Playing the Truth Game "Verbatim": from Tribunal Plays to Experimental Crime Plays on the Contemporary British Stage

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> "[T]he theatrical and narrative structure of a verbatim play needs no less cunning than a thriller." (Hytner 2017)

> "At the time I was writing crime novels and reading crime novels and I felt safer with a plot to pull me through. I'm always looking for the plot and the story. How am I going to tell the story in a way that you want to know more? I put on stage my own journey to discovery." (Slovo 2016)

Crime and its relentless investigation have been ubiquitous to the repertoire of British verbatim theatre, especially since its renaissance in the mid-1990s.[1] Quite clearly, there are some obvious ways in which a crime play and a verbatim play are related. Both a crime play and verbatim theatre can in effect be dealing with real-life crimes and therefore use some actual words spoken by real people. A quick survey of the latter also reveals that, whatever its shape or form, verbatim theatre engages with the criminal underbelly of British society, sometimes poignantly giving voices to them, as in Robin Soans' *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), Tanika Gupta's *Gladiator Games* (2005) on the events surrounding the death in custody of Zahid Mubarek, Davey Anderson's "massaged-verbatim" piece *Blackout* (2008) on the true stories of a young offender from Glasgow, Simon Armitage's poetic *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* (2012), DV8 Physical Theatre's *John* (2014), Brave Badger's "headphone-verbatim" piece *The*

Listening Room (2017), Mojisola Adebayo's *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* as part of the Black Lives Matter movement (2017), as well as in our two case studies: the Tricycle Theatre's tribunal piece *The Colour of Justice* (1999) and Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork's verbatim musical *London Road* (2011).[2]

Quite expectedly, the mock-verbatim play *Taking Care of Baby*, famously penned in 2007 by Dennis Kelly, revolves around a crime, that of young mother Donna McAuliffe who is convicted of the murder of her two infant children.[3] Interestingly, James Fritz's mock verbatim piece *Lines* (2011) is "a documentary play about another documentary play that never actually happened" (*L* 2), that is to say that none of the interviews and characters are real. However, more surprisingly, at the heart of the play is the tragedy of a real event, and of a man who died and the play closely follows the structure of a crime play.[4]It would be wrong, however, to systematically equate a verbatim piece about crime with the category of the "crime play" (and, conversely, a crime play using some verbatim material with verbatim theatre). Indeed, a verbatim play about crime could simply look like the staging of Tony Parker's *Life after Life: Interviews with Twelve Murderers* (1990), capturing the individuality of different voices with a stunning immediacy and vividness and, yet, having the format of a series of interviews back to back.[5] It follows that Beatrix Hesse's definition of the genre in her recent monograph on the subject as "a play revolving around crime and its detection" (Hesse: 1) and whereby "[t]he crime must be […] central" (Hesse: 1) may not be sufficient to analyse the whole spectrum of plays hovering between the poles of both the crime play and verbatim theatre. It will thus be necessary in this article to offer a more specific interrogation of the complex relations between the genre of the crime play and recent verbatim performances on the British stage. More specifically, this article explores how criminal cases have been represented in verbatim theatre, that is to say the verbatim treatment of crime narratives. To this end, this study will endeavour to suggest that some contemporary verbatim performances have contributed to the long tradition of crime plays on the British stage and provide a close reading of two case studies. In other words, a question to

be asked here is whether verbatim theatre can be said to have injected a new ebullience and contemporary edge into the genre of the crime play. This study also hopes to establish that the strategies typically associated with the crime play are increasingly inscribed within the features of verbatim theatre. Similarly, by drawing from real life, crime plays may incorporate some verbatim strategies themselves.

As Marvin Lachman has stated, the crime play has tended to be "neglected" (Lachman: 1) from academic scrutiny. Likewise, and in spite of the compulsive appeal of an actual crime, verbatim theatre has not often been discussed in relation to the crime play genre, even if one of the most prominent verbatim theatre-makers, Gillian Slovo (*Guantanamo*, *The Riots* and *Another World*), has also gained a notable reputation as a crime novelist, and that some conventional features of the crime play, such as the kind of music that tends to punctuate certain scenes in those plays, may find their way into a verbatim performance.[6] Instead, scholars and commentators alike have preferred to focus their attention on the political potential of verbatim theatre, on its ethical issues or on the correlation between true crime and the crime play, without having any recourse to verbatim theatre criticism. "Verbatim crime plays", I contend, crucially alter the reading of both verbatim theatre and the crime play, and, as such, they deserve our full attention. In other words, there are many variables and less obvious relations to take into consideration, which the following pages will attempt to illuminate.

First, there are two main ways in which verbatim theatre and the crime play may be said to intersect: the tribunal play (and we shall look at the Tricycle Theatre's *The Colour of Justice* (1999) for elucidation), and the more experimental side of the verbatim spectrum of practice (through Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork's *London Road* (2011)). Second, the audience typically understands from the start of a verbatim performance that the words were originally uttered by real people, which arguably changes everything in terms of reception. Third and more problematic perhaps, any murderer/criminal in verbatim drama is known to the audience before the play even starts, which makes verbatim theatre particularly difficult to be envisaged in relation to

the crime play, or rather to its most consensual definition. Clearly, the effectiveness of the crime play tends to heavily rely on surprise with many unexpected turns, which is harder to achieve when the case is already known to the public. In other words, here, the audience's work is no longer to put the various threads of the story/documentary fragments together like a jigsaw. Fourth, as such, the focus of the "verbatim crime play" is more often than not on the judicial process that follows the crime, rather than on the crime as it happens. Their aim is consequently different, as verbatim works are often attempting to give a voice to people otherwise neglected or marginalised, from convicted murderers to young offenders, with the discernible intent to challenge prejudices and shed light on some hidden aspects of society. Fifth, to further complicate matters and due to their particular origins, verbatim plays tend to be formally more experimental than mainstream crime plays. This makes a remarkable dramaturgical difference. For instance, verbatim theatre sets different kinds of clues throughout a given piece that I call "verbatim markers", which are simply there to remind the audience that they are watching a verbatim performance. Such elements like the playing of the original interviews in *London Road* or the reminders of the origin of the statements throughout *The Colour of Justice* do not really contribute structurally to the play, they do not bring about an unexpected twist in the crime plot or any extra tension. Sixth, their exposition is therefore very different and the verbatim identity of these crime plays often requires a self-reflexive gesture before the crime scene is even set. Seventh, "dramatic" language is another key difference. Indeed, Kate Dorney in her study *The Changing Language of Modern English Drama* considers that contemporary verbatim theatre marks the passage into a new realm whereby "[l]ife-like-ese and speech have finally melded" (Dorney: 225). Linguistically speaking, the presence of a unique "idiolect", that is to say one's "own distinct and individual version of language" (Coulthard: 431) is generally what defines a non-verbatim playwright. Even if, theoretically, the writer of a crime play can choose any word at any time, s/he eventually tends to make typical choices of preferred words.[7] Taken together, these variations suggest that the way these verbatim and real-life crime

plays appeal in comparison to their non-verbatim counterparts is rather different.

Having made an argument for the complex relations between the genre of the crime play and recent verbatim performances on the British stage, let us now turn to one of its most prominent manifestations: the tribunal play that Beatrix Hesse has described as "a special case among the [crime] plays surveyed" (Hesse: 91) in her monograph *The English Crime Play in the Twentieth Century*.[8] As the tribunal play is already considered as a crime play in the critical literature (and presents less challenges at the formal level), the following pages will consequently devote more space to the highly problematic case of Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork's *London Road*.

The Tribunal Play

The Colour of Justice (1999) was the fourth in the Tricycle Theatre's pioneering series of tribunal plays and distilled over 11,000 pages of material (69 days of public hearings) into a two-hour performance, including an interval. This crime play – categorised as "melodrama" by Beatrix Hesse – is entirely based on the Macpherson Inquiry that was a watershed moment for race relations in the UK and purported to expose the failure of the original Metropolitan Police investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence by a gang of white youths. The production then transferred to the Theatre Royal Stratford East and the West End before appearing at the National Theatre and eventually becoming a screenplay broadcast on BBC2. The video recording of the performance was also used in Hendon amongst the Leicestershire police for both training and racial awareness purposes.

The term "tribunal play" is to be understood as a single-sourced, two-hour (or more) verbatim play scrupulously based on the transcripts from a high-profile legal case that can be "trials, tribunals [or] public inquiries" (Paget: 223).[9] Typically, therefore, a tribunal play offers a painstaking reconstruction of portions of a legal case for a theatre audience. Its subjects vary greatly depending on the source used by its creators, but it tends to concern itself with miscarriages of justice and

larger flaws within the operations of British institutions, which strikingly differ from the concerns of a conventional crime play. Crucially, the premise behind these UK productions is that inquiries constitute a matter of public interest that are denied an appropriate coverage by being inaccessible, poorly reported in the traditional journalistic media outlets and by not being broadcast on television. Hence, theatre compensates for and serves as a corrective, providing the British public with "a readily accessible overview" (Woolf: 7).

More importantly, perhaps, both the crime play and verbatim theatre acknowledge the inherent theatricality of the legal system. Indeed, trials are intense dramatic spectacles and compelling events that lend themselves readily to theatrical reconstructions, their particular structure offering an ideal template for these crime plays. In a 1971 journal article, distinguished California attorney Richard Harbinger unapologetically describes trials as theatre: "[a]s a dramatic thing, it had dramatic attributes, such as dramatic form, dramatic substance and, most significantly, dramatic effect. When one observes an adversary trial, he sees a play" (Harbinger: 122). In other words, theatre and fiction are spectres hovering over these real judicial and human activities, sometimes even compellingly colliding with them: "there are recorded instances of a criminal being cast in the role of Christ in a mystery play, so as to exploit his actual torture and death as part of the spectacle" (Favorini: xiv). Similarly in *The Colour of Justice*, if much less harrowing, one of the lawyers of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, a full judicial inquiry headed by Sir William Macpherson, five years after the murder of a black teenager in South East London – an area notorious for racist attacks and stabbings – makes the following comment after hearing the evidence of William Mellish, formerly detective superintendent:

> MANSFIELD: Can I just ask, the officer we are calling XX. This is becoming like a Pinter play with surreal references. (*TCOJ* 400)

At one point in the Shipman Inquiry – investigating the actions (including those of the statutory bodies, authorities and responsible individuals) that led to Dr Harold Shipman's deeply shocking series of murders at Market Street, Hyde, near Manchester, England – Dame

Janet Smith alerts us to the fact that "[t]he way that Shipman could kill and walk away unsuspected would be dismissed as fanciful if described in a work of fiction" (Woolf 2014). But how does the tribunal play qualify as a crime play?

Before going any further and looking at *The Colour of Justice* in more detail, it must be asserted that the tribunal play is not necessarily exempt from fiction altogether. Indeed, some tribunal plays have departed from the aforementioned conventions. In other words, theoretically at least, a tribunal play could be indistinguishable from a conventional crime play belonging to the category of the courtroom drama. More importantly and although it is theoretically convenient to include tribunal plays in the crime play genre, since they are perceived as belonging to the subcategory of the courtroom drama, I would like to propose that the verbatim nature of these plays complexifies any attempt at theorisation.

One of the key tenets that unite both the crime play and tribunal theatre is the pursuit of documentary realism. In the case of a tribunal play, this is even more prominent: the designer Bunny Christie accurately recreated on stage Hannibal House at Elephant and Castle and the stage set recreated everything down to the tiniest detail (e.g. the computers, the ring binders, lawyers whispering to each other, etc.). Furthermore, sometimes realism meets reality as it were, involving far less strain on the imagination as when Sir William Macpherson of Cluny, the Chairman to the inquiry announces that "we will break off now for twenty minutes" (*TCOJ* 366), which is made to coincide with a 20-minute interval for the audience at the Tricycle Theatre. In other words, the idea of realism in these performances arises from an aesthetic project that takes it upon itself to realise the utopian impulse towards the real, essentially through the repudiation of anything that can be construed as theatrical (e.g. the house lights are never turned off). As such, these plays also differ from the typical courtroom drama, as they are attached to "irrelevant details" and the text is very often peppered with many unremarkable *sur le vif* moments: "can we have on the screen PCA 45 at page 72" (*TCOJ* 322). Finally, *The Colour of Justice* is not a conventional courtroom play as it does not end with a

verdict. Instead, it ends with the closing statement of Macpherson, demanding "a minute of silence to remember Stephen Lawrence" (*TCOJ* 415). Evidence of the success of this strategy may be found in the fact that "the whole audience at the Tricycle st[ood] up" (Butler 1999).

As we have just seen, even the most conventional verbatim form – the tribunal play – has a significant impact on the genre of the crime play in that it both extends and challenges some of its conventions. It remains to see what effects a more experimental form of verbatim theatre could have on the received definitions of the crime play.

Experimentation

The musical *London Road* is a crime play that focuses on the lives of the Ipswich inhabitants on the eponymous road in 2006-2007, at a time when fear in the whole community was at its height, following a brutal series of murders committed on young prostitutes working in the area by a man who was to be known as the "Suffolk Strangler" and which made national headlines. Instead of focusing on the victims or the family of the victims like the media coverage did at the time, Blythe turned her attention to the community going through (in a relatively short space of time) a state of rising panic on the way to a sort of post-traumatic regeneration, that is to say a community healing itself. As one of the characters says in the play, Blythe was "about the only person that **has** – actually come down [t]here [London Road and Ipwich], and **asked** the residents how they feel" (*LR* 9).[10] Throughout the process, Blythe also interviewed police officers, the surviving sex workers in the area and, perhaps in what one would call a self-referential manner, members of the media working on the case. Put another way, the play is not a record of the startling event itself but, instead, lays emphasis on the panic response of the London Road community to that event. In particular, the piece narrates how the community strove to blot it out so that ordinary life could resume.

It was first performed (with a cast of 11 and a six-piece band) on 14 April 2011 at the Cottesloe auditorium of the National Theatre, London, in a production directed by Rufus Norris and designed by

Katrina Lindsay that played to packed houses. As is common in verbatim theatre, the production also raised £25,000 for the Iceni Project in Ipswich (a drug rehabilitation organisation- through audience collections after each performance. Following its success, including the reception of the Critics' Circle prize for Best Musical and Show of the Year from *Time Out London* as well as critical rave reviews, it was then revived the following year for the much bigger space at the National Theatre, the Olivier, on 28 July 2012. In addition, an extract from *London Road* was revived for a special performance on the occasion of the National Theatre's 50th anniversary in November 2013. Due to its success, *London Road* has also been revived throughout England in amateur and student productions such as one by Sedos in summer 2016 at the Bridewell Theatre in London and by the Bristol Old Vic School in June 2014. It also received a North American premiere that was produced at the Bluma Appel Theatre in Toronto. More recently, *London Road* was adapted for the big screen and the script was again written by Blythe, with added material that had not been used in the theatre show. This was the first time the National Theatre was premiering a film and also the first time a verbatim production was adapted for the cinema.

In this section, it is proposed that the internationally celebrated *London Road* is a theatre production in which many features of the crime play and verbatim material are co-dependent. It is also experimental since, if one applies Jauss' concept of "horizon of expectations", that is to say "the familiarity of previous aesthetic experiences" (Jauss: 25) with which we always see new works, it would seem that none of these past experiences – be they crime plays, musicals or verbatim drama – could have possibly helped in framing and understanding *London Road* from an aesthetic standpoint. Faced with a completely new type of crime play, verbatim performance and musical, critics have tended to use a rich variety of expressions to encompass the phenomenon of the "musical verbatim crime play". Critic Peter Bradshaw called it an "addictive forensic thriller set to music" (Bradshaw 2015), Barry Hertz a "revolutionary musical mystery" (Hertz 2016), whilst Justin Chang settled for "an arresting true-crime musical" (Chang 2016). To carry

out research on *London Road* is immediately to encounter a milestone in British verbatim theatre history, a "groundbreaking" (Spencer: 408) production that lifted verbatim theatre to a whole new level, making a claim for attention that was to rival both the genre of the musical and that of the crime play. For the purposes of this section, it may therefore be desirable in the first instance to clear away the eulogistic chorus, and to focus instead on what makes it a significant contribution to the genre of the crime play.[11]

First of all, one would surely argue that the term "musical verbatim crime play" signals a paradox of sorts. Indeed, the crime play and verbatim theatre's relative integrity and seriousness seem very far removed from the joyous lightness and buoyancy of most musical theatre that is all glamour, entertainment and charm.[12] Clearly, both the crime play and verbatim theatre are interested in recreating a certain level of reality, whereas by contrast, the musical requires exuberance as well as a higher and enchanting level of energy. In other words, they reflect quite different attitudes towards life, and for our purposes, this generally pertains to opposing aesthetic considerations. That is to say: the expected realism associated with the crime play on the one hand and the verbatim language, on the other, cannot be more opposed to the sheer artificiality of songs and musicals.[13] Even if the traditional crime play relies on very strict conventions, which may on the surface appear to have something in common with the set pieces of musical theatre, they differ at a fundamental level. Additionally, from a technical standpoint, it would seem virtually impossible to reconcile the formal structure of music with the verbatim meanderings and inarticulacy of everyday conversational language (or its dramatic recreation in the context of a crime play). Further, the sequential placement of different oral verbatim material does not necessarily match the sequential placement of musical sections that can include repetitions (sometimes with alterations).

In the context of a crime play based on a true story, as is the case for *London Road*, another difficulty arises from the fact that such a production deals with an unsettling subject (here the 2006 Ipswich serial murders) and very sensitive material that seems, from the outset,

not to lend itself well to such a treatment, becoming an insurmountable ethical and political challenge.[14] In fact, before *London Road* even opened, the media tried to stir up controversy. *The Daily Mail*, for instance, titled one of its articles "Theatre Show about the Suffolk Strangler's Killing Spree to Be Staged" (Daily Mail Reporter 2011) and implied that this could potentially be a traumatising experience for the people affected by the tragedy: "some of the families might be offended". Similarly, *The Eastern Daily Press* called its article on the subject "Former Norwich Pub Landlord's Prostitute Murders to Be Turned into a Musical" (Staff Reporter 2011), with all the alarming implications that such a title could trigger in the general public. As for the BBC – perhaps as a result of the aforementioned *Daily Mail* article – they revealed that "Suffolk Murders Play Angered Tania Nicol's Mother" (BBC 2011) and reported that Ipswich MP Ben Gummer had claimed that "[i]t [was] a pretty sick-making feeling to make a musical, or musical documentary, out of something which [he] th[ought] most people in Ipswich would like to be left alone" (BBC 2011).[15]

Now, one question that automatically springs to mind has to do with the function given to the songs in the verbatim crime play. Do they serve as a narrative device or do they clash jarringly with the unsung spoken words, brimming with the pleasures and celebratory tones of the spectacle? One thing is certain: the "musical verbatim crime play", if we may call it so, departs from conventional understandings of the genre of the crime play, as well as both verbatim and musical theatre. Consequently, it appears almost counterproductive to attempt to define a strand of performance largely in its infancy. Suffice it to say that, over the course of this article, a musical verbatim crime play is to be understood as a verbatim crime play that prominently displays its musical and sung material and, in so doing, inevitably disturbs the conventions of both the mainstream crime play and verbatim theatre. Conversely, a musical verbatim crime play is to be understood as a break from mainstream musical theatre, since both the music and the songs are created through a verbatim methodology of some sort. Last but not least, the musical verbatim crime play, contrary to a given "verbatim crime play" with songs and music, such as

Robin Soans' *Life after Scandal* (2007), often blurs the lines between verbatim speech and songs.

As will already be evident, perhaps the best way to define a musical verbatim crime play such as *London Road* is by seeing it as an aesthetic compromise between these three strands. In the case of *London Road*, due to its subject matter and the close and constant scrutiny of the press, it is very possible that the balance tilted more in favour of verbatim theatre and the crime play. A good example of this is the absence of the particular and typical moment when a character is about to break into song. Another lies in the fact that the singing voice of the performers sounds more "spoken" than is usually the case. In other words, a different musical verbatim crime play based on less controversial material might have different aesthetic priorities, perhaps tending towards an all-dancing and all-singing spectacle. In effect, the main priority here seems to have been to avoid distracting the audience from listening to the verbatim material. As such, the methodology adopted by composer Adam Cork was to attempt to transfer Blythe's strict headphone-verbatim methodology to the medium of songs and music. Technically, this means that Cork transposed every spoken sentence and half sentence as if they were a tune. Put another way, he focused on the rise and fall of conversational speech in the musical line and was forensically faithful to the rhythm and pitch of the real people, to their "voiceprints".[16] Very skilfully, he moulded the structure of the songs around the verbatim testimonies to the minor details of pauses in everyday language.[17]For example, in the second song in the show entitled "Everyone is Very Very Nervous", the Radio Techie sings the following:

> *I mean the best person to talk to is the bloke*
> *by the gen – by the erm lamp-post over there*. (*LR* 11)

On one level, *London Road* can easily be described in terms of crime drama. The exposition comprises the usual clues early on that the story is shrouded in mystery, revolving around several still-to-be-solved murders. Although unmentioned in Hesse's seminal study of the genre, *London Road* would seem to enter the category of the thriller – one of the four modes she identifies in her theoretical work – as

it is clearly a crime, or rather a series of crimes, that triggers off the action. It starts with a murder that disrupts a whole community, which is then followed by the discovery of several bodies. It also has the familiar "whodunit formula" embodied by the catchy song "It Could Be Him" posing the typical "who done it" question and increasing suspense:

> STARBUCKS GIRL 1. *You automatically think it could be him. / That's the scary thing, you know he could be amongst us walking around with us every day and we, we don't know./ Like anyone. It could be anyone in here/ for all we know* (*LR* 19)

London Road also harbours one of the "stabilizing features" of the crime play genre identified by Beatrix Hesse in her aforementioned work, that is to say the kind of society depicted that is here clearly "a 'well-ordered' society characterized by fear of social mobility, of foreigners, and of disease and the diseased" (Hesse: 172). Likewise, the tension increases throughout in response to the continuous threat and there is a real closure: the criminal has been punished, something good has happened in the community and the girls have been kept off the street and drugs. At times, music also enables the verbatim material to follow the structure of a crime play more closely, as it possesses the capacity to add dramatic intensity, emphasising the state of mind of a character and/or facilitating empathy more broadly. What seems to have been particularly decisive for the creative team is to attempt to maintain the dramatic cohesion of the crime play at all costs. For instance, one of the most unsettling scenes in the piece in which the character of Julie (the originator of the "London Road in Bloom" competition) confesses the following:

> Ya know, I feel sorry for the families but not for them [the murdered prostitutes]. […] they're betta off ten foot under. (*Beat.*) That's a horrible thing to say isn't it? (*LR* 65)

is placed at a strategic and dramatic moment.[18]

As we have seen, on another level, most of those who have written on *London Road* to date have also stressed its strangeness as well as its puzzling engagement with the genres of the thriller, verbatim and musical theatre. Visually and unlike the conventional strategies

of both verbatim theatre and the crime play, we can see a smoke/haze effect throughout that makes the general atmosphere slightly unreal, as does the sound of the orchestra, the hanging flower baskets being flown to the ceiling, the lighting and the repetitions of the verbatim words. As expected from a musical as well, sound can also become a disruptive element, despite the fact that Blythe strove to fit the verbatim and musical material into the more conventional dramatic frame of the crime play. As Patrice Pavis has expressed in *The Routledge Dictionary of Performance and Contemporary Theatre*, "sound in the theatre appears to be not just a sonorized accompaniment to the text, but rather an action, a performance that involves the entire production" (Pavis: 231). Even though Blythe writes that "Adam [Cork] was able to set these words to music by following the cadence and rhythms of the original speech patterns so accurately that their verisimilitude was not diminished" (Blythe: 6), I would suggest that this argument is particularly difficult to sustain when the audience witnesses, for instance, the character of Ron say "*Good evening.* (*Beat.*) *Welcome*" (*LR* 5) no less than twenty-two times and slide into song. If it is true that Blythe reduced Cork's musical interventions to a minimum, ultimately, he had to versify spoken language at times, leading Blythe to modify the forensic accuracy with which she normally works. Inevitably, going from unversified, spontaneous speech to songs heightens and formalises it. As opposed to what one would encounter in both the crime play and verbatim drama, here we encounter three kinds of language: the spoken, which remains unmarked, the sung, presented in italics, and the emphatic/stressed presented in bold. In other words, the script radically departs from that of a crime play and resembles a musical score:

> FEMALE REPORTER (*and the two other reporters*). *Well this is*
> *the* **third time** *that* **Steve Wright** *has ap –*
> **peared** *in Court but it's the* **first time** *that he's*
> **for***mally* **en***tered a* **plea** *he arrived here at*
> *Ipswich Crown Court.* (*LR* 42)

Within the sung, the chorus – the main body of a song – clearly stands out as it constitutes the most distinctive departure from both aesthetic conventions of the crime play and verbatim theatre. For in-

stance, the song "Everyone is Very Very Nervous" in Act I, Section Two, which is interspersed by a singing Santa on a plinth interpreting Edward Pola and George Wyle's *It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*, ends up being performed by the full cast as follows:

> ALL. *Obviously you gotta lotta people goin' out f'th' weekend*
> *Th' gonna be a bit worried*
> *So erm we're handing out personal alarms to erm* (*LR* 15)

At the end of the song, everything accelerates, the music overtakes the words, a police siren joins in, and the word "very" is repeated with a cacophonous medley of sounds that completely upsets the remnants of realism. In other words, in several musical instances, the verbatim material has been stretched beyond itself, to the point where its original meaning has been lost and new meaning cannot yet be created.

Even the diegetic function of the songs contributing to the incorporation of *London Road* into the genre of the crime play by essentially increasing the sense of flow is disrupted:

> RON. *I got up and all I could see was police cars* (Beat.)
> *Goin' up the road. Course – ya know – I –* (*LR* 26)

These exact words initially said by Ron are then sung by "various" (*LR* 27) in vocal harmonies and then distorted through a kind of echo-singing technique, creating the sense of a whole community being brought together by these tragic episodes. Furthermore, one of the key effects of setting verbatim language to music and taking it beyond its customary social significance is that it makes the audience look at the unsung material in a different way. Indeed, unlike the conventional crime play, all of a sudden the spoken material sounds more sung, one notices the symphonic structures of spoken language like never before. Also, typical of the musical genre is the presence of self-introduction "songs" such as the following:

> JASON. *Me. I'm uh, uh – I'm a freelance photographer* (Beat.)
> *But I'm –working for – some a the nationals, today.* (Beat.) (*LR* 30)

Another key feature of the musical verbatim crime play is its disruption of the conventional rules of characterisation. Indeed, as Lib Taylor has argued, the performance processes of *London Road* (i.e. the distortion of the verbatim material through voice and music) introduce "deferrals of the realist matching of voice to real person" (Taylor: 376). The staging was also highly stylised. A particular moment in the performance stays in memory, the one in which the real television news reporter Simon Newton is shown on a monitor. This filmed TV newsreel footage is then juxtaposed with the musical recreation by actor Michael Shaeffer live on camera. This particular report is then sung by all the actors on stage. Even more disrupting to the conventions of the crime play, perhaps, is the use of blue and white police incident tape creating a web on stage in some of the scenes. It completely disrupts the conventions of realism when it appears around the residents' sofas, an artistic decision that neither the conventional verbatim theatre-maker nor the crime play dramatist would have happily considered. This metamorphosis of the London Road sitting rooms – where the majority of the scenes take place – is a visual metaphor for what the residents experienced in the midst of those tragic events. On stage, we see the residents trying to get on with their lives whilst being constantly reminded of the incidents. The actors standing in for the London Road residents are literally caught in these incidents, physically trying to circumvent the police tape.

Arguably, the definition of the crime play is always provisional and it would seem that *London Road* extends our understanding of the genre still further. Despite its arising from the rather grim context of the Ipswich murders and aftermath, it can be perceived as a seismic shock – a groundbreaking moment in British theatre story – that radically challenged an audience's habit of attending crime plays, musical and verbatim theatre.

Conclusion

In many ways, the mixture of strategies belonging to both the crime play and verbatim theatre can be seen as a kind of new aesthetic that gives more artistic licence to each strand in terms of distortion

and imaginative leaps. Indeed, for the crime play genre, the inclusion of verbatim material enshrines it with the promising "effect of the real" (seen at its clearest in *The Colour of Justice*), as well as unforeseen possibilities such as the ones we observed in *London Road*. This also betrays a new attitude towards verbatim theatre, since its material is now perceived as clay for the theatre-maker to experiment with, rather than a mere "constrained theatre" (Angel-Perez 2009), that is to say a theatre solely governed by artificial rules and principles.

In considering the various ways in which the state of new writing is perpetually shifting, further attention could equally be given to the growing impact of verbatim theatre on playwriting methods, forms and dramatic language.[19] In other words, it is my contention that verbatim theatre may also be currently contributing to a more profound redirection of the thematic, aesthetic and formal conventions of the crime play, bringing new kinds of theatrical experience such as Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork's *London Road* on the British stage. In fact, my main argument in this article is not just that verbatim theatre has flourished in all sorts of ways over the past two decades – including when it seemingly takes the shape of the crime play –, but that it has radically altered the landscape of British new writing more broadly.

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[1] Depending on one's definition of verbatim theatre, it is possible to trace one of the first British verbatim crime plays as dating back from the early-modern period: *The Late Murder in Whitechapel, or Keep the Widow Waking* written by Thomas Dekker, John Ford, William Rowley and John Webster (on the basis of the verbatim accounts of two real crimes) and staged in 1624 at the Red Bull playhouse in Clerkenwell.

[2] "Massaged-verbatim" is used here to encompass those plays that mix verbatim theatre and fiction. Headphone-verbatim is a strand of verbatim theatre whereby the actors wear headphones or earphones throughout the performance and repeat a beat behind as much as they can hear (not only the verbatim words but how they were said in the original interviews).

[3] A mock-verbatim play designates a theatre work that is not based on the exact words of real people but adopts a specific language and strategies that make the audience think it is verbatim.

[4] Ian Tomlinson was an English newspaper vendor who collapsed and died in the city of London on his way home from work during the 2009 G-20 summit protests.

[5] This book of revealing interviews with nine men and three women who have been given sentences of life imprisonment for murder was not initially meant for the stage. However, in many ways, it is similar to a verbatim play or a collection of riveting short crime plays, each of them containing a killing with unexpected twists at times. Fascinatingly, the aforementioned book was turned into a verbatim play by Paul Jepson and performed as part of the National Theatre's Transformations' season in 2002.

[6] A good example of this is the National Theatre of Scotland's site-specific piece *Enquirer* (2012) that utilised music that could remind one of the soundtrack to a thriller.

[7] It is in fact a far more complex issue that goes beyond the scope of this article since the selection of verbatim material itself, as a form of artistic expression by one author that reproduces actual speech, can also betray him or her. In other words, the way s/he puts together the verbatim words on a page, the choice of certain conventions and techniques and, particularly, the limitation of his or her artistic expression to those very few qualities are always revealing. On a given page, the so-called "voice" of the author may not be as evident in the context of verbatim theatre. Nonetheless, one would certainly not confuse a verbatim play by Alecky Blythe with one by David Hare or Chris Goode.

[8] Hesse does not necessarily consider the whole genre of the tribunal play as characteristic of the "new" English crime play. However, she includes Richard Norton-Taylor's *The Colour of Justice* (1999) – one of the most celebrated tribu-

nal plays in the UK – among her case studies probing the manifold directions of the genre.

[9] William Twinning defines public inquiries as "normally set up by Ministers to investigate and pronounce on matters giving rise to serious public concern, such as major disasters, allegations of corruption or of serious impropriety of public life or of police malfeasance. The main objective is to restore public confidence by a formal, independent, and open investigation of the facts, and to make recommendations to prevent a recurrence of the matters causing public concern" (Twinning: 34).

[10] To some extent, *London Road* also enabled the residents to counter some of the media representations that sensationalistically depicted this particular area in Ipswich as a "red-light district".

[11] *London Road* received five star reviews from *Time Out, The Independent, The Financial Times, The Sunday Times, The Evening Standard, The Sunday Express, The Mail on Sunday, Metro* and *The Guardian* and its first run at the National Theatre was extended to accommodate the high demand for tickets.

[12] We are very much aware that these are generalisations and the spectrum of the musical genre cannot be equated to these clichés. However, more often than not, musicals are understood as "a light-hearted story on a contemporary theme performed as music theatre, and using solo songs, duets, trios, choruses and straight dialogue to convey the dramatic dialogue" (Nzewi: 181).

[13] This is also an important point for Beatrix Hesse, which she perceives as the "[s]tabilizing features" (Hesse: 172) of the genre, which she associates with the "adherence to the doctrine of stage naturalism" (Hesse: 172), that is to say "the preference for the single living-room set, and the use of a linear, chronological plot" (Hesse: 172).

[14] The residents still live on this road, the parents of the victims are still grieving and for many people at the time, the project, however respectful it may be, appeared to come too soon after the events.

[15] As a result, Alecky Blythe wrote to all families of the victims to explain in more detail what the show was about and what it was not about, thematically as well as aesthetically, so as to allay some of their fears. She also explained that their daughters and themselves were not going to be represented in the performance.

[16] This is a kind of vocal footprint. Admittedly, when we speak, we hit particular pitches that we tend to return to when we repeat rhythm in our speech. Here, in this particular context, this corresponds to the verbatim detail of the voice in a musical sense.

[17] As Cork has explained, the "fairly solid musical structures" he created to contain the "anarchic" verbatim material were mostly "built out of key elements of

the transcribed voice, translated into harmonic progressions, or rhythms in the accompaniment" (*LR* ix-x). On other occasions, Cork used a slightly different process whereby he composed "a 'container' unconnected with the musical surface of the words, but inspired by their literal content, or the tone in which they are spoken, or the mood of the situation in which they were uttered, or that of the situation which they describe" (*LR* x).

[18] Until that part in Act II, Julie had been introduced to the audience as a sympathetic character and this revelation towards the end of the piece was clearly intended to produce a momentary and unexpected emotional shock.

[19] In his *Rewriting the Nation*, Aleks Sierz uses the term to specifically designate "the category of text-based theatre, where an individual playwright is at the centre of the theatre-making process" (Sierz: 50). He then continues to explain that "[n]ew writing is thus distinguished from other forms of theatre, such as physical theatre (where the emphasis is on the visual), devised theatre (where a group collaborates on a text), adaptations of books or films (where the story and dialogue depend on the source) and verbatim theatre (where the words of real people are used)" (Sierz: 50). Arguably, the conventional crime play does not entirely fit within the category of new writing since it can encompass adaptations and even verbatim theatre, as I hoped to have shown in this article.