

Abstract

Speaking machines: the 'dialectical' voice in contemporary verbatim theatre

This paper questions the political efficacy of two recent examples of verbatim theatre, *Sochi 2014* (2014, Tess Berry-Hart) and *Home* (2013, Nadia Fall), both of which exhibited elements of 'epic' dramaturgy and the 'democratic' intention to include a multitude of marginalised voices, drawing attention to the plight of disenfranchised communities.

Paget (2007) connects the genre's presentational style back to Brecht and Piscator: within the 'broken tradition' of political theatre. Verbatim practice opens up a space where the contradistinctive approaches of Stanislavski and Brecht might co-exist; if there is an implicit obligation to impose a narrative structure and encourage emotional connection with individuals, does this contradict the Brechtian impulse to foreground their immediate social framework? The paper asks whether apparent absence of authorial hierarchy is actually reinstated when a multitude of voices is harnessed to the same ideological apparatus, becoming a 'speaking machine for some overall intent of the group or director' (Erickson, J: 2003). Notably, the pieces included the use of songs, 'beat boxing' and rapping; did these function as 'distancing' devices – or stylistic diversions? The paper examines integration and foregrounding of testimony as 'authenticating' presence and the actor's live, interpretative function ('ghosting' the absent protagonists whose edited words and voices are captured through interview). The paper asks whether the plays, staged respectively in Islington and the South Bank, ultimately encourage an interrogative political engagement – or comfortably reflect their audiences' liberal unanimity.

Brief biography

Shane Kinghorn is a Senior Lecturer in Drama and Contemporary Theatre and Performance at Manchester Metropolitan University, having previously worked in London as a dramaturg, director and associate lecturer. His research and pedagogic focus is in the practice and application of dramaturgy, examining the relationship between the dramatic text and contemporary performance trends. Since 2004 he has specialised in the research and teaching of documentary or verbatim theatre practices, the subject of several performances and publications in the UK and Europe.