

Documentary Theatre: Writing from Interviews

Art & Activism Masterclass on Research-Based Theatre

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Artist-Researcher Identity:

I create theatre and video projects from interview-based data, found media artifacts, and historical events.

I believe that performance has the power to disrupt pre-conceived notions and to challenge, clarify, and change collaborators and audiences alike.

Verbatim Performance Lab



Photo Credit: Nora C. Lambert, NYU-TV

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Mission Statement

The Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL) investigates and performs words and gestures collected from found media artifacts and interview-based data.

Through these investigations, VPL aims to disrupt assumptions, biases, and intolerances across a spectrum of political, cultural, and social narratives

VPL is a project of NYU Steinhardt's Program in Educational Theatre.

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Verbatim Performance

The precise portrayal of an actual person using their exact speech and gestural patterns as a data source for investigation, literally “word for word” & “gesture for gesture.” (Think: given circumstances)

Documentary Theatre

Explores the past or present through an elaborate investigation of media culture, new forms of narration and representation, and authentic documents. Authentic documents could include source materials such as newspapers, government reports, interviews, journals, and correspondences.

Documentary Theatre

Typically includes or is referred to as **verbatim theatre**, investigative theatre, theatre of fact, theatre of witness, autobiographical theatre, **ethnodrama**, docudrama, reality-based theatre, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, **research-based theatre**, and performed ethnography

Definition adapted from Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty Letters: “Memory as Resistance in Documentary Drama” and Carol Martin’s *Theatre of the Real*.

Tom Barone & Elliot Eisner

“After all, one of the characteristics that artists and scientists share is that both groups of individuals are troublemakers.”

Anna Deavere Smith



“If you say a word often enough, it becomes you.”

“I knew that by using another person’s language, it was possible to portray what was invisible about that individual.”

Smith (1993)

D. Soyini Madison



Performed Ethnography and Communication: Improvisation and Embodied Experience (2018)

In a section entitled “On truth,” Madison comments on the “tensions and ethical dilemmas of oral history and narrative performance relative to truth.” She writes:

“Stories bind us: ‘The shortest distance between two people is a story.’ This short distance is where truths meet and gather.”

In the notes to the chapter, Madison attributes the above quotation to Patti Digh, author, activist, and master storyteller.

Mario L. Small



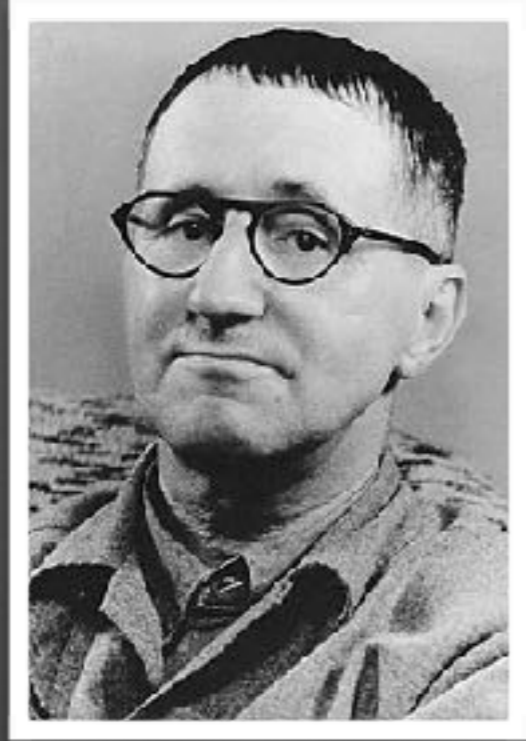
Rhetoric and Social Science in a Polarized Society: 2019 Spencer Lecture, AERA

Identifies the importance of *qualitative literacy* as it relates to polarization, social science, and public discourse.

Qualitative literacy is “the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret qualitative evidence.”

Essentially, the difference between fact and opinion and how those different forms of information are presented and interpreted.

Bertolt Brecht



Verfremdungseffekt

Defamiliarization

“If we play works dealing with our own times as though they were historical, then perhaps the circumstances under which [the spectator] himself acts will strike him as equally odd; and this is where the critical attitude begins.”

Brecht (1949)

Working with interview data

Of a Certain Age: a case study

Of a Certain Age

Topic:

The effects of ageism on performing arts professionals
over the age of 65

Of a Certain Age

Research Questions:

What are the experiences of performing arts professionals over the age of 65?

How can gaining a clearer understanding of these experiences of older performing artists help to combat ageism within the population at large?

What we were working to accomplish with the project:

- Communicate the effects and impacts of ageism on older people and others
- Educate social workers/clinicians who work with older people around ageism
- Create allies for older people rather than perpetrators of ageist language and ideas

Interview Prompts:

1. Describe the circumstances surrounding your birth.
2. Describe your first professional job as a performing artist.
3. Describe your most recent job as a performing artist.
4. What is your favorite thing about working as a performing artist?
5. Describe a moment in your life when you experienced or witnessed ageism.
6. What is surprising to you about growing older as a performing artist?
7. What advice would you give to someone at the beginning of their career as a performing artist?
8. What, if anything, are you looking forward to in the next decade?
9. Do you have anything else you'd like to say about any of the topics we've been discussing?
10. Do you have any questions for me?

Thinking about consent vs. release

Ethics & “Good human being-ness”

Using composite characters

**Rules of engagement:
How does the audience know what
they’re experiencing?**

Finding emerging themes in the data

Making selections (binning)

Use the research question(s) as the guide

VIRGINIA SEIDEL

It does. That's right, it does. Yeah, and also, even with commercials, we used to joke, to audition for a food commercial as a woman, you had to be slender. I mean not skinny, but you could not be pudgy or chubby. The men could be. The men could be obviously overweight, and the wife is always pretty. And I said, "Oh!" And then I started to notice that. And somebody said, "Well, the man identifies with that chubby guy and thinks, 'Oh yeah, that's me. Oh yeah, I got a nice-looking wife.'" *(laughs)* And also like in *Art Magazine* you'll see print ads. The man will have silver hair or white hair, but his wife will not.

Flat & Buffed Transcript

Of a Certain Age

Shooting Script / April 2018

As a Woman (32:36 - 34:26)

VIRGINIA SEIDEL

It does.

That's right, it does.

Yeah, you'll-

And also, even with- ya know commercials, we used to joke,

Um-

(whispers something amusing to herself)

You-

To audition for a food commercial
as a woman, you had to be slender.

I mean not skinny you know but

you could not

be pudgy or chubby.

The men

could be.

The men could be

obviously overweight,

and the wo- and the wife is always

pretty.

An- and I said, "Oh!" And then I started to notice that-

And then somebody-

And somebody said, "Well- well th- the man identifies with that chubby

guy

and thinks, 'Oh yeah, that's me and that-' you know and "Oh yeah, I- I got a nice looking

wife," ya know even it if mi- he di- *(laughs)*

And so-

And also too- like in *Art*- like in *Art Magazine*

you'll see print ads.

The man will have silver hair

or white hair

but his wife will not.

Scored
&
Raw
Transcript

Video #1 from Of a Certain Age

Example of a monologue

<https://youtu.be/pxkKCt6syY4>

Structural Ways of Arranging Your Data in a Script

Solo

Duet

Trio / Quartet

Montage

Choral

Video #2 from Of a Certain Age

Example of a duet

<https://youtu.be/4aiOqXZ9V9k>

Getting Started

What kind of theatre do you want to make?

How do you want to engage your audience in dialogue around the material and the performance?

Source material:

- Current events
- Questions you have about the world
- Questions you don't already know the answer to

Moving Forward

Think:

- topic
- research question(s)
- interview prompts

Read:

- other people's work
- What is the dramatic literature for this genre?

Verbatim Performance Lab

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Questions & Comments

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