justice system and experiencing what happened on the stand with me, to me, for me" (Dechausay). Several years after the trial, Balkan was called upon in the subsequent coroner's inquest, a process which required her to review pages of court documents, which she thought might suit a dramatic setting. "That's when I realized how compelling the material was-how shocking the transcripts are" (Verdecchia 20). In 2007, Balkan was invited to create an installation utilizing the court transcripts, as part of Factory Theatre's LabCab festival. From there, Balkan continued to work on the project as part of a two-year residency at The Theatre Centre, where she turned the piece

into a fully-fledged verbatim play (Verdecchia 21). In 2018, an updated version of *Out the Window* was staged as part of Toronto's Luminato festival. That performance, which is the subject of review in this chapter, was directed by Sarah Garten Stanley, and featured a cast of Sarah Kitz, David Ferry, RH Thompson, Peyson Rock, Brett Donahue, Richard Lee, and James Graham.

VERBATIM METHODOLOGIES

As per the first chapter of this thesis, there are several distinct dramaturgical characteristics that differentiate verbatim from other examples of documentary theatre. One example is that verbatim theatre's dialogue is often comprised, almost exclusively, of the testimonies of real people, which are then recreated on stage, verbatim. With these re-stagings, it is common for dialogue to resemble everyday speech, with scripts that closely recreate the patterns of ordinary language use. Another common technique is the sourcing of material from a wide range of interview subjects, often representing the words of ordinary people over high-profile public figures. With verbatim theatre it is not uncommon for works to include many different characters, all with unique backgrounds and opinions. As such, works do not always include well-rounded and developed characters. Instead, audiences are provided with sometimes dozens of different voices, which further the overall perspective of the community. With these communal interrogations comes a focus on issues that are grassroots in nature, concerned with the here and now and the ways people are impacted on an everyday level. Ultimately, verbatim practices reinforce the genre's commitment to truth and authenticity in a manner that provides accurate recreations of real people's words. The remainder of this section will consider some of these techniques and the ways they are utilized in the works I have chosen to study.

The Assembly Porte Parole's *The Assembly* provides many examples of the ways the verbatim movement has evolved in the two-plus decades since *Laramie,* specifically the methods used by artists to stage interactions between ordinary people. Through the play's script, *The Assembly* carries on the verbatim tradition of recording and recreating the testimonies of real people in a manner that focuses on replicating original words verbatim. The subjects' statements are preserved within the piece and brought to life on stage by a team of actors. With the recreation of subject testimonies comes the preservation of original language and speech; each participant's natural speech patterns are recreated as close to the original as possible with repetitions, hesitations, and pauses common throughout. For example, in a moment where Brett Watson is trying to reiterate the rules of the assembly to the group of participants, his dialogue includes many pauses and hesitations: "It's just, if you guys could just keep it cool, I mean argue as much as you want but let's just, let's just… uh yeah. Anyway…" (Porte Parole). These words feel real because they evoke Watson the artist's uncertainty in the moment and desire to get the conversation back on track. Stylistic choices are also made to further this commitment to accurate recreations. When representing these political encounters on stage, the artists maintain as many elements from the original experience as possible. From the outset, the stage is set up to closely resemble the original dinner party, with a round table at centre stage, and microphones at every seat with two computers on opposite ends of the table. Cameras are focused on each of the four participants with their image displayed on a live overhead monitor. In terms of scenography, the play's design elements are meant to evoke a sense of documentation; the interactions are being staged for the purpose of recording citizens' testimonies which are then recreated by the artists. A number of different encounters are pieced together into one: however, breaks in

dialogue are common with clear separations existing between group interactions and conversations between the participants and the artists. In breaks from the main conversation, participants get up from the table and often walk to the edge of the stage where they discuss matters with the artists. An example of this is an interaction that occurs between James and the two artists, where they are discussing Valerie's behaviours, while away standing away from the table:

> "Watson: So, what do you think of Valerie's views?
>
> James: I think there's a lot of people who share those views.
>
> Watson: Oh yeah?
>
> James: Yeah
>
> Ivanovici: So, would you say she's alt-right though?
>
> James: I don't even know if alt-right has a textbook definition
>
> Ivanovici: Right
>
> James: I mean, some of her views were definitely aligned with the alt-right…" (Porte Parole).

Even though these moments mark a departure from the main conversation among the four participants, they are handled in a manner that reinforces the realness of the entire piece, with similar dialogue structures and staging used to reference the verbatim nature of the play's dialogue. Overall, the script and design elements evoke a sense of realness within the work, with audiences experiencing a restaging that closely resembles the original encounter captured by the artists.

While the sourcing of original testimonies is key to creating authentic dialogue within the play, it is also important for productions to establish characters that closely resemble the real

people the work is based on. Unlike some forms of documentary theatre, the subjects behind *The Assembly* do not represent themselves on stage, creating a degree of distance between participant and audience. Instead, a team of actors is brought together, portraying the initial subjects and helping to bring the testimonies to life on stage. In earlier examples of verbatim, such as *Laramie*, it is common for actors to play multiple characters. This specific casting dramaturgy furthers the notion of community kaleidoscope with plays providing a diverse range of original voices. The focus is less on the individual person and their identity, but more on the community that is being represented through these works. *The Assembly* however departs from this tradition in that each actor plays a singular character. In doing so, this may allow for stronger, more realistic depictions of real people, as actors are able to put more attention to one character. Derek Paget, citing Barker, states that the performer within documentary theatre acts as a "second-hand" communicator of the original subject's lived experience (327). Allowing actors to focus on just one character may provide a stronger communication of this lived experience. Even though the artist is taking the subject's words and restaging them, the initial participants are given input into the ways they are represented on-stage. Early in the play, Watson and Ivanovici[2] ask each participant how an actor should prepare to play them, giving subjects a sense of ownership over their words and influence into the ways their testimonies are restaged. By asking such a question, the artists inviting participants to have a say in the ways their "characters" are presented in the final piece, with the artists making a conscious effort to increase the legitimacy and transparency of the testimony collection phase. Connecting back to the separation that exists between the original subject and the actor body, actors are able to study the subjects through their recorded

[2] It is worth noting that the two authors play themselves in *The Assembly*, which is not a hallmark of the genre. In this specific play, having the playwrights play themselves reiterates their role as mediators of the political debate. Having the real-life artist onstage re-enforces the power dynamic between artist and participant, with the artist controlling the environment in which the interaction takes place.

testimony, and their decisions as actors may also be influenced by the insights these participants share about themselves. This has the potential to establish strong bonds between audience and subject, as spectators can easily identify with certain perspectives, allowing them to experience authentic connections with the participants they most relate to, while encountering new perspectives. With these strategies in mind, *The Assembly* effectively recreates subject testimonies in a manner committed to strong character development.

With authentic characterization comes another verbatim method that is central to *The Assembly*; the practice of bringing together a wide range of opinions and perspectives on certain political and social matters. Just as *The Laramie Project* sought out a multitude of voices to speak on matters relating to the LGBTQ+ population, *The Assembly* attempts to "set up and record encounters in which four strangers of wildly different ideological leanings face-off and candidly confront the issues that most divide them" (Porte Parole). These encounters are then edited into a script, which was performed on stage by professional actors. The 2018 Toronto production focused on the rise of Trumpism, which included discussions on the pervasiveness of the alt-right movement as well as the threat of "Muslim refugees" on Western civilization (Nestruck). Each of the four individuals entered the space with a unique viewpoint on the issues in question. From this set up, the ensuring debate is representative of a wide range of perspectives, ensuring the work is reflective of the diversity of opinions one might expect in a democratic society.

The presence of diverse political perspectives also speaks to the representation of community within the play, another common trait of verbatim theatre. In terms of the play's understanding of community, the artists share a vision that is based on both location and political identity. The play specifically focuses on a chosen location, Montreal, and seeks out participants

from the city to stage the interaction. While Montreal itself is of little to no importance to the substance of the piece, the project would likely differ significantly if the interaction was staged in a different location, such as Toronto or New York City, as the lived experiences of the subjects is in part a result of the city they live in. However, while a sense of geographic community is important in terms of the way the play chooses its participants, the overall focus of the performance has more to do with social or political communities than it does location-based groupings. The specific setting and location of the piece has little to do with the overall focus of the work, which remains on the people and the ways community is assembled. *The Assembly* and other contemporary plays are more focused on the ways people form "communities" based on social elements such as race, religion, or political affiliation. Ultimately, the play examines the ways such identities divide members of society.

The Assembly sets up encounters between people of differing political ideologies and beliefs, allowing them to interact with one another in a communal setting. In the early stages of the play, the characters discuss their political ideologies and the divisions that exist among them. Throughout the piece, most conversations are geared to the ways specific issues are felt by the individual participant. For example, while debating immigration policies, the characters Shane and Valerie constantly bring the conversation back to their own experiences, and how such policies impact them and their communities. In terms of this representation and its grounding in the verbatim movement, most examples of the genre focus on community issues in one way or another. While some early verbatim works draw heavily on notions of community based on location, exploring issues that impact specific neighbourhoods or strictly defined geographical boundaries, the same cannot be said about *The Assembly*. Along with other contemporary verbatim examples, *The Assembly* works to move beyond location-based understandings of

community, focusing instead on social groupings that exist in society and the ways politics is experienced at this level.

While *The Assembly* includes representation of a diverse range of voices, the play does so with a rather narrow perspective on the issues at hand, as only four interviewees are included in the final project. In the initial pre-production phase, the artists sought out a number of potential participants, which they eventually reduced to the select few voices chosen for the final production. While some examples of verbatim theatre, particularly works that interrogate a specific neighbourhood or geographic community, may include testimonies from dozens of interview subjects, *The Assembly* is much more limited. However, despite the relatively finite number of interview subjects, *The Assembly* still manages to provide a diverse set of perspectives. There is diversity in terms of the racial and gender-based makeup of the subjects, and given its focus on political debate, the play seeks to provide a representation of both ends of the spectrum, as left-wing and right-wing perspectives are included. Even though the production only includes testimonies from four different people, the play can be seen as a representation of the community in that each individual represents a different background and political affiliation, just as the community-at-large is made up of a wide range of identities. While this does allow for some diversity of perspective, in terms of overall quantity, it is impossible for four people to represent all the unique facets of society. While no production can provide 100 per cent accurate representations, however, the limited number of voices included in *The Assembly* necessarily restricts the range of views, with the play presenting a small snapshot of the current political climate. When thinking about the overall dramaturgical implications of this decision, it is clear the artists were attempting to represent a very specific form of communal interaction, a discussion between a select group of people: the sorts of "dinner party" conversations that are

common in society. If this is the aim, the work does take appropriate measures in terms of representing a specific social interaction, however, given its limited perspectives, the play cannot persuasively make broad claims about society-at-large.

Finally, in terms of subject matter, like other contemporary examples of verbatim theatre, *The Assembly* explores issues that are highly relevant to its audiences but may be lost on future theatregoers. Conversations related to the Presidency of Donald Trump are highly specific to the current time and place in which the play was performed. Even in 2022, several years after the specific performance being examined in this chapter, these conversations come across as quite dated. While Donald Trump remains a popular public-figure and issues related to *Trumpism* are still very much at the forefront of contemporary American political discourse, the conversations modeled in the work are no longer a direct representation of the sorts of dialogues citizens are currently engaging in. It is likely that a modern-day production of the same work would feature dialogue on the January 6th Insurrection or the war in Ukraine, as opposed to Trump's policies on Mexican or Muslim immigration. The exact performance in question is representative of the relatively short shelf-life of specific verbatim productions. It would not make sense to take this same performance from 2018 and present to audiences in 2022 without adapting it to contemporary conversations. While the overall methods deployed by Porte Parole speak to universal themes and timeless conversations, such as the topic of mass-polarization, specific events and issues mean the work remains relevant for only a specific period of time. However, the practices utilized in the specific performance are easily transferred to other topics and conversations, which is why *The Assembly* has become a successful series for Porte Parole, allowing artists to stage similar interactions pertaining to a wide range of subject matters.

Overall, *The Assembly* provides a key example of the direction the contemporary verbatim movement may be headed in terms of dramaturgical elements. While remaining committed to the genre's long-standing policies of replicating original testimonies of ordinary people, the production moves away from a narrowminded form of theatrical journalism, to focus on political and conceptual debates of the day. The play is very much a black box production, indicative of previous verbatim works, as the core focus remains on the testimonies of real people, with dramaturgies reflecting the play's overall commitment to the preservation of original words.

Out the Window In her play *Out the Window*, Liza Balkan uses verbatim methodologies to examine various elements of a legal case in which she played a pivotal role as a prime witness. Balkan uses the genre as a means of re-examining the role she played in the case, and the ways her words may or may not have impacted the outcomes of the trial in question. Overall, the work offers a commentary on the state of Canada's criminal justice system and the experiences of witnesses, using the issue of police brutality as its main backdrop. In terms of methods, *Out the Window* represents some traditional verbatim practices, such as the preservation of original subject testimony and the prioritization of diverse perspectives: the same sorts of methods on display in *The Assembly*. However, the verbatim methods I am concerned with in this analysis differ significantly from the dramaturgical strategies deployed by the artists behind *The Assembly*. Principally, Liza Balkan uses the genre of verbatim theatre to further examine her own journey through Canadian criminal justice system in a manner that facilitates discourse among community members and helps raise awareness towards an important social cause.

Like most examples of verbatim theatre, *Out the Window* has a script made up of the testimonies of real people, citizens whose statements have been recorded by the playwright and are recreated on-stage by artists. In terms of dialogue, the play recreates natural language and speech patterns, allowing the words to feel authentic and resemble the ways ordinary people talk. One example of this is the inclusion of speech breaks and hesitations, such as "um' or "uh." "Um, so after the four people beating on him, I think he was subdued, I didn't hear him anymore… I had uh, uh *field glasses* um uh what are they called?" (Balkan 13). This is an example of the ways Balkan has recreated, as close as possible, the original interview recording. Dramaturgically speaking, the presentation of subject testimonies in this manner ensures the authentic recreation of original language in a way that is self-referential and allows audiences to recognize the reality-based nature of the piece. Not only do these speech patterns represent authentic language used by real people, but it also signifies the character Liza's uncertainty about the events in question, as her hesitations provide a lack of assertiveness in comparison to the lawyers she is interacting with on the stand. Overall, the preservation of original subject testimonies, verbatim, is a hallmark of the genre and one that is on full display in *Out the Window*.

While *Out the Window* represents at least one common verbatim tradition, there are several ways in which the work differentiates itself significantly from existing plays within the movement. One way *Out the Window* departs from traditional verbatim practice is through the methods used to collect the testimonies of ordinary subjects. While there are instances of the playwright conducting interviews directly with people involved in the case (such as lawyers), the majority of dialogue is lifted from existing documents, such as court transcripts. The result is a script that is made up of both original testimonies gathered for the purpose of the performance,

as well as statements that are taken from other source material. In terms of the recreation of real people's words and actions, both sources lead to dialogue that is ultra-realistic, however, when the source material is taken from existing documents it adds an additional level of separation between subject and audience, something original interviews seek to remedy by allowing audiences to get as close as possible to the original subject. This marks a departure from existing traditions in that previous verbatim works tended focus almost exclusively on original testimonies gathered for the purpose of the play, as opposed to re-staging existing documents, which dominated the earlier documentary movement. Dramaturgically speaking, the lifting of materials from a wide range of sources ensures diversity in terms of the scripts' overall tone, as the ways individuals speak in recorded interviews may differ from the way subjects' testimonies appear in existing documents like court transcripts or police reports, representing the various ways people give testimony in cases like this.

Aside from dialogue— an important element of the overall production which provides rich examples of various verbatim methods— there are other noteworthy examples of verbatim practices within *Out the Window*, such as the representation of real people. Every character in *Out the Window* is a recreation of a real person. But, unlike *The Assembly*, *Out the Window* features mostly anonymous characters. The only people specifically named within the play are Liza Balkan and Michael Vass, the rest of the subjects appear in reference to their role in the case, such as "Officer 1" or "Lawyer 2." By naming the characters in this manner, Balkan furthers the notion of verbatim as a mosaic of community perspectives, as opposed to just a select number of named individuals. While these characters represent real people, and their dialogue is almost an exact recreation of original testimony, these could be representations of any lawyer or officer. The specific individual's identity is less important than their overall role in

the case in question. While this is not always the case in *Out the Window*, as some characters are representations of one specific person, the various lawyers and police officers represent the roles of different figures in the criminal proceedings and Liza's experience as a witness at trial. These characters are representations of the institutions of power that Liza and Mr. Vass must interact with and/or fight against. In a sense, these characters blend into the background and the focus remains on the experience of Liza Balkan as a reflection of her role in the events in question. It is also possible that given the high-profile nature of the case, Balkan may have chosen to keep the individuals' identities hidden so as to not attract unnecessary attention onto background characters[3]: the play is more a commentary on Liza Balkan's individual experience and has less to do with the actions of other people. This is different from Annabel Soutar's position in the play *Seeds*, as most of the people involved in that case are named in the production. While *Out the Window* is a reflection on Liza Balkan's individual experience as a witness, *Seeds* is more of an investigative piece, with Annabel the character acting as the guide, introducing audiences to people like Percy, guiding them through the events in question. While both offer snapshots of community, *Out the Window*'s primary focus is on the experience of an individual, which in turn can offer commentary about the state of the community. Considering that *Out the Window* puts forward representations of communal perspectives, it is also important to take a closer look at the ways the project understands notions of community and the work that goes into these sorts of representations.

With its careful selection of specific characters, *Out the Window* provides audiences with a representation of the community that is focused both on physical location and social groupings. While the play is focused on an event within a specific Toronto location and its

[3] On a personal note, Balkan also mentions a fear of "being sued" as one of the reasons she why she doesn't use real names for the police officers (75).

impact on the surrounding community, there are other groupings represented in the piece that transcend notions of geography and speak to the ways various populations may respond differently to the events in question. Within the story world, people are grouped based on race, career, gender, mental health status, and location. The issue of police brutality and the treatment of marginalized people is relevant to the community in a number of unique ways. For example, issues of police brutality may be specific to the individual neighbourhoods in which the subjects reside. Audiences may therefore understand the issue based on the geographic boundaries in which the play is set. Liza the character may be more sensitive to the possibility of an incident of police brutality occurring within her neighbourhood, based on her existing knowledge of the surrounding area. Like *Laramie*, the work is, to a degree, focused on issues in the here and now that are highly specific to the location in which they are occurring. As its title suggests, *Out the Window* is very much about specific events that occurred within view of Balkan's apartment, outside her window. However, while geography is important for certain interpretations of the play's overall subject-matter, it is not the only sense of community the play seeks to address. Characters are often grouped based on career, creating *communities* of police officers, lawyers, and public citizens. In this sense, audiences may be likely to identify with the perspective they most relate to, based on their career. For example, police officers are likely to identify with the community of law enforcement that is represented in the play. As a result, the work may establish divisions within geographic neighbourhoods, inadvertently pitting citizens against each other and creating an "us versus them" mentality which is common in dialogue on police brutality. However, these divisions existed long before *Out the Window* came into existence; Balkan is not creating the frictions, she is simply representing this reality in an accurate manner,

similar to the ways *The Assembly* takes advantage of existing tensions that arise out of political positionality as opposed to community roles.

In terms of the overall structure of the play, each act in *Out the Window* differs significantly from one another, leading to inconsistencies in terms of the play's attachment to familiar verbatim methodologies. The first act most resembles the characteristics of documentary theatre, with Balkan closely recreating events from the court proceedings in which she was a key witness for the Crown's case against the officers involved in Otto Vass' death. In this act, Balkan recreates moments from her appearance on the stand, which ultimately ends with the defence attorney casting serious doubt over Liza's ability to provide a neutral recollection of the events in question. In terms of the overall structure of the first act, the play resembles other courtroom dramas, with the character Liza being questioned by two lawyers. The act also features testimonies from the police officers; however, these testimonies are principally meant to highlight issues faced by Liza and potential areas of concern within our criminal justice system. For example, the officer's testimony stands in contrast to Liza's appearance on the stand, in part because their words offer an explanation for the actions Balkan is describing, including the brutality displayed by the officers towards Mr. Vass. Beyond simply explaining matters that relate to Liza's interpretation of the events, the officer's testimonies also highlight potential injustices within the case and the overall treatment of Balkan as a witness. When Liza the character is on the stand, she faces significant challenges from Lawyer 1, who often pokes holes in her memory and ability to be neutral witness, free from personal or political bias. Meanwhile, the officers face considerably less pushback from the lawyers as they are able to openly explain matters in a way that minimizes some of the more gruesome elements of Liza's interpretation. Overall, this act comes across as more of a straightforward recreation of court proceedings,

which sets the stage for the rest of the play in which Liza tries to make sense of the events in question and her role as a witness. In terms of the dramaturgical decisions made by Balkan the playwright in the first act, one might question whether the differences in experience between Liza and the officers is a reflection of serious issues in our criminal justice system, or it may also be an effect of the personal biases of the playwright.

While the play's first act is in line with the dramaturgical practices of documentary theatre, there are moments that are more reflective of personal creative license, allowing Balkan to highlight various elements of the events in question in a manner that clarifies certain aspects of the subject's testimonies; elements that might not make sense if audiences cannot effectively see the events being described. Through theatrical effects, such as lighting and sound design, Balkan is able to transform the courtroom scene and re-enact moments from the event in question. This is a departure from traditional verbatim dramaturgies, which focus on re-creation of original testimonies but not on the specifics of the event. By re-creating specific actions related to the event, Balkan highlights moments that may be missed if the play were to rely solely on dialogue. For example, by directly recreating specific moments from Liza's time on the stand, the play highlights points of tension for the character, providing audiences with a stronger idea of what she was going through in that specific moment. These heightened examples of theatricality may take away from the overall accuracy of the scene in terms of its ability to recreate the specifics of the courtroom experience, however, it also adds to the realness of Liza's own testimony as Balkan shares the inner workings of Liza's memory. These sorts of dramatic scenes can help to highlight certain moments and characterizations, strengthening the play's overall message, while highlighting verbatim's reliance on emotion.

Out the Window's second act is more representative of traditional verbatim practices in which the playwright interviews subjects and then recreates those interactions on stage. In Act 2, Liza sits down with the lawyers from the case, many years after the conclusion of the trial. Using verbatim methods, Balkan asks questions of the lawyers to get a better understanding of the criminal justice system and her role as a witness. Equipped with a tape recorder in hand, we see Liza the character interacts with the lawyers and revisits some of the events of the trial. In this instance the tape recorder acts as a marker of the realness of the testimonies; audiences are alerted to the fact that what they are seeing and hearing is real and has been preserved by Balkan the playwright. But the device itself also acts as a tool for Liza the character to navigate the interactions she is revisiting, as she jumps forward, pauses, and rewinds. Many of the scenes in Act 2 are short, almost vignettes of various discussions between Balkan and the lawyers. By the end of the act, Liza is almost in a frenzy, and she replays the conversations in a manner representative of Vass' own mental condition. By the end of Act 2, Liza plays back several quotes surrounding Otto Vass' life and mental disorder, ultimately concluding that Mr. Vass was an innocent victim of the police's inability to properly deal with those suffering from mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder. While these are facts surrounding Vass' condition, their presentation suggests Balkan's own beliefs, which sets up for a second part to the performance, where audience members are invited on-stage to participate in a communal discussion[4].

Overall, *Out the Window* is another example of the contemporary verbatim movement, and the ways artists use methodologies to craft works that are highly realistic and respond to

[4] *Out the Window* is a play that consists of two distinct "parts," spread out over three different acts. Part One is made up of Acts One and Two, both of which play out like a traditional verbatim play, with Balkan using the dialogue to craft a "story." Part Two, which features a singular Act 3, is not traditional verbatim theatre. Instead, artists invite audience members to join them on-stage, as they all share the space as members of a community. According to the script, "this act is also intended to be a malleable entity, reflecting and responding to the pulse of the locale and times in which it is being performed" (73).

pressing issues and debates. From a dramaturgical standpoint, the play focuses on the near exact replication of subject testimonies to investigate a real event: people's words are preserved with almost exact accuracy. However, while *Out the Window* shares similarities with other examples of the verbatim genre, there are several distinct practices that differentiate it from works like *The Assembly*. For example, Balkan utilises materials from a wide range of sources, such as court transcripts, as opposed to strictly originally recorded testimonies. The play also presents its verbatim content in two stylistically distinct acts, with each providing a unique approach to verbatim practice, but both use truth-based methodologies to interrogate a pressing political issue. In terms of overall verbatim dramaturgies, *Out the Window* is an example of the ways the genre re-stages the words and actions of real people as a means of making sense of complex issues and debates, while also using moments of heightened theatricality to highlight the overall focus of the play which remains on the experiences of Liza Balkan as a witness to the police's killing of a seemingly defenceless man.

Political Discourse

The main focus of this thesis is on the political implications of verbatim theatre and the ways the genre uses hyper-realist methodologies to facilitate political debate and democratic participation among audiences. As part of this focus, verbatim works can be examined vis-à-vis the ways contemporary political issues and events are portrayed in a manner committed to accurate recreations of ordinary people's testimonies. As part of these recreations, verbatim theatre may also have the potential to facilitate political discourse between various citizens, contributing to a sense of democratic participation between members of a community. This next section will examine the two plays in accordance with these aims, considering the ways contemporary

political issues are explored and the overall impact the two works have on democratic participation.

The Assembly: At its core, *The Assembly* is a play about political discourse and debate, with the artists using the genre to facilitate and represent debate among ordinary citizens. The work is motivated in its mission by the rise of mass polarization. In this context, the artists use verbatim methods to unite people through democratic discourse. However, the sorts of debates presented in the work are more in line with the kinds of conversations people engage in on a regular basis, as opposed to the formal structured debates that may be the subject of other examples of documentary. This is not a representation of debates with agreed upon rules and resolutions, and clearly defined winners or losers. While the artists mediate the interaction to facilitate meaningful dialogue, there are many moments where the conversation turns into a complete free-for-all between the participants. Even though the entire interaction has been staged by the artists for the purpose of theatrical recreation, audiences are witnessing encounters they will find familiar. These sorts of conversations happen on a daily basis within a democratic society. Considering the hyper-partisan nature of our current political climate, it is quite likely audience members have had similar interactions with people of opposing political views. The majority of spectators can likely relate to at least some of the events in the performance.

Considering the ways audiences within a democratic society can relate to the debates staged within *The Assembly*, it is important to consider how democratic principles are embedded within the performance. One example is the way the play draws heavily on the democratic principle of every citizen having a voice. In *The Assembly*, there is an attempt to give equal weight to all perspectives, for better or worse, no one ideology is allowed to dominate the

discourse. While Valerie often provides lengthy diatribes, spewing harmful rhetoric about non-white immigration, the character of Shane occupies equal amounts of time with his statements against white supremacy and bigotry. By inviting ordinary citizens to provide their thoughts and perspectives on contemporary political and social matters, *The Assembly* sets up encounters in a way that ensures several voices are heard at once, with participants of different political backgrounds all sharing the space. Democratically speaking, this affords ordinary citizens an opportunity to voice their political concerns, regardless of ideological leaning, while also providing audiences with an opportunity to hear from a wide range of opinions and perspectives. This experience is further strengthened by the ways audiences are encouraged to engage directly with the themes of the play in a "long-table" style discussion towards the end of the performance. The invitation allows audiences to participate in the political dialogue the work has been representing and take it a step further.

To begin the long table[5] discussion section, the actor who plays Shane overtly concludes the dramatic portion of the play by inviting audiences to come up on the stage and share their thoughts and opinions on the content of the piece. This structure provides spectators the opportunity to put into practice the very discourse that has been modeled throughout the play. There are two rules to this subsequent discussion: 1) In order to participate, people need to be seated at the table, 2) a seat must always remain open, inviting others to come and share their perspectives. The first rule speaks to the play's format, in that every time participants are

[5]Long table discussions are emerging as a potential dramaturgy among many examples of theatre of the real. The concept was conceived by Lois Weaver to encourage conversation between community members and "break down institutional barriers for knowledge" (Split Britches). In terms of their prevalence within verbatim theatre, long tables allow spectators to join as members of a community and make sense of the content while considering the play's relevance to their daily lives. These discussions are activities in community building and democratic debate, which I have observed to be common traits of verbatim theatre.

speaking together as part of the "assembly," they are always at the table. The second rule is an action taken by the artists to ensure the space is inviting to spectators, reminding people that there is always a seat at the table. The cast and crew seek to create an open space for political dialogue, and this is modelled in the initial encounter as well as the follow-up discussion. In the production I viewed, while audience members were at first hesitant about walking onto the stage, several people slowly entered the space, engaging one another in a conversation about the performance. In particular, a Muslim man got up to speak about some of the misconceptions of Islam he noted in the play. These comments then invited further reflection from other audience members, allowing the people on-stage to engage in a discussion similar to the interaction they just witnessed. While the entire long table discussion is mediated, in that it must fit within the confines of the theatrical space, the audience members do a good job initially of following the rules and establishing a space for civil debate and conversation. Overall, the debate that occurs on stage between strangers from the audience is a similar interaction to what the artists hoped to stage as part of the initial production. The biggest difference is that the people who enter the space seem to be much more civil than the subjects of the work. This may be due to the fact that artists strategically selected individuals for the initial interaction, specifically soliciting people who were likely to incite intense debate, which is ideal for drama. However, the civility displayed throughout the long table may also be due to the nature of the theatrical space and the fact that people are knowingly being watched by hundreds of other theatregoers.

In the archival version I had access to, something exceptional happened. Within moments of opening the space for participants, the "real" Shane enters. While spectators are discussing issues such as hate speech Shane doubles-down on the sentiments he shared earlier in the piece. At this point, Tanja Jacobs, the actor who plays Valerie, re-enters the space and takes a seat at

the table to respond to some of the statements made by the "real" Shane. Jacobs tells audiences that Shane was at the previous performance and states that she believes he is simply there to re-hash his own opinions, as opposed to listening to what others have to say. This specific moment is noteworthy for many reasons: in particular, in the ways it connects to notions of censorship and verbatim editing. For the conventional dramatic elements of the play in which artists have gathered testimonies and edited them into a script, artists remain the ultimate authority on what makes it into the final performance. By inviting audiences to come up on the stage the artists are relinquishing some of their control, with Shane quite literally breaking free of any censorship that may have occurred with his original testimony. He is free to enter the space and speak freely knowing that others will be forced to listen to him. This moment also provides a reflection on the notion of political discourse as a whole, with the work questioning whether people are truly capable of listening to one another, or whether these spaces simply allow individuals to put forward their own opinions without meaningful discussion. This specific incident is clearly a semi-isolated moment, such that while audiences are told that Shane was present the night before, we have no reason to believe that he makes a habit of showing up and causing problems for other participants on a regular basis. While this is a noteworthy and extraordinary moment, it is important to separate it from the rest of the long table experiment.

Not only does *The Assembly* amplify the voices of ordinary citizens through the initial verbatim performance, but the subsequent long table discussion seeks to engage audiences in the political discourse that is taking place on stage (the Shane incident notwithstanding). Audiences can reflect on the political content of the play, discussing issues such as the rise of Donald Trump. Such interactive discussion also provides spectators and artists an opportunity to consider the production's broader impact on society and democracy. As critic J. Kelly Nestruck

observed at the performance he attended, “one black audience participant hit it on the head” when she asked Jacobs “who’s not at the table?” (Nestruck). Such a question asks the artists and audience members to consider which voices have been silenced in relation to those perspectives the production has sought to amplify. By including a participatory long table discussion towards the end of the performance, the artists have an opportunity to put into practice the sorts of engagements the work is interrogating. Furthermore, while many works seek to foster political discourse and democratic participation, *The Assembly* goes a step further by directly igniting such debate among ordinary spectators, all within the controlled confines of the theatrical space.

With its modelling of organic political debates amongst ordinary citizens, *The Assembly* does present an accurate depiction of a democratic society, however, as a play it may also fall victim to certain drawbacks. One of the main areas of concern regarding the performance’s impact on democracy has to do with the potential risks associated with giving every citizen a voice. If all voices are given equal access, it becomes possible for certain ideologies to dominate the proceedings. The racist rhetoric displayed by Valerie, a supporter of the alt-right, has the potential to alienate certain audience members. People of marginalized backgrounds may feel directly targeted by these comments, especially if it is presented as “authentic.” As such, certain spectators may be prevented from actively participating in the discourse if they feel attacked or targeted by the content of the play. Unless every individual feels safe in the space, and free to share their thoughts without oppression, the on-stage environment cannot be considered wholly democratic, as democracy is dependent on people being able to share their voice in a collective environment. While Shane stands in opposition to Valerie’s rhetoric, he is not the subject of her most racist vitriol. How would a Muslim immigrant feel in this space after listing to Valerie’s rants on terrorism and the “dangerous” rise of immigration? By amplifying certain problematic

perspectives, the artists may be unknowingly silencing the voices of others. It is also possible that certain moderates, or those towards the centre of the political spectrum, may be offended by the statements made by Shane, a radical anarchist. While Shane doesn't outwardly discriminate in the way Valerie's statements may be perceived, there is the potential that certain people may feel "targeted" by his antagonistic comments, and unwilling to participate in the subsequent long table discussion. Overall, by opening the initial interaction up to a wide range of unfiltered perspectives, the work may in fact prevent individuals of certain backgrounds from participating in the discourse the play seeks to foster.

In terms of the ways certain political perspectives are shared within the play, it is important to consider how the artist's own political biases may influence the portrayal of specific ideologies. Considering the notion of artistic neutrality, the overall tone of the encounter complicates the relationship between Valerie and other perspectives. The verbatim form allows her racist and misinformed rhetoric to stand without significant challenge from any authority figure. The artists' neutral political stance makes it difficult for audiences to differentiate between right and wrong, or good and bad. If the goal is for citizens to speak out against racism or xenophobia, the work does not effectively exemplify these actions. Audiences may fail to take the appropriate or desired political stance if such offensive rhetoric is allowed to exist within the piece, without some form of condemnation

The Assembly is unique in terms of the ways it envisions forms of democratic participation wherein political discourse is a prime way in which citizens *participate* in the processes of democracy. The play holds true to the democratic power of collective voice by directly inviting ordinary people to share their perspectives in such an open forum. The artists envision theatrical space as one that is conducive to debate between citizens, both during the

performance proper and in the supplemental long table section. By engaging in political debate and discussion, audience members are indirectly participating in democracy. Not only are such conversations indicative of the freedom of speech and expression which are commonplace in most democratic societies, but such engagements also constitute democratic participation in terms of how the individual views their roles and responsibilities within a democracy. Through political debate, citizens can express thoughts and opinions, having their own voices heard on pressing political and social matters, which may in turn influence the beliefs of others. This entire *Assembly* series is an interesting commentary on the state of contemporary political discourse. With the artists' aim to bring people together and bridge the gaps created by the rise of mass polarization, the ensuing events do little to change the status quo. While there may be moments in which the four individuals agree on some things, overall, they appear just as divided, if not more so, by the end of the experience than they were at the start of it. However, this is not a failure in terms of the work's democratic aims. It is possible that audiences will be alerted to the extreme divisions that exist within society. Perhaps people will leave the space more concerned about these issues than they were when they arrived. While these concepts are not new, it does have the potential to reaffirm the fragile nature of contemporary political discourse, and the need to improve the quality of our democratic spaces.

Out the Window is less overtly "political" than other examples of verbatim theatre, at least in terms of the fact that the play does not concern itself with discussion of policy and political outcomes. However, the work still engages in contemporary political debate in a manner that invites further participation within democratic settings. The play's main focus is on issues relating to police brutality, which is at the centre of contemporary North American political

debate. In settings like Toronto, where *Out the Window* is set and had its premiere performance, these sorts of conversations are occurring in everyday political settings with movements such as Black Lives Matter raising public awareness to the actions of law enforcement and calling on governments to defund the police. While the play itself is not concerned with these specific debates, at least insofar as it does not include testimonies from advocates nor does the work directly portray these movements, the case of Otto Vass may resonate with other conversations. By focusing on a specific event, Balkan presents audiences with facts that may be relevant to debates on police policy where spectators are able to draw on the content from the play in future political engagements. In this sense, *Out the Window* focuses on real events as a means of raising awareness towards important political issues.

Like, *The Assembly, Out the Window* does model communal forms of democratic participation, ultimately through the process of dialogue-building activities such as the long table discussion that occurs in Part 2. "Part 2 lives in the present. We are in a theatre in real-time. The theatre space itself becomes the container for Community; one that is ultimately shared equally by both the audience and performers alike" (Balkan 70). At this point in the performance, audience members are invited to take up space on stage and join the artists a discussion about the play and its subject matter. When audience members walk onto the stage, they are entering during the performance: actors remain in the space, existing both as their characters, but also as artists. Throughout all of Act Three, action is guided around the specific timeline of Otto Vass' death, with various time markers identified throughout the 45 minute act. Audiences can interact with the artists in a semi-structured but improvised setting, allowing for a greater connection between spectator and subject, as audiences can gain additional insights into the source of the material. People can ask the artists questions, while engaging fellow community members in a

discussion about what they just witnessed. In this scenario, artists are envisioning the use of the theatrical space as a venue for community debate. These sorts of conversations and debates are a regular part of life in democratic societies. The play both represents political discourse but also directly facilitates conversations between neighbours and other community members. As such, the work is not only modelling the ways citizens can take up these important conversations once the initial play has concluded, but the production directly makes space available and works to get people talking in the here and now.

In terms of the political participation *Out the Window* works to facilitate, the play is more focused on every day and indirect ways citizens take part in democratic activities, such as debate, as opposed to direct actions like voting. By including mostly indirect forms of democratic action, the play avoids some of the issues that are associated with other examples of participation. As I have written about elsewhere in this thesis, certain democratic institutions, such as the voting system, may in fact contradict some democratic principles in terms of the ways various citizens may be prevented from exercising their civic duties. Instead, the actions modelled in *Out the Window*, such as communal debate, are more in line with the democratic principle of every citizen having a voice. These conversations also form the basis of everyday democratic participation, in that citizens are encouraged to take part in communal decision-making processes. The play informs citizens about important political issues, while directly creating space for community members to engage in conversations with one another. The play does not advocate for specific policy outcomes; however, the show's themes may act as a call to action of sorts for civilians concerned about law enforcement, who are able to use their democratic agency to effect change.

While the majority of *Out the Window* is concerned with indirect forms of democratic participation, the work does, however, focus on issues specific to the justice system. By examining the experiences of a witness, such as the ways individuals are treated on the stand, Balkan is able to explore potential limitations or shortcomings of our justice system, allowing audiences to envision various reforms. By focusing on her own experiences, in relation to the Otto Vass case, the play makes space for citizens to raise awareness and demand justice. While the play does not directly advocate for specific action, nor does it encourage spectators to become involved with criminal justice reform, by inviting citizens to engage in debate on these and other subjects *Out the Window* is fostering a space in which these issues may be debated within the confines of a democratic setting. Ultimately, this strategy allows people to share their thoughts and influence the political actions of fellow neighbors and community members.

Both *Out the Window* and *The Assembly* use verbatim theatre to explore contemporary issues in a manner committed to fostering a sense of democratic participation among audiences. The two plays envision forms of participation that are geared toward the ways citizens engage with each other on an everyday level within democratic societies. Neither work advocates for direct political action or involvement, but both focus on the power of discourse to bridge political divisions or make sense of the world around them. While pretty much every form of theatre can inspire conversation and debate amongst audiences, *The Assembly* and *Out the Window* both go a step further and directly involve audiences in the debates occurring on-stage. Where democracy is concerned, this alerts ordinary people to the power of collective voice and the ability we have as citizens within a democracy to engage with one each other in complex debate in order to bring about change.

Truth and Authenticity

The third chapter of this thesis considered the ways verbatim theatre exists as a genre committed to accurate and truth-based recreations of real events. Dramaturgies such as the preservation of original testimonies common within the genre reaffirm verbatim's commitment to the authentic re-staging of ordinary people's words and actions. As a genre focused on political issues and debates, it is important for such works to be accepted by audiences on the premise that the artists are committed to accurate storytelling. People need to believe that what they are seeing is in fact a representation of reality. However, with the rise of the current post-truth era, contemporary verbatim works are facing significant challenges in their ability to represent the "truth" using familiar methodologies. This section will examine the two plays discussed above – *The Assembly* and *Out the Window* — in relation to their overall commitment to truth and authenticity, exploring how the works provide truthful recreations of subject testimonies, as well as the strategies used to shield the plays from potential criticism in a post-truth context. Overall, this section will consider the truth-based practices and the ways the plays work politically in a day and age where notions of reality are becoming increasingly complicated.

The Assembly derives a sense of truth and authenticity from reproducing the thoughts and opinions of real people. Like other contemporary examples of verbatim theatre, the play is not concerned with definitive ideas of true or false, right or wrong. The play states this intention from the outset, as audiences are made aware of the overall goal of bringing together ordinary citizens for political conversation. While political division is at the forefront of *The Assembly*, it is not a project that seeks to dissect political documents or other data. Instead, the work showcases the perspectives of four people, allowing them to present their unfiltered views on topical political issues. The script for *The Assembly* is created by the artists recording staged

encounters between strangers: “in each touring city, the play’s creative team sets up and records encounters in which four strangers of wildly different ideological leanings face off and candidly confront the issues that most divide them” (Porte Parole). In terms of the play’s overall perception of truth, the ways real people’s testimonies are preserved and recreated by the artists of Porte Parole establishes a clear sense of authenticity within the work. The artists are committed to staging interactions in a public setting allowing the subjects to guide the work through their testimonies; what audiences see is a restaging of real-life encounters between the artists and the participants

Where post-truth is concerned, the play both avoids and reaffirms some of the challenges presented by the current era. By inviting people to talk about pressing events and political issues, the work is able to accurately restage factions within contemporary society. Just as the play represents the realities of mass polarization, different perspectives and beliefs come into conflict with one another throughout the performance. For example, what Valerie, an antagonistic right-wing activist, believes to be true, may not align with Shane’s interpretation of reality. Both Shane and Valerie share perspectives that are indicative of post-truth ideology, such as Shane’s assertion that one’s truth is different based on the “privileges” they enjoy within society. As I state in the chapter on post-truth, one of the common tendencies of the current era is the prioritization of people’s emotional reactions to events and issues, over objective analysis of evidence. As Shane states, his perceptions are what dictates truth to him, which are likely to differ significantly from the way Valerie perceives reality. In this sense, *The Assembly* is representative of the realities of post-truth in that each subject navigates and confronts the complexities of truth in these political settings.

The Assembly also provides a platform for people to share their perspectives, without proper vetting or factual analysis. Oftentimes, participants are left to challenge one another on the veracity of statements made, just as people do in everyday settings. While the four strangers are free to challenge the claims of one another, which often happens, especially between Valerie and Shane, there is no neutral party differentiating between false or accurate information. Even in moments where the artists themselves become involved in debate with some of the participants, they are doing so by sharing matters of opinion: no factual data is ever properly citied. While this is highly realistic in terms of representing the sorts of encounters that occur between citizens every day, the play lacks an overall sense of objective truth. Audiences are left to determine for themselves which perspectives are to be believed and which ones are to be dismissed as misleading or outright false. As a result, the work could be considered highly authentic, in that it is a direct representation of real life, however, such a recreation does come at the cost of the work's ability to represent direct truth in terms of content. Despite audiences being well informed of the play's commitment to truth in terms of its form, the fact that testimonies may be untrue in terms of content may leave spectators unsure as to who or what information is to be believed.

By presenting people's perspectives, unfiltered, the artists are forced to take a completely neutral stance, which may heighten the play's overall authenticity in that all political perspectives are presented organically. As a consequence, the play's overall commitment to truth may be hindered, as certain statements might be included which are unverified or outright false. Where post-truth attitudes are concerned, a lack of objective definitions of truth will likely help the work avoid some of the challenges presented by the current moment. If audiences believe what they are seeing is a more accurate depiction of real life, perhaps they will be more willing

to listen to the various perspectives included in the work, allowing people to identify with at least some of the content in the piece, as opposed to the belief that the play is somehow reflective of the artist's own biases. The major concern here is that certain perspectives may be included which are false or contribute to spreading misinformation. However, if the work succeeds in creating authentic interactions between ordinary citizens, with civil political discourse being modelled, then the conversations will remain democratic in nature, allowing the misinformation to be challenged and debunked. In this sense, these conversations on-stage are a direct representation of the interactions which occur between civilians on a daily basis. By avoiding objectivist rhetoric on truth and information, *The Assembly* is creating a more hospitable environment for authentic political discourse, with the play less likely to face significant criticism for pushing a specific agenda.

Out the Window In terms of making audiences aware that they are witnessing a theatrical production based closely on real events, there are several ways *Out the Window* acknowledges its position as a verbatim production. For example, the play directly states its intentions, with text being displayed early on in Part 1 reading “All of the text you will hear in this story is 98.1% verbatim. The rest is memory” (Balkan). While this is partially a joke in that it is almost impossible for something to be 100 per cent verbatim, it does alert audiences to the fact that what they are witnessing is a play that is based closely on the words of real people, allowing spectators to judge whether the performance succeeds in creating authentic depictions of reality. The play also represents elements of the playmaking process by showcasing the interviews between Liza and various subjects. In these moments, audiences catch a glimpse of the process by which Balkan the playwright has constructed the work; people can see for themselves the sorts of

questions she asked the subjects and the ways each person responded. As fact checking comes with its own complications in a post truth era, the transparent way in which Balkan showcases the process acts as a truth marker in that she is taking ownership of the process and highlighting her commitment to accuracy.

Unlike *The Assembly* and other contemporary examples of verbatim theatre, *Out the Window* is more concerned with objective truth and investigation, as Balkan takes on more of an investigative journalist role, using the piece to better understand the events in question. However, even though the play is investigative in nature, it does so in a manner that is consistent with verbatim's avoidance of objective definitions of truth. Balkan as a playwright is looking for answers, but she does so in a way that embraces insecurity, and lets audiences reach their own conclusions, as opposed to the work attempting to establish a definitive or singular truth. Like *The Assembly*, *Out the Window* taps into a dialogue that is extremely complicated and multi-faceted; the play can't possibly examine all sides of the policing debate. Instead, Balkan uses the work as a form of self-reflection, as she navigates her own questions relating to the case and her role as a witness.

While *Out the Window* avoids objectivist truth rhetoric, thereby shielding the work from certain post-truth critique, there are additional elements which may challenge the play's commitment to truth and authenticity. As a work that is focused primarily on the experiences of its playwright, *Out the Window* runs into challenges regarding the notion of neutrality, with Balkan's own biases creating a potential for criticism. In the day and age of mass polarization, audiences are hyper aware of the presence of various political ideologies and the impact of bias on truth-based media. In terms of verbatim theatre's commitment to truthful depictions of events and issues, the playwright's own biases may prevent the work from presenting information in a

neutral and accurate manner. *Out the Window* tackles the notion of neutrality head on, both within the story world, and by extension the role of Liza Balkan the playwright. While on the stand in the first act, Liza is asked about her inability to be a completely neutral witness, "Lawyer 1: You were going to say it's really had to remain neutral in these events" (23). The play acknowledges the difficulties faced by artists who seek to present information in a completely neutral manner, with further quotes suggesting that Liza the witness may be sympathetic to Otto Vass, which would possibly cloud her judgement regarding the specific actions of the officers. Given that this is a verbatim play, Liza the character's own sympathies are most likely reflective of the opinions of Balkan the playwright. If Liza the character is unable to be a neutral and objective witness, the same could be said about Balkan the artist. In terms of post-truth challenges, in the current era of hyper partisan divisions, it is likely that certain audiences may feel as though the work is biased towards a particular ideology, thus discounting its ability to present information in a neutral manner, as some may expect the genre to do. If audiences feel that Balkan the playwright is motivated by her own biases, they may not accept the play's truth premise and commitment to accurate reporting. But by forefronting her own inevitable bias, Balkan confesses the play's subjective nature, allowing the work to prioritize the emotional realness verbatim is known for.

Another difficult position for *Out the Window* has to do with the audience's judgment of Balkan's commitment to truth, in that the play represents a highly publicised event that spectators may have prior knowledge of. Balkan uses the specific event of Otto Vass's death to tap into conversations pertaining to broad issues of police brutality and justice reform. It is possible that audience members will enter the theatrical space with their own thoughts and opinions on the topic at hand, which may influence their overall response to the perceived

authenticity of the work. Under these circumstances, Balkan's play may encounter objections based on its representation of true events and whether the playwright's methods are sufficient in terms of her commitment to authenticity. When people have prior knowledge of the specific events being depicted, they may also be likely to compare the play's depiction of matters with other forms of media. The key issue here has to do with the fact that the play is now being treated to the same standards as journalists or other forms of media, which takes away from the work's position as a piece of theatre. Ultimately, however, *Out the Window* may in fact avoid some of these harsher criticisms given that the play is Balkan's individual journey and has less to do with the specifics of the case. While the play does explore some of the specific elements, including details about Mr. Vass and the officers in question, Balkan does not seek to provide a definitive answer as to whether the officers were wrong in their actions, or whether the "correct" verdict was reached at trial.

Despite some challenges regarding the work's commitment to truth and authenticity, specifically the ways the post-truth era may complicate the audience's response to the play's truth premise, *Out the Window* takes many steps to ensure transparency and avoid providing a singular definitive understanding of truth; quite literally the show places a transparent object front and centre through its title. The play is transparent in terms of the ways it acknowledges and represents elements of the playmaking process, allowing audiences to judge whether Balkan has been accurate in her sourcing of materials, such as interviews and transcripts. However, the lack of definitive investigation means that information is ultimately left for audiences to reach their own conclusions, a process Part 2 helps spectators navigate through a long table discussion. Where post-truth is concerned, the play is likely to avoid harsh criticism given the ways it avoids

singular truth rhetoric and invites audiences to collectively reach their own understandings of the events in question.

Going Forward

Both *The Assembly* and *Out the Window* represent traditional verbatim characteristics that have become commonplace within the genre throughout the last two-plus decades, such as the preservation of original testimonies from ordinary citizens, as well as the representation of the community to interrogate issues of pressing political concern. While both plays represent traditional practices within the genre, they are also examples of shifting trends within the movement and provide an insight into the future of verbatim theatre. Specifically, in terms of the future relevance of verbatim, both plays represent contemporary approaches to the facilitation of political discourse. *The Assembly* showcases the ways verbatim plays represent the political realities of the day while contending with the rise of mass polarization. In terms of contemporary society's approach to political discourse and debate, people are often divided based on their ideology, with citizens increasingly surrounding themselves with those who share their thoughts and beliefs, while clashing with those who do not, creating what C Thi Nguyen refers to as "echo chambers" (Nguyen, *Escape the Echo Chamber*). As such, *The Assembly* is a case study of the ways verbatim methodologies can interrogate these divisions and bring people together. However, the play is very much a direct presentation of the current political reality; it remains to be seen whether these practices can in fact repair some of the factions caused by mass polarization. As a work of verbatim theatre, *The Assembly* takes a very different approach to political discourse than earlier examples like *The Laramie Project.* While *Laramie* assembles the perspectives of a wide range of community members, *The Assembly* takes a much more direct

approach to facilitate debate and conversation amongst community members. The play is less concerned with one issue and event and puts neighbours into conversation with each other. The work is a very direct form of community building through theatrical practice. The biggest shift from *Laramie* that is evident in *The Assembly* is the play's commitment to staging political debate in a direct manner. By limiting the artist's interference in the initial "assembly" interaction, the play is more reflective of the current realities pertaining to political discourse, with the work giving citizens a platform to discuss pressing issues.

Out the Window takes a similar approach as *The Assembly* when it comes to discourse, by directly staging conversations between ordinary citizens and members of the community. However, while *The Assembly* is solely focused on political discourse as its main subject matter, *Out the Window* includes a documentary-style depiction of real events, while also facilitating debate between citizens. Both plays utilize the testimonies of ordinary citizens, but the first part of Liza Balkan's play is much more in line with earlier verbatim practices, such as a playwright interviewing a variety of citizens connected to a specific event or issue. Whereas *The Assembly* is more open-ended in allowing its interviewees to chart the path of the play and the conversations the four are engaging in, *Out the Window* uses traditional verbatim methods to tell a more concise narrative. However, the second part of the play is similar to *The Assembly* in that it directly invites members of the audience to enter the performance space and take part in the debate themselves, thus facilitating a more organic interaction among ordinary citizens.

What can these two works teach us about the future of verbatim theatre? In terms of methodologies, both plays continue the practice of providing a platform to ordinary citizens, with the artists especially concerned with furthering the genre's commitment to the inclusion of

marginalized perspectives. While *The Assembly* has been criticized for lacking certain perspectives, especially as the participants engage in conversations surrounding racialized communities, the play does try to provide a diverse subset of voices. In terms of diversity, both plays also represent a potential area of concern for the genre and whether there is variety in terms of the artists contributing to the work. Both *The Assembly* and *Out the Window* are created by white artists, and while there is an effort to include a diverse range of interview subjects, there is still a potential power imbalance when non-marginalized artists are responsible for sharing the stories of minority subjects. While *Out the Window* is not directly about racial injustice, conversations on police brutality in Toronto would be lacking if they did not include some sort of focus on the experiences of racialized communities who are most impacted by these practices. In this instance, Balkan's play is limited by the playwright's own perspective; a trend that will continue unless artists from diverse backgrounds are invited to take part in the creative process. In this case, neither play represents a shift in verbatim practice, instead, they are reflective of a longstanding issue with the genre regarding its commitment to inclusion. Ultimately, at its core, verbatim values inclusion in that the genre prioritizes the perspectives of ordinary people, including citizens from marginalized communities. However, both *The Assembly* and *Out the Window* highlight potential shortcomings in terms of the genre's overall commitment to diversity and the backgrounds of people whose stories are being told. These issues will need to be properly addressed as the movement progresses, with more diverse storytellers invited to take part in the creative process.

Another major area of interest pertains to the ways each play contends with the challenges associated with the rise of post-truth. Both works seem to embrace notions of uncertainty regarding truth, allowing citizens' testimonies to exist freely within the theatrical

space, without artistic intervention to determine what is true or false. In the previous chapter, I cautioned that verbatim theatre may work to legitimize some of the problematic elements of the post-truth movement, largely due to the ways citizens' emotions are prioritized over objective analysis of fact. Both plays represent tendencies of the genre to avoid definitive understandings of truth, while also continuing to embrace the importance of lived truth, allowing individuals to stand by their own interpretation of events. As a result, neither play makes a considerable effort to address issues of post-truth and the potentially problematic activities of the movement, especially regarding politics. Instead, the works act as mere representations of our uncertain reality. This is especially the case with *The Assembly* as the play's content recreates the division and polarization the artists seek to address through their chosen form. *Out the Window* marks a slightly different reality for the contemporary verbatim movement, as the work does function as a form of investigative journalism, more so than most examples of modern verbatim theatre. However, the play is more focused on Balkan's own individual experience as a key witness, as opposed to determining a definitive version of events. In terms of shifting trends, both plays reaffirm my theory that contemporary verbatim may be best served by embracing some post-truth activities, such as a lack of definitive truth, in an attempt to authentically represent reality and inspire democratic participation, while shielding the works from potential criticism related to problematic elements of the current era.

Chapter Five: Conclusion, What's Next for Verbatim Theatre and this Research?

Introduction

When I set out to complete a master's thesis on verbatim theatre, I knew I was interested in examining the genre in terms of its relationship to political discourse. As someone who has always been intrigued by theatre's ability to examine political issues and facilitate democratic debate, I have long felt that verbatim is a genre well suited to such endeavours. As I engage with the limited scholarly literature on verbatim theatre and politics, it has become clear that solid academic inquiry is lacking where contemporary North American verbatim theatre is concerned. While scholars like Jenn Stephenson and Ryan Claycomb have published works on the genre within the last decade, most of the scholarship on verbatim seems to have stopped in the early 2010s. I hope this project will help draw attention to the fact that verbatim theatre is still a relevant genre of practice for some North American artists. Considering the ways the genre has evolved throughout the twenty-first century, and the challenges verbatim artists face due to the rise of post-truth and other societal shifts, I believe the timing is perfect for a resurgence of academic literature on verbatim. Ultimately, however, the field of study will respond to performance trends within the genre itself. Given that verbatim performances are limited in scope beyond the early 2000s it is understandable that the scholarship is limited to that specific era. It is no secret that verbatim theatre as a practice has somewhat fallen off the map since its heyday in the late-90s to mid-2000s. While this is true insofar as recent verbatim plays have been unable to replicate the widespread popularity of works like *Twilight: Los Angeles* or *The Laramie Project*, there is still a vibrant community of verbatim practitioners, both in North America and around the world. Considering my project was specifically focused on North American verbatim theatre, more specifically English-language Canadian works, it is important

to note the genre remains popular in the United Kingdom and Australia. My ultimate hope with this project is to showcase the potential of verbatim theatre in terms of its ability to respond to contemporary political issues, while ensuring the amplification of marginalized voices, all with an aim to facilitate political discourse and showcase the ways citizens can participate in democracy.

Ultimately, my findings throughout this project indicate a potential for verbatim theatre to influence political discourse and democratic participation. However, it is not entirely clear whether contemporary artists will rise to the occasion and effectively handle the current set of challenges facing the genre, such as the rise of the post-truth movement. As I argue in the previous chapter, verbatim works must move beyond objectivist understandings of truth, as the genre continues to prioritize individuals' lived experiences and emotional testimonies, without making definitive judgements about the *truth* of its content. While *The Assembly* does this by showcasing different viewpoints, allowing audiences to form their own judgements, the investigative nature of *Out the Window* suggests that some artists are still influenced by traditional documentary practices that dominated the early works of the movement. Should these practices continue, verbatim theatre may face increased skepticism from audiences who may doubt or challenge the truth-based nature of the works. Essentially, contemporary artists must engage in a bit of a trade-off; avoid singular and objectivist truth statements in order to make the work more palatable to certain spectators or continue to hold their work to a high standard of truth while potentially opening the performance up to increased criticism. One of the successes of verbatim as a political tool is that the genre often frames its content around listening: artists seek out a wide range of perspectives, instead of simply shutting down viewpoints that clash with their beliefs. It is important for artists to find a balance, and not completely abandon the

commitment to truth and authenticity while allowing citizens within a democracy to access and confront various viewpoints.

This final chapter will act as a conclusion, wrapping up my main arguments and findings, while also providing a glimpse to the future. Ultimately, I will consider the various findings of this research project to ponder what the future may hold for the verbatim genre. I will also take time to consider how this project may translate to a future Ph.D. dissertation, continuing with my focus on the relationship between verbatim theatre and democratic participation, offering up ways I would like to continue with some of this thesis's themes in future projects. Ultimately, this was a rewarding and eye-opening experience. Just because I have reached the end of the thesis, as I prepare to finish up my masters' degree in cultural studies, I am not ready to leave behind verbatim theatre. As both an artist and an academic, I believe the genre will continue to play an important role in my research and creative endeavours, for years to come.

This chapter will have four elements as I wrap up the project and look ahead to what's next. The first section will provide an overview of the core arguments of the thesis, recapping the key findings on verbatim theatre in relation to political discourse and democratic participation. Next, I will reflect on some of the many lessons I learned along the way. This second section will act as a reflection on verbatim theatre in North America, allowing me to reflect on the lessons learned about the genre. The third section will then begin the work of looking toward the future, as I ponder what may come of the genre as we move through the third decade of the twenty-first century. Considering my overall findings, what can we predict will become of the genre in the years and decades ahead? This section will allow me to provide some concluding thoughts on the state of verbatim theatre and the challenges the genre will likely face moving forward in the 2020s. Lastly, I will conclude the chapter and this thesis, with a look at the future of my own

academic and artistic career. Taking the lessons I have learned along the way, I will use the last section to consider how I will take this work forward with me in the years to come, both as a practicing theatre artist, as well as a newly graduated master's recipient in cultural studies, who hopes to contribute to verbatim theatre in both capacities for years to come.

Recap of the Core Elements of the Thesis

Throughout the first four chapters of the thesis, I established several arguments pertaining to the relationship between contemporary verbatim theatre and democratic participation. I have argued that verbatim theatre is a powerful tool for political discourse and democratic participation. While the genre's relationship to politics is essentially the main focus of this project, there are other core elements which emerged throughout the research. In terms of the state of contemporary verbatim theatre, a second major argument has come forward regarding the challenges contemporary artists face, such as the rise of the post-truth movement and the war on truth-based media. Verbatim theatre must find ways to contend with the rise of post-truth, such as a shift away from objectivist truth claims. In order for the genre to continue fulfilling its democratic aims, while strengthening our public political discourse and encouraging future participation, verbatim artists may need to find ways to adapt to the current movement, while avoiding unnecessary criticism from supporters of post-truth.

One of the main arguments of this thesis is that verbatim theatre is a powerful tool for political discourse and democratic participation. While verbatim theatre is not unique in terms of its focus on political issues and events, nor is it the only genre capable of inspiring political discourse and democratic participation, it stands alone in terms of the ways artists utilize certain methodologies to interrogate political issues and events. Through a representation of important

political debate that is committed to grassroots, community-oriented understandings of politics, verbatim has the ability to facilitate high-quality discourse among audiences. When people enter the theatrical space, they are confronted with issues and events relevant to their own experiences. These plays tell stories that are local in nature and relate to the experiences of spectators in the specific time and place the production is occurring. Where politics is concerned, we see stories focused on grassroots issues and the ways they are experienced by ordinary people on an everyday level. The focus is on regular people, allowing citizens to tell their stories in their own words, as opposed to the high-profile public figures who may be the subject of other forms of documentary or political theatre. The result is a script that reflects a kaleidoscope of different community perspectives with people of various backgrounds and experiences often coming together to share their stories. As such, verbatim theatre is able to reflect the perspectives of marginalized individuals: those whose voices may be silenced or excluded from other forms of theatre and media. When exploring political issues, the inclusion of such perspectives allows for a consideration of the ways marginalized communities are impacted by these issues, sometimes in ways that differ from the experiences of the dominant group.

In terms of democratic participation, the potential exists for verbatim theatre to influence the actions and behaviours of citizens in a democratic setting. By modelling political actions, such as debate and activism, the plays may inspire audience members to take up the cause for themselves. The notion of political mimesis suggests that when works model specific political behaviours, audiences may be inspired to become involved with the issue and take up the sorts of actions they see represented (Wake 105). As citizens within a democratic society, audiences have certain tools and abilities at their disposal, with these works encouraging spectators to become involved in the cause once the performance has concluded. However, there are numerous forms

of participation possible within a democratic setting, and the plays represent a variety of democratic actions. While some works, like *E15* (as discussed in Chapter Two), model direct forms of participation, such as voting or political advocacy, other performances take inspiration from in-direct, or everyday forms of democratic participation, like raising awareness or political debate amongst regular citizens. By showcasing the diverse range of actions that are possible within the context of democratic participation, audiences better understand the wide array of possibilities that exist within society and the expansive nature of democratic action. Actions like ordinary political debate are commonplace within a democratic society and their inclusion in these plays speaks to the way citizens in a democracy can take part in collective decision making and have the ability to share one's perspective and potentially influence the opinions of others. Often, verbatim will directly model these sorts of engagements, showcasing them in an idealized sense, and allowing spectators to learn from the work and incorporate its teachings into their own activities. Ultimately, these characteristics make for a genre that is uniquely situated to foster political discourse between ordinary people, which in turn may encourage audiences to participate with the institutions vital to our democratic stability.

While verbatim's showcasing of political issues and the fostering democratic participation are key focuses of this thesis, so too are the challenges the genre faces in a contemporary setting. Another key argument is the idea that verbatim theatre will need to contend with the rise of post-truth in order to remain a relevant genre capable of contributing to the strengthening of political discourse and democratic participation. The current post-truth era, characterized by increasing division along the political spectrum and a widespread skepticism towards media and institutions of power, presents many challenges for the genre. In a context in which citizens may display an increased sense of skepticism or disbelief towards truth-based

media, there is a possibility that verbatim spectators may be unwilling to accept the genre's truth premise, as such, the works may be unable to fulfill their other benefits, such as the facilitation of political discourse. If people do not accept the play's form as truth-based, the genre loses out on its ability to present audiences with accurate depictions of real people and events. Once citizens begin to challenge various elements of the verbatim process, the work's promise to accurately represent the words of real people in an authentic and unfiltered manner becomes complicated. Considering that the preservation of real people's testimonies is a cornerstone of the genre, audiences must accept the work's premise as truth-based in order for verbatim to fulfill its political and democratic aims.

Not only could the current post-truth movement threaten verbatim's ability to be easily accepted as truth-based on behalf of audiences, but the societal divisions the movement is associated with may also present unique challenges to the genre. With the rise of post-truth sentiments contemporary society has become increasingly divided along the political spectrum (Delvin et al.), with citizens gravitating towards content that aligns with their political beliefs, shutting out viewpoints that conflict with their perception of truth. As such, people are also more likely to take a critical view of works that conflict with these beliefs (Grabmeier), with some even questioning the legitimacy of certain truth-based media. Where verbatim theatre is concerned, issues may arise regarding the genre's commitment to accuracy and the work that goes into recreating the words of real people. As post-truth attitudes become more prevalent, audiences may be more likely to doubt the perceived authenticity of the work and its ability to accurately represent an issue. Concerns related to political bias and artistic neutrality also come into play here as the current climate is uniquely concerned with the ways truth-based media are biased against certain perspectives. Ultimately, the attitudes associated with the movement, such

as a distrust of truth-based media and conceptions of reality based on emotion over objective truth (Prado 1), may pose challenges to the future relevance of the genre and by extension its democratic aims and abilities.

While post-truth presents many challenges for verbatim theatre, I have also observed ways in which the genre may in fact reinforce some of the problematic attitudes of the current movement, sometimes to the detriment of the work's overall commitment to truth. Verbatim plays often derive a sense of truth based on the recorded testimonies of ordinary people. As such, there is a perception that the works are truth-based in that the script is usually made up of almost 100 per cent original words. Where post-truth is concerned, testimonies are treated as true in that they come from a real person, but the plays do not often seek to establish a singular objective truth. Verbatim plays rarely establish a definitive understanding of what is true or false, instead, real people's testimonies often appear unfiltered without a significant amount of scrutiny on behalf of the artist. While this approach might align with the relativistic values of the post-truth movement, it may in turn lead to plays that are less committed to truth-based recreations, ultimately contributing to misinformation. Another major similarity to post-truth values pertains to the use of emotion as a main source of authenticity, as opposed to objective analysis of fact. This does connect to post-truth's prioritization of people's own emotions as opinions as a source of fact, but once again, the overall sense of truth within the work gets called into question. While it is potentially concerning that verbatim does reinforce certain post-truth attitudes, by embracing some of these instabilities the genre has the potential to shield itself from intense post-truth criticism, while still succeeding in its aims to inspire political debate and democratic participation. So long as the works stay committed to accurate recreations of ordinary citizens' testimonies, the ability exists for the plays to inspire participation within democratic settings,

especially if spectators do not feel coerced or duped by the biases of the artists. When verbatim works avoid singular or objective understandings of truth and allow subjects to express their own lived experiences, the works increase in authenticity. While this may take away from the overall truth of the work, audiences are likely to accept the fact that artists are seeking to provide accurate and authentic depictions of real people and events. If artists remain mindful of these attitudes, they may be able to add an increased sense of transparency and commitment to the truth within their own practice, protecting the plays from unnecessary criticism, while maintaining a high degree of accuracy in terms of the ways original testimonies are preserved. The next section of this chapter will reflect on the various lessons learned throughout the two-year research project.

Lessons Learned

In terms of my understanding of verbatim theatre, I've learned a great deal about the unique elements of the genre which further separate it from other forms of documentary theatre. Quite often, discourse on documentary incorporates elements of verbatim, sometimes blending the two into one truth-based genre. However, a careful examination of verbatim theatre brings to light some of the ways the genre stands as a unique form of truth-based drama, one that draws from certain documentary traditions such as a reliance on existing documentation while establishing new practices, including the preservation of ordinary citizens' testimonies. Through this project, I have identified key verbatim characteristics and methods that contribute to the overall academic discourse on the genre. A careful recreation of ordinary people's testimony, often relying on original recordings, establishes verbatim as a genre committed to truthful representation. With these recreations comes a close adherence to authentic language, with artists preserving as much of the original testimony as possible, creating ultra-realistic dialogue indicative of the original

interview subject. The genre also focuses on community-oriented issues, in a manner that transcends traditional geographic understandings of community. While an earlier generation of verbatim plays focused on issues in a specific time and place, such as *The Laramie Project's* examination of the murder of Matthew Shepard and the town's reaction, contemporary works tend to group *communities* based on social identity and other factors. The result is a work that interrogates pressing political issues and events, and their impact on different groups of people within a community, as opposed to the location-based responses to the event or issue. By taking this approach, the works become highly relevant to their specific audiences, since spectators can identify with certain subjects and hear from voices they have yet to encounter in their daily lives. Ultimately, these characteristics showcase the potential of verbatim theatre to continue providing truth-based accounts of important issues, allowing a wide range of perspectives to be shared and heard.

Aside from establishing the characteristics which separate verbatim theatre from other forms of documentary, I have also spent a great deal of time exploring the genre's relationship to politics and democracy. In thinking about the ways verbatim may be able to explore political issues and events, it has become clear that the vast majority of contemporary works within the genre are concerned with political issues in one way or another. Some of the works I examined are expressly focused on discussions of politics and policy, such as *The Assembly*. While other plays like *Out the Window* take an indirect approach to political discussion, their themes can still be tied back to contemporary political debates, such as the discourse on policing. Both examples of verbatim theatre have the potential to impact future political debates by showcasing important social issues and current events and encouraging further discussion and debate within the confines of a democratic society. Overall, the genre has a unique connection to politics and

democracy; while some works are more overtly *political* than others, the wide-ranging focuses of the genre enable verbatim theatre to impact public political discourse in a number of ways, many of which are unique to the genre.

Thinking about the wide range of political foci within verbatim theatre brings me to another lesson learned: the fact that politics takes on many different forms and should not always be thought of regarding specific policy decisions or legislation from elected politicians. This thesis adopted an understanding of politics focused on everyday citizenship and the ways people are impacted by political circumstances within their daily lives. Plays that focus on the high drama of elected officials are often too far removed from the everyday experiences of most citizens. By bringing the works down to the community level, ordinary people can share their stories in a manner that encourages fellow community engagement within a democratic setting, allowing people to debate issues and work together to effect change. This also connects to the different ways the project envisions various forms of democratic participation, with historical understandings of participation often limited to direct forms of action. While activities like voting may be seen as the most common forms of direct democratic participation, it is not the only tool citizens have to *participate* within their democracies. Ultimately, democratic societies are most concerned with collective decision-making, allowing people to have a say in the political process and requiring officials to have a responsibility to the citizens they represent. Through this project, I have identified other forms of participation that are afforded to people within democratic societies, as I analyzed works that showcase many of these activities. One example of democratic participation this project has focused on is the notion of public political discourse and the power of collective debate. Within democratic settings, people are often encouraged to share their voices, be heard by fellow citizens, and influence the thoughts of

others. Where collective decision-making is concerned, such discourse may have the potential to impact future policy decisions by showcasing the concerns of ordinary people as a sort of call to action among citizens, which politicians may take note of. Overall, it is important to understand the wide range of activities that are made possible within democratic societies. Effective participation should not only be thought of in terms of direct participation with specific institutions, such as the electoral system. By broadening our understanding of democratic action, we make room for more people to participate within a democracy, working to have their voices heard and ultimately effect change. Where verbatim theatre is concerned, the genre is uniquely situated to interrogate these political issues through a commitment to accurate recreations of ordinary people's testimonies, while encouraging citizens to participate in democracy, through political discourse and other forms of action, like volunteer work or political activism.

The Future of Verbatim Theatre in North America

Throughout this thesis, I have worked to establish new understandings of contemporary verbatim theatre, considering the ways the genre can foster political discourse and democratic participation. For the most part, I am writing about these potentials in an idealized sense, however, based on my findings I still believe it is possible for the genre to have a realistic impact within contemporary western democracies. So long as verbatim artists remain mindful of the challenges presented by current movements, such as the rise of post-truth, I believe verbatim theatre with its focus on grassroots community-oriented debate is well suited to interrogate political issues and events of today. However, I also understand that given my project's limitations it is impossible for me to address the entire verbatim movement and the contemporary state of the genre. While I have provided several examples of modern verbatim plays that fulfill many of the genre's democratic potentials, there is still a perception that the best days of the

verbatim movement are behind it. Productions of the late-90s and early-2000s, such as *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* or *The Laramie Project*, garnered a significant amount of attention for the genre. With contemporary verbatim works few and far between, none have been able to capture the widespread popularity enjoyed by earlier verbatim hits. Despite the criticism by academics like Ryan Claycomb, who asserts that verbatim theatre is an exercise in "cruel nostalgia" (174), or an attachment to an outdated and idealized sense of democratic utopia, I believe that verbatim is fully capable of representing important political issues and events, in a manner that continues to inspire political discourse and democratic participation, with the potential to unite members of a community around a grassroots issue, giving citizens the tools they need to effect change.

Unlike academics like Claycomb, who argue that verbatim theatre's democratic potential is now little more than a pipedream caught up in untenable political ideals, I maintain that contemporary works still have an ability to inspire and facilitate democratic dialogue among citizens, especially at a grassroots community level, which is an essential exercise for contemporary democratic society. The rise of post-truth puts democratic institutions and verbatim theatre in a difficult position, but the genre may still succeed in its quest to improve the quality of our democracy through exercises in community dialogue building. Verbatim can remain an effective genre capable of these democratic aims, so long as it properly addresses the challenges of post-truth and other current societal trends. While post-truth is perhaps the most obvious challenge in this day and age, other political and social issues pose threats to the genre. Society is increasingly divided along the political spectrum, with people often retreating into their own familiar surroundings, displaying an unwillingness to listen to those whose beliefs clash with theirs. The issue for verbatim is that the genre's political and democratic potential relies on people listening to one another, hearing from the perspectives of others and allowing

that to shape their own thoughts on a particular issue. With the rise of Trumpism in the United States and the hyper-partisan nature of western politics, this activity of grassroots community building through verbatim theatre may seem like a historic ideal. Based on the results observed through *The Assembly*, it's safe to say works that directly attempt to challenge this reality may face or create more problems than they solve. Simply presenting unfiltered opinions has the potential to spread hate and misinformation, which does not benefit democracy. However, these challenges can be mitigated when artists make a concerted effort to avoid objectivist truth rhetoric and allow their works to stand as just one representation of the various perspectives on a particular issue, representing many sides of the debate. Relativistic views are good for democracies as citizens can listen to and learn from one another. When artists get out of the business of providing a singular definitive *truth*, verbatim exists as an authentic representation of community voice, which incorporates several different perspectives in the final project.

The verbatim genre also faces other challenges, which are not directly tied to the issues presented by post-truth, but still threaten the overall goals of the movement. One example is the rise of modern technologies, such as the emergence of social media and the meta-verse. Global citizens are now more connected than ever before and, as such, the hyper-local community focus of the genre may no longer be relevant to most audiences. This could be both a benefit as well as a challenge for verbatim theatre. While on the other hand the rise of such technologies could turn citizens away from community-based focuses, perhaps we will see an increased desire for the engagements these technologies are lacking. When people are constantly connected to the global network, they may seek opportunities to unplug and engage with their fellow neighbours and like-minded community members. Where politics is concerned, contemporary verbatim plays have the potential to tap into grassroots community-oriented issues in a manner unique from

other forms of media or technology. Verbatim theatre can fulfill society's desire for grassroots stories focused on local issues by representing the perspectives of ordinary citizens, working to elevate the stories of marginalized individuals whose voices are often silenced by other forms of media. In order to be successful in these endeavours, and ultimately contribute to democratic participation, the genre will need to face its challenges head-on, and forge a new path forward in the twenty-first century.

Porte Parole, the makers of *The Assembly* series, are a contemporary company uniquely focused on verbatim as a viable genre for political inquiry and democratic participation. Artists like Annabel Soutar, Alex Ivanovici and Brett Watson have used the verbatim genre to create a series of politically focused works that travel to various settings and engage citizens in democratic participation. The series is open ended, and its content is dependent on the testimonies of each group of participants. As such, the artists have created a roadmap for likeminded practitioners, showcasing the ways verbatim theatre can be used to facilitate political debate. While I cannot predict the future, I believe this project, with its case studies and insights into the genre, provides an interesting blueprint for contemporary verbatim companies, allowing the genre to remain a relevant form for artists to use the voices of ordinary people to interrogate pressing political issues and events, in a manner committed to political discourse and democratic participation.

WHAT'S NEXT?

To close out this chapter and conclude the thesis, I would like to take a moment to consider what's next for this research. Through this project, I have provided an in-depth examination of political verbatim theatre in North America, considering the ways the genre has contributed to a strengthening of democratic participation and political discourse. I have also contributed to the

scholarship on verbatim theatre, by considering some of the challenges the genre may face in a twenty-first century post-truth context. While the project is complete as far as this thesis is concerned, there are still potential areas of interest pertaining to verbatim theatre, which I would like to explore in future research projects. This final section will consider some of the ways I may continue this work in future endeavours, such as a potential Ph.D. dissertation.

One of the ways I would like to take this work further is through expanded research methodologies. While this project focused on several examples of contemporary North American verbatim theatre as a case study, I would like to expand this portion of the research to include additional methodologies, specifically spectatorship research. By broadening my methodological focus, I will be strengthening the quality of my research in that the work will be more well-rounded and expansive.

Overview of spectatorship studies project Just as verbatim theatre lacks a significant amount of contemporary scholarly research, publications on spectatorship studies are limited, with Kelsey Jacobson noting a "paucity of scholarly research on audiences" (41). I believe the methodology is well suited to the genre and that spectatorship studies is the next logical step for my research on verbatim theatre, with a future project addressing some of the current gaps in the literature. Spectatorship research as a methodology is well suited to verbatim theatre in that it allows researchers to speak directly with spectators, examining the ways people respond to the piece. Verbatim plays are often concerned with audiences in a way that other genres are not, in that audiences are uniquely invested in the perspectives within the play and their perception of the work is critical to verbatim's truth premise. Where a spectatorship studies project is concerned, the methodology can help shed light on a number of the genre's elements, such as its

commitment to truth and authenticity, while questioning the audience's repones to the play's political focuses. Using Belliveau and Nichols' approach to qualitative audience research as a blueprint, this potential project will assess the democratic potential of a verbatim play based on feedback from spectators. Belliveau and Nichols utilize both focus groups and interviews to assess the ways audiences respond to "research-based theatre" (4). Their approach to audience research is of particular relevance to this project, because they are similarly interested in assessing how spectators respond to the reality-based elements of performance. This project will utilize such methods to assess the ways audiences are impacted by the personal testimonies of the verbatim play. This methodology of interviewing audiences to better understand their response to the piece is predicated on Kirsty Sedgman's concept of treating audience testimony as a "sense-making process" (Sedgman, 2018). It is through these interviews that we gain a better understanding of how audiences "make sense" of the performance. How is verbatim theatre being understood by audiences? How does it make people feel? How is the political content being perceived and is there a potential for audiences to be mobilized as members of democratic society? Given the fact that this project is most concerned with the ways verbatim theatre impacts audiences, specifically in terms of the potential for further democratic action, it is necessary to speak to the people the work is intended to have an effect on. Spectatorship studies will allow the project to assess the potential impacts such politically motivated works have on audience members.

Given my interest in post-truth, spectatorship studies is an interesting methodology as it further complicates notions of expertise and the value of lived truth. Just as verbatim derives its main source of authenticity from the individual testimonies of its subjects, spectatorship studies as a methodology values the thoughts and options of audience members; often ordinary citizens

from all walks of life providing emotional responses to the work. However, just as verbatim theatre faces challenges regarding its potential legitimization of certain post-truth attitudes, spectatorship studies as a methodology may face similar challenges. Sedgman notes some of these challenges, as she questions the impact such research may have on notions of expertise: "In a political climate beleaguered by efforts to delegitimize expertise, what are the implications for a research tradition that seeks to understand cultural value from a range of diverse perspectives?" (*Audience Experience in an Anti-expert Age: A Survey of Theatre Audience Research*). To which Jacobson responds, "I do not aim to vault the position of the audience beyond the level of expert, but rather to investigate the hermeneutics at work when audiences come to view performances" (Sedgman 7 qtd. in Jacobson 41-43). Such research can allow us to better understand how audiences form their interpretations of the work. Where verbatim is concerned, the methodology will allow me to interrogate the ways spectators respond to the political themes of the piece and the potential impact this may have on people's future democratic actions, while valuing the responses of ordinary citizens; the perspectives the genre is most concerned with.

Verbatim outside of North America Another area in which I could expand my research focus to provide a more well-rounded examination of the genre is to look at the state of verbatim theatre beyond North America. Due to the fact that I am a researcher in Canada, with limited access to verbatim plays, I have had to focus on works I can access here and now, which means the project has focused almost exclusively on the current verbatim movement within North America, with a specific look at Canadian artists. While *The Laramie Project* is a popular example of the movement and has been experienced by audiences around the world, its subject matter is most relevant to English-speaking western theatre audiences. *Out the Window* and *The Assembly* are

also focused on issues specific to North American contexts. With this in mind, I believe there is the possibility to branch out from North American verbatim theatre in future research considering whether the characterises I have observed in North American verbatim theatre translate to other contexts. What does verbatim theatre look like outside of North America? In what ways do the practices in these locations differ from the verbatim works I have analyzed in this thesis? Are verbatim characteristics specific to geographic location? How do these genres contend with contemporary challenges within society, in order to remain a relevant form of truth-based theatre? These are questions I would like to answer in subsequent projects, as I move to broaden my research focus, getting a better understanding of the global state of verbatim theatre in a twenty-first century context.

Overall, there are a number of ways in which I can take up the work from this project in future research. I have learned many lessons along the way, both as an academic and theatre artist, teachings I will take forward in my post-master's journey in both capacities. As an academic, I will continue to look for new ways to incorporate emerging methodologies in the verbatim theatre discourse, as we continue to expand our understanding of the genre and its ability to respond to contemporary political issues and democratic needs. As a theatre artist, not only will I take up these practices in my own work, but the research has helped strengthen my understanding of the genre and what's needed from contemporary artists as we move forward in a post-COVID and post-truth context. Ultimately, I believe there is tremendous potential within verbatim theatre, and while the genre will have to contend with challenging societal issues in order to remain relevant for future audiences, I believe the potential is there for verbatim theatre to continue playing an important role in presenting the stories of ordinary people in a manner that

is able to foster political discourse amongst citizens, ultimately facilitating a strong notion of communal democratic participation.

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