PRIMARY RESEARCH

From a devised theatre practitioner who works within the verbatim genre

**Melissa Booth**  - Co-founder and Artistic Director of Portmanteau – Melissa set up the company with the aim to make work that fuses movement, spoken word and real stories to explore socio-economic issues

**Verbatim Answers**

**Question 1 (Practitioner) What is the best way to create content from the information taken from the verbatim; and which stylistic genre would enable us to create an engaging performance?**

If the words are engaging and the idea is engaging then the style should follow. The stylistics qualities of the work should be developed from the performance objective - what is the best style to convey the sort of thing or message that we are trying to say – rather than thinking about too much. The style or genre should be whatever it needs to be in order to ‘say’ what you want to ‘say’.

**Question 2 (Practitioner) What type of content (stories and experiences) are the best to create Verbatim from?**

With any Verbatim piece, you have an obligation to try and remain focused on finding material the suits what it is that you’re trying to say. For me, the best material is always truthful – if you can tell a real story, then you are already 50% of the way there. Verbatim is a way for the disenfranchised and misrepresented to have a voice. Obviously, as a theatre maker, you have to try and circumnavigate the ethical implications and make sure that you are being truthful. For me, truth is everything so, if you can source material or generate work that is truthful rather than being representative of the truth, you work will be far more intrinsically valuable and worthwhile.

**Question 1 (Practitioner) If creating a piece about Alzheimer’s, what elements of that topic would you focus on?**

I would focus on first hand accounts of the implications – try and talk to people about the effects. I think the best thing to focus on would be to create a piece of theatre which is representative of the mind-set of someone suffering with the infliction. For example, if Alzheimer’s is a condition that warps and distorts memory and reality, your piece, stylistically, could include that as well as telling specific stories. If you could focus on one thing – one person, family etc. then that also could be great as you are able to fully explore something. The only issue with that is that it may not be fully representational of the whole spectrum – using articles and statistics can help with that.

**Question 2 (Practitioner) Which Non-Naturalistic techniques would you advise using when approaching Verbatim?**

I mean, Sign & Describe is always good. I like Recorded Delivery also but that takes a lot of practise. I think you can apply basic physical techniques to Verbatim quite easily but I think it’s important to think of composite characters – making one character being representative of different voices – it’s essentially Verbatim’s homage to Brecht.

**Question 1 (Practitioner) How can you make a theme like Alzheimer’s applicable or accessible to our age group as both performers and audience?**

I suppose you have to talk to your age group if your interested in making something applicable. If you want to make theatre for young people (especially Verbatim) then you need to talk to them and hear their voice. Also, don’t write off that your age group aren’t clever or developed enough to understand. I guess you need to think about adding in visual and aesthetic moments in order to make it ‘interesting’ but that’s less important I think.

**Question 2 (Practitioner) If there is no access to someone directly impacted by Alzheimer’s, how else could verbatim be generated?**

Articles, interviews, YouTube videos, podcasts etc. Anywhere that you can find people talking about Alzheimer’s or talking about the impact. You could do something simple like asking a group of people what they think about the condition or if they can try to explain what it is like – depends on how you structure the questions and who you focus on asking.

**Question 1 (Practitioner) How do you stage Verbatim stories in a creative and interesting way without always using physical theatre?**

Creative and interesting is relative – if the stories are engaging and interesting then it’s not necessarily about adding in loads of movement or anything. You obviously need to think about blocking and staging but it then becomes about how you integrate dialogue or make the words a text that is interesting for an audience – the process of creating a narrative (linear or otherwise) is just as important. It’s not always abut what you’re doing whilst you’re saying something, it’s what you’re saying also. If that is well crafted then the piece could be more static or minimal.

**Question 2 (Practitioner) What is the best way to discuss sensitive topics through Verbatim?**

Talk honestly, openly and with empathy. You’re not a therapist and it’s not your job to try and fix something. You have to always give people the option not to answer something if they don’t want to and you have to understand why they may not want to. In my experience, if you’re open and honest then your interviewee’s will be too. Also, sensitivity is relative – you can’t pre-empt what someone will find difficult to talk about so you shouldn’t try and work it out. Just don’t ever ask a question that could offend someone for no reason and make sure that you are allowing people time to articulate themselves in whatever way possible – sometimes them saying less is better, sometimes more is, it just depends. As long as you are being sensitive and understanding, you should be fine.