Transcript

MADELEINE

Welcome to Practice Makes: the Oxford Reimagining Performance Podcast, where we put leading scholars in conversation with actors, directors and other practitioners to crack open the connections between theatre research and performance in practise. I'm Madeleine Saidenberg.

HELEN

And I'm Helen Dallas, and we're pH D students at Oxford.

MADELEINE

We've worked in theatre as directors and dramaturgs.

HELEN

And now we also ask academic questions about theatre.

MADELEINE

In this week's episode, we speak with Alecky Blythe and Molly Flynn about documentary and verbatim theatre.

HELEN

Alecky is an award-winning playwright specialising in verbatim theatre. In 2003, she set up the theatre company "Recorded Delivery," a name that describes the specific technique her work employs, which we will be hearing more about very soon. Alecky's plays include Come Out Eli, The Girlfriend Experience, Little Revolution and London Road co-authored with composer Adam Cole, which won best musical at the Critics Circle Awards. Her hugely successful new play our generation was performed at the National Theatre and Chichester Festival Theatre this year.

MADELEINE

And Doctor Molly Flynn is a lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London. She specialises in Russian and Ukrainian theatre with a focus on documentary performance. She is the author of Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in 21st Century Russia, which has excitingly just come out in paperback. So we wanted to start this conversation with the two of you by asking: what is documentary or verbatim theatre?

ALECKY

Shall I explain my-- I suppose I have a particular approach to it, but I know I work within a broader church and I'm quite puritanical in my approach to verbatim. Hence actually the name "Recorded Delivery" being the, you know, the name that we chose

for the company because with the way that I approach it, I record conversations on a Dictaphone, with real people. And often, but not always, about an event that maybe affects a community. And then I will spend quite a long time trying to find a narrative within that community off the back of these events. And then edit all of that material down and then in the performance, the actors, traditionally, I mean I've slightly moved on now, but for me, they have in the past, worn earphones and copied exactly those words as they were said. Although more recently, the actors have actually kind of learned the lines, but they've learned them with the real-life intonations. But that's probably verbatim at it's sort of purest form, but that doesn't diminish from other works, where possibly interviews are done and the actors never hear the interviews. Maybe they're you know, transcribed, and that's, that's the text that the actors are given, or in the case of David Hare, with work like uh, Stuff Happens, you know he will do lots and lots of interviews and the actors will then be hot seated and, well, actually the actors will go and meet the real-life characters and then come back and be hot seated by the rest of the company and then he will kind of piece together the work from those interviews. So actually it's quite a few degrees away from the pure audio. Not to diminish it at all. And then of course you've got the more of the sort of the court tribunal plays which came out of now The Kiln (used to be the Tricycle) Nick Kent his work, which would be sort of edited court transcripts. Uhm, like the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry and the Bloody Sunday, most sort of famously. So yeah, it's quite you know there are lots of approaches to it, and my only reason for my take is that's what I, that's what I learned in a workshop. And I should mention Mark Wing Davey, who I learned this particular technique from, and he himself had learned it from Anna Deavere Smith, who you may all be familiar with, and who I've sadly never met or worked with. But yeah, my work is basically, yeah, brought down from her really via Mark

MADELEINE

What a lovely, generous answer to that question!

ALECKY

[laughs] I'll shut up now!

MADELINE

No, no! I was just sort of expecting that that you might have disagreeing answers, but that sort of explanation of the broad variations of possibility for verbatim is so, so lovely and your lineage of learning about it is so generous. Molly, I wonder if you have anything to add to that in terms of studying verbatim and documentary theatre as well as being in the room for it.

MOLLY

Absolutely I agree that was a really wonderful kind of summation of so many of the different forms. I used the term documentary theatre in my research, partly because that's the term that people use in the regions that I'm writing about, as a kind of umbrella term that includes lots of different types of theatre that are based on real life events. So it includes verbatim and recorded delivery, but it also includes things like autobiographical theatre or living newspaper or witness theatre in which people who are not necessarily actors or performers are telling their own stories on stage. So yeah, I think there is also just some room for difference, because often in the UK the term verbatim theatre is used to describe not only performances in which actors are speaking word for word interviews that had taken place before, but also to describe a kind of broad range of theatre that uses documentary materials, whereas in Ukraine and in Russia and other places in East Central Europe, the term documentary theatre is more commonly used to describe that type of work.

HELEN

I was really interested in from both of your answers, what you're talking about kind of both generic approaches almost approaches over genre, but also very specific personal styles like. Do you see yourselves as creatives and academics? Is having a style— can there be a style in documentary theatre?

ALECKY

Yeah, I think so, uhm. I think I do have a style, although I think it's evolving, you know, and It has evolved from in in lots of ways actually from, you know, Come Out Eli, and it's partly driven by budget, because we were five actors playing I think between us 70 parts between the five of us and we were wearing headsets which plugged into— so each person had a mini disc player, and this is just because of the you know the time and the budget restrictions really, you know back then and that's how you kind of recorded material. And so if you were in at the beginning of the show, we all had to kind of press play like, backstage, 321 play on our mini displays, hope that we were all kind of In sync. And then, if you were in a scene with somebody else, it was fine, you know monologue to monologue, but then if you suddenly had to kind of drop into a two-hander or three-hander, you'd each have a splitter on your machine, so you'd sort of work across the stage, plug into the other person or you might have a massive extension lead kind of snaking all the way across the stage if you wanted to be able to kind of have some distance from that person and I think in those, kind of, in that style it was a really good reminder as a physical reminder to the audience that we were, you know, listening to the audio, and I always kind of think that's important that the audience get it that they're like, “ah, this is real people’s words.” You know, there seems to be kind of more power, I think, in thinking, “oh, it's actually happened. It's actually—and it's also how they

said it. And then you know, as we kind of got into sort of slightly more sophisticated theatres with better budgets, the shows, we went into wearing earphones where you literally just plugged into a kind of radio pack, and so if you had to be in the scene with somebody you didn't have to unplug and plug in because you were all being controlled by the stage manager. And you couldn't even necessarily see 'cause we'd have like the wrap around earphones. And we weren't trying to hide them, but obviously people get so involved in the story. And even though you put it in the programme, you know, "the actors are listening to…" Of course people don't always read the programme and I might even try to play some audio over the PA at the beginning of the show where you might hear my voice, you know, coming in and then it would fade out. And still, you know the audience wouldn't necessarily get it. And I used to kind of think, oh that's the shame in a way that they do. Didn't realise it's real and then with London Road we actually moved away from the audio, not from the audio but from the earphones entirely. And you know and learned it with that detail. And so then it's like, yeah, how do you get *that* across, you know, so I think, for me that would be my the style and then in the experiencing it I think, you can sort of, hopefully you can sort of feel the real because of the unknowns and the ums and the slightly kind of messy dialogue that you get with verbatim that you don't get with fictional text so much. But like I said, yeah, it's evolved. So now you know things are better lit and you know full costumes and it feels a little bit more like you know, a proper play, a bit less rough and ready, but in a way do you lose some beauty in that? you know it's like—

MOLLY

Yeah, I actually love the idea of like carrying those cords across and connecting with another in those moments that sounds— I mean I, I didn't see that production live, that was before I lived in the UK, but it sounds like quite a beautiful moment in a way.

ALECKY

Yeah, it's such a physical reminder, you know, and kind of manifestation of what the actors are literally having to do you know?

MADELEINE

Come Out Eli, which you were talking about first there Alecky, was in 2002, wasn't it, about the Hackney Siege? So it's sort of 20 years of technical difference that you're that you're spanning between that and Our Generation, and I hadn't really thought about in terms of style. But of course that you know that really changes what you have at your hands, at your disposal.

ALECKY

It's completely, yeah, it's changed everything, and even now, even if you know even if I, you know I was still doing something on that kind of budget. Now we wouldn't be working with mini discs. We'd all have smartphones and there is an app you can get, which means that you know everybody can be listening to the same thing, run off a Mac by the stage manager. So actually you can all be in sync and listening to your onto your smartphone. So uhm, even now if you were yeah, like I said, doing something, you wouldn't necessarily have to have all of that plugging in. You know you'd have to really go out your way to go "OK, we're gonna do an old school style mini disc player version" you know, to set it back then. Yep, 20 years ago.

HELEN

I suppose as well, that brings up the point that as well as the difference in performance, one of the stylistic differences is whether you actually can go and record someone to use for the verbatim, but I was thinking about some of the ways that you navigated that with the pandemic. For anyone who didn't see Our Generation, which I'm sure we will get into in more detail later, but in the third act is in lockdown, so the ways in which the recording can navigate, not being able to record with people in person, are really innovative and use a lot of projection on screens for that sort of zoom-core box that we are all in right now. And I mean Molly, is that something that's relevant to your work, and about the ways in which you know is—is it possible in in Ukrainian documentary theatre to get access to these recordings so easily? Or is it more often written text, or a mix of both?

MOLLY

Yeah, it's an interesting question. In the context of Ukrainian documentary theatre, and maybe I'll kind of come back to this later, actually, a form that has really come to prominence in recent years is more what I mentioned before, a witness theatre in which people speak their own stories on stage. But the question of kind of what types of sources and documents are accessible definitely did come into play in terms of the research that I did on Russian documentary theatre. For example, one of the plays that I wrote about in my book is called One Hour, Eighteen Minutes, and it's a play about the events leading up to the murder of Sergei Magnitsky, who was the Russian attorney that uncovered the biggest state corruption case of that time, and was murdered in prison. And the play actually uses some verbatim texts, for example, interviews with his mother about those events. But it also incorporates a lot of imagined texts that the playwright wrote herself based on evidence that was kind of in the public domain, and based on what we know to have happened, but in that instance there was no way to interview those state officials, right? There was no way to kind of access those sources and so there's a kind of quality to some of the documentary theatre in Russia where part of what it was doing at that time was kind

of pointing out the lack of documents or the lack of reliability of documents, or kind of bringing into public view questions about the status of documents within the official domain.

HELEN

Thank you so much for explaining that example to us, Molly. Could I then ask maybe quite a, quite a fundamental question about research on practise as they relate to documentary theatre. What is the relationship between the research that goes into making documentary theatre, the recordings, the gatherings of pieces of evidence, and putting together the actual performance that an audience watches?

ALECKY

Uhm, well, uhm. I think when you're doing the collecting, I always try to keep in mind the audience when I'm asking my questions because even though the collecting is not a theatrical event in itself— in fact, it's quite the opposite and you should try to make it as intimate as possible, so that the interviewee doesn't feel self-conscious. You're actually trying to work against that kind of it being kind of showy. I don't want people to be kind of like necessarily putting on a show for me. I sort of want to kind of cut through that and sort of kind of get to the real. But that said when I'm asking my questions, I'm always thinking what does the audience know, and what do they need to know? If the character— if the interviewee is talking about something that I can see, but I'm like, ah, the audience aren't going to know what he's referring to. I've got to keep on going, “oh, can you just sort of explain that to me? Can you?” And that was something that I had to kind of keep on drilling into the collectors, actually, was often they would kind of get material and they'd be like, “Oh yeah, no, I've got this, and this was really good. And this happened and blah blah blah blah.” And then you'd edit it, and kind of go, “yeah, we can't use that, it doesn't actually hold up on its own, because yes, you were seeing that and you knew that because somebody had said something else, but if you take your conversations out of it or whatever, that doesn't kind of stand up on its own.” Do you see what I mean? You’ve always got to be thinking, “what's left if I take that out? If I take my voice out or whatever? What am I left with? OK, now I need them to kind of, explain that or…” So I am, all the time, as you're recording, you are thinking “how is this going to work on stage and you know, can I make this theatrical?” Yeah, so it's kind of working on both levels 'cause you're trying to be kind of present, and listening, and keeping your antenna really tuned in case they mentioned something that links with somebody else, something else that somebody else has mentioned, that then you can tie in thematically or whatever. But at the same time, you want to be thinking about, actually, the end result and how that might sort of play out on stage. Because of course there's so much editing and so much re— let's say recontextualizing, I mean

not massively, but, I mean, for example, there's lots of songs in in London Road, which for listeners who don't know, it ended up being a musical, created from interviews with the community of Ipswich, responding to the murders of five sex workers who were killed back in 2006. And there was a song in that called “You Automatically Think It Could Be Him,” which was sort of the women’s response at the time of the murders to you know, the fear of thinking that every man was a potential suspect, you know “is that the murderer, is that the murderer,” when no one had been, you know, arrested yet and there was real palpable kind of fear. And in the show, it's all seemingly set in like one cafe. But in reality, the material was taken from some girls dining at bus stops, some people in one cafe, some people in another cafe, some people out in the town. Wherever. But you know, I feel like you know there are some things that you can cheat and completely pull out of one reality and put it in another because actually what they were talking about is this, you know, kind of common fear. So yeah, sometimes things are completely kind of pulled out of one world and put into another for your storytelling purposes. Uhm, so you know a lot of that goes on and that to me, that's the fun part. But also it might come into what we want to write later in terms of ethically, you know, how far can you pull it away from how it actually happened? Which is a whole other can of worms.

HELEN

Oh, definitely that's fascinating, Alecky, thank you, and what about you, Molly? As someone who works as an academic as well as a as a practitioner of theatre?

MOLLY

Yeah, I think, for me, I'm sure this is different for different theatre makers, but for me one of the big differences in the approach to research in those ways is that as a theatre maker, one of the things that we train to do is to trust our impulses without always asking why, right? But you know, in the example that you've just given, Alecky, like you knew for some reason that these testimonies that were taken from different places could come together generatively into that one space, right? And maybe you had, maybe it's because they were about the same topic, but also. It matters, that that’s just something you knew, right? Whereas as an academic researcher, one of the things that we are trained to do is to be constantly asking “why, why, why,” what and that certainly shifts the way you work with the material and the way you write about it. However, I do think that there is also a creative element to you know, working with sources in the context of academic research and making those choices about you know what to include, how to craft, how to craft the narrative of the study that you're trying to communicate so that it reflects what you have seen, right, and what you believe to be true about that material. So I do think there's some similarities, but for me I would say that the process of making theatre

and the process of studying theatre have that kind of that one essential difference, which is a certain ruthlessness of questioning. That can, yeah, that can shape my academic research differently.

MADELEINE

It's so interesting 'cause I know Helen and I are obviously in the middle of research, and we're also both people who have made theatre, and that sense of when the research starts to come together into a narrative and acknowledging your own perspective in that narrative, is a really interesting moment when you're doing research. I guess we're circling around questions here about judgement and about ethics. But before we get into that, I wonder Alecky if you might tell us—I'm so tempted to say what the plot is, but that's obviously not at all what I want to ask—what is Our Generation? What did you—once you had all of this information, how did you shape it and what now, on the other side of it, do you feel like is the thread of the play?

ALECKY

It's a really good question, actually. It's been the hardest one to structure, actually, and it was a question that all the while that I was making it, you know, Rufus at the NT would be sort of like, "so what is the story?" You know the idea that there wasn't really at the beginning—we didn't know what the plot might be, and if there would be one, but we just had to trust that if you follow 12 individuals, so the idea for the show, the genesis of the idea was: follow 12 kids over five years to see them go from, you know the maturation process I suppose was the plot, to see them going from being children into young adults. 'Cause you meet them, I mean, they're not all exactly in the same year, but they're, you know, the youngest at the beginning of the story are sort of 12, 13, and then you know by the end they've got to, you know, sort of 16, 17, 18. That's the kind of spread that you're looking at. And so you've got six different regions in the country, so two kids in six different schools in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and yeah, I didn't know what, you know the story was going to be. I mean, obviously things would happen to those individual children, and heartache, and you know exam stress. There were certain moments that I knew that, OK, I could hit exams, right? Let's make sure our collectors were all out there trying to capture a bit of exam stress, trying to be there for results. So there were some, because of the, kind of, school calendar. There were moments that I could go "right, we definitely know we want to get that." But of course there are other things in their lives, I don't know, parents splitting up or them falling in love for the first time. You never know when that's gonna happen and so it was quite, you know, sort of difficult to try to get those things as they happen. My favourite way to work is to be very spontaneous and try to capture things in the moment. I think work is stronger when

you capture something as it's happening rather than, you know, six months afterwards. Or you know if somebody is having a bad day, you kind of want to be there on the bad day. You don't want to hear about it a couple of weeks later, when they're like, “oh everything's fine now and you know it’s OK.” You know you sort of want to get the, you want to get the emotional, you know, temperature of it as it's hitting and we couldn't always do that because— normally I do do that and I can, you know, be on the phone with a with a character and they could be like “oh this is happening.” I'm like, “great, OK, I'm gonna get on the train, I'm going to get in my car and can I come down and we can talk and I can sort of try and capture this bit.” Whereas with the children you've got a much more formal, you know, and understandably, of course, for safeguarding purposes, structure that you have to work with it. And you'd always have to have like 2 week’s notice to set up the interviews, you can't be contacting the kids directly. You've got to go through the school or the parents. So all those things do slightly kind of, just kind of water down the kind of heat of really kind of getting you know, the big things, landing with their kind of emotional intensity. So you know, we sort of had to work around a few of those things. But sorry, I'm going off on a bit of a tangent. But the plot, the overall plot would be, you know, the coming of age of these youngsters in modern Britain. And because you've got 12 individual storylines to follow, that's actually really a bit too many to try to kind of hold onto over the course of an evening, so we needed some other kind of communal moments where you could bring them all together and it was, I think, stumbling on that, realising actually if I can create these, what I called “ensemble moments” where you might just get a line or two from each of the children about kind of big topics that were common to all of them. They sort of acted as some sort of poems, every once in a while, where because you might not have heard from one child for a little bit, because of course not all 12 are going to have as dynamic stories as the others and not all were, you know, as loquacious, and you know some turned out to be, you know, others kind of came into their own or whatever. So it was great was like, oh, you'd suddenly have like a beat where everyone comes together and talks about social media or everyone comes together and talks about love, or everyone comes together and talks about body image, and they were really useful because you go “Oh yeah, there's that kid again. We haven't heard them for about 15 minutes,” but you just have a little slice of them and it brings them alive again. So yeah, they were sort of thematic moments that kind of acted as a glue to pull these otherwise disparate stories, when they were getting a bit disparate, together. Because it was a real challenge to try and keep those 12 lines all sort of, you know, not going off into many different directions.

HELEN

Oh no, thank you for that, Alecky. It’s really nice to sort of have moments to think deeply about one work; we obviously want to think about verbatim and documentary theatre as a whole form, but we don't want to generalise too much. I mean, you know, as you were saying like, if you can get one specific voice on it, that's made more meaningful. Molly, I think that you also had a specific bit of theatre or project that you were going to tell us about that. I'm very excited to hear about that as well.

MOLLY

Yeah well actually kind of following on from the theme of teenagers’ stories. I thought I could tell you a little bit about some of the projects that I have written about and participated in in some ways in Ukraine. There was— one of the companies that I have written about that was founded in in 2015 when the war had just started the year before. I think it's, well, it's probably important to say that you know, we've all been following Russia's war in Ukraine since February 24th. But we don't necessarily see in the media that this war has been going on for eight years, right? That this war actually started, Russia's war in Ukraine started in 2014.

ALECKY

I didn’t know that.

MOLLY

And theatre makers in Ukraine have been responding to the war with incredible innovation and commitment ever since that time. And one of the projects that emerged in the early years of the war was a group called the Theatre of Displaced People. And this was a group that worked exclusively in documentary theatre and exclusively in this form of Witness Theatre that I've already mentioned. And a lot of the projects that they created were with teenagers who were living in Ukrainian-controlled cities close to the frontline, so these are cities where people— the cities that were shelled essentially, but at the time we were working they were in Ukrainian control, but very close to the areas that were occupied. And often these families, you know, people who lived in these cities had kind of families on both sides of the front line and had a real diversity of background and beliefs. So this group of theatre makers— the company was founded by a Ukrainian playwright named Natalia Vorozhbyt and a German director named Dirk Schinnell, as well as a really solid an incredible group of team members would travel to these cities and create projects with teenagers there, in which the teenagers would tell their own stories on stage. And sometimes those stories were about the war, but often those stories were about their lives. You know, teenager lives and one of the projects that I participated in, for

example, was called “What My Mom and Dad Should Never Know” and there were stories about you know, growing up and hanging out and making friends and falling in love and the same kinds of stories that you're describing from Our Generation. But the difference is that these kids were growing up on the frontline of a war and some of the projects direct that—addressed that question more directly. For example, one of the projects was called Children and Soldiers, and this in this was run in four different cities with four different groups in which they brought a group of between 7 and 10 teenagers together with the same number of soldiers who were stationed in their city, and often those soldiers were from other parts of Ukraine, but had come, you know, to fight that war, and had been stationed in those towns for some time, and there was, there was a complexity to the dynamics of the war in that early years, which has changed significantly in the face of the kind of brutality that we see in the war today. But at the time there was some animo— there could be some animosity and some kinds of stereotypes about people from eastern Ukraine who were living in that town, and soldiers who were maybe from western Ukraine and one of the things that this project did was it brought those two groups of people together and put them into dialogue with one another and created a space in which they could all discuss together their experiences of that war. And one of the really amazing things about that project, it seems to me, was also that was not only the workshopping of the presentation that brought [unintelligible] each other's public presentation of those stories for everybody else in the city, right, including the parents, who, because of generational differences might not have been able to kind of take those steps to bridge those gaps themselves, but then have the opportunity to see their own children on stage, you know, in dialogue with people that they previously thought of themselves as completely different from, for example. And in that way these projects brought together not only the participants who learned to to tell their stories and to take agency of their stories, but also a whole kind of community around them.

ALECKY

Wow, and they're playing themselves, are they, the kids? They're not making up fictional versions of themselves in order to tell a story.

MOLLY

Exactly, that's right, so they're telling their own stories, and one of the really impressive elements of the type of work that this company does, is that they work really closely with the kids. I mean they also work with adults in different contexts, but in these projects, for example, they work very closely with these kids to help them kind of, refine the text of their story, right? The narrative. How to kind of how to tell a story, but also how to not act while telling the story.

ALECKY

Yeah! Right!

MOLLY

Right? Like how to be able to be present in sharing that and take agency over it. And feel the power of being able to tell a story, but without pretending to tell it or pretending to be something other than who you are, which actually is, is kind of— because I have worked somewhat in that technique with these artists, I know it's really hard.

ALECKY

Yeah, harder than it sounds, of course. Yeah, absolutely.

MOLLY

And yeah, I actually remember asking one of the students who— this was in 2017 that I was there working on this project and he had been involved in one of the first projects in 2015— and I asked him, you know, “is it hard to learn to tell your stories in these ways?” and he said, “oh yeah, it was at first, but now I'm used to it.”

ALECKY

Yeah yeah, I mean well it's interesting, 'cause with Our Generation you know like there were a lot of kids when we were kind of doing the selecting process, you know, like the casting of them, you know you could sort of hear when that collectors would go and do interviews in their various schools that they were assigned and then send me back bits, and I'd listen through and be like, “oh yeah, and maybe this child or this one,” and the ones that immediately I’d go “no” would be like no, because you could hear they’re doing too much like, “me me choose me,” you know, and especially if they kind of wanted to be actors,I'm probably like no, let's not go for them. Because yes, you sort of worry about that presentational side, so I bet that that was tough actually to kind of get through that.

MOLLY

Yeah, I think it was, I mean, and especially you know—and I guess this comes around to the quest question of ethics again, which we're still sort of circling around— but like you know, in a lot of these projects these kids are talking about real trauma, real and recent trauma. And they do so with an incredible candid presence. And without a kind of excess pathos. Like you almost couldn't imagine that somebody I guess, for those of us who haven't lived through war in that way, it's hard to imagine what it would be like to tell that story.

ALECKY

Yeah.

MOLLY

with the subtlety and presence and honesty that they do, and that's something that they've learned to do through work with these theatre makers.

ALECKY

Yeah, but I also think it's extraordinary that— 'cause often I've found the case with material that is, you know, more upsetting, that if you kind of wrote that and had an act to kind of say it, the actor would probably emote really quite a lot. And when they listen to the audio, it is kind of amazing how actually the real-life person: generally it's more matter of fact than you would ever imagine. Which is—

MOLLY

Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

ALECKY

Which is sort of really interesting, and actors will then often say when they go back to you know fictionalised text, they'll try and do different things with it to what they would automatically think, having worked with verbatim. I'm fascinated with the other work, what sort of work is it— I mean, is that still going on, theatre work in Ukraine?

MOLLY

Well, that company is no longer in existence, but there are, I mean there have been, a lot of different projects over the last eight years in particular, and I guess that's what my research is kind of focused on right now, is this period between the Maidan revolution in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022. Because there was in that time such an incredible and vibrant movement of socially engaged theatre, and in particular this kind of witness theatre, not only with teenagers, but also with people who—with veterans, a lot of projects with veterans who served on the frontline. For example, one of the place that I have been writing about, together with a Ukrainian colleague named Yelizaveta Elenic, we have been writing about a play called “Commodity” that was created by Alex Adarian who at the time when the war started in 2015 was a 23 year old film student, and then he participated in the Maidan Revolution. Once the war started, he served as a volunteer medic on the front line, and he wrote an autobiographical performance about that experience. And it's really an incredible piece of work because of the way that it is so brutally honest about the complexity of war, essentially, and about the complexity of human

lives and the notion of the enemy, and the way war can be used for profit and the way the media portrayal of war creates kind of narratives around heroes that in his experience were not necessarily representing the full intricacy of what happens at war. And yeah, so this is one of the projects that I have been writing about and thinking about in connexion to the theatre of displaced people work that I've just described. And I suppose in in light of the full-scale invasion and the incredible horror and brutality that we are all now witnessing, I have reflected differently upon those projects and been thinking about how the—about resilience, actually, and about resistance, and how the process of telling one story and sharing that story and coming together in that way and in those venues contributed to a broader movement within kind of grassroots activism and arts activism in particular in Ukraine, that has facilitated the resistance and resilience that we are seeing now.

ALECKY

Wow.

MOLLY

So that's one of the things that I have been thinking about a lot in the Ukrainian context. In terms of the kinds of theatre that's going on since the full scale revolution, it's a bit more complicated. That's because many of the theatre artists, for example, Alex Adarian, who I have just speaking about, are serving in the military. Some of Ukraine's leading playwrights are— playwrights, actors, directors, I mean people are either in the military, in the territorial defence, have fled the war, or are working, you know, contributing to humanitarian aid either in Ukraine or abroad. People are making theatre, and people are writing. But it certainly takes a different kind of priority in a different kind of form in these circumstances.

HELEN

Thank you so much for that. I didn't want to interrupt that conversation, that was—everything you were saying was so wonderful. I had wanted to ask: I've got big questions like why verbatim or why witness theatre, but I actually think you've both given answers to that, really, I think those are really inherent in what you're saying. But we if we keep that in mind when I—we should finally address this question of ethics. And actually, I'd also say I was thinking about safety, actually, Molly, even, when we're talking about witness theatre and also about "One Hour 18 Minutes," about the safety of staging such a work and maybe in thinking about those ethical concerns, why despite those, we would want to have verbatim theatre and documentary and witness theatre.

MADELEINE

I guess if I can sum up that question, what are the ethical questions that you deal with when you're making verbatim theatre, or when you're researching verbatim theatre, for both, you know, the ethics of making it and the safety of the performers.

ALECKY

It's about making sure that what you're gonna end up putting on stage is not going to have a detrimental effect on those people that have shared their stories. So it's I think it's about the responsibility of representing them, faithfully and of course, we all know we can edit things in certain ways that might make things a lot more dramatic, but at the end of the day, you might end up with a play that's, everyone going to be on the edge of their seats, but if the real life people are going to be really kind of upset by it, it's not worth doing it. So for me it's always I feel like I'm kind of in the middle. I've sort of got this sort of truth-ometer because I've got the, like the real life people here, yeah, and then I might have the director here, who is wanting to kind of like soup it up a bit more and like “oh maybe we can try and can we do this? Can we try this out” and “I know it didn't happen like this, but, blah blah blah blah” and I feel I have to kind of always, 'cause I don't have the real life people in the room. And that is a kind of deliberate choice actually, because I feel that the work I'm making is removed from them, actually, interestingly. I know it is their words and it's you know without their words there wouldn't be a, wouldn't be a show, but at the same time, the end result is still a few degrees away from them, even though it's their words said as they were said, because you know, it's said through actors. You know they are in costumes. They are lit. They're put on a stage and they are, you know, it is then kind of cut, so you know you end up hopefully with you know a piece of art that is very much taken from life. But it is not. It is not their life standing up there and even when it's with, you know the work you're talking about, Molly, you know with the kids stories, and I'm sure they've still been shaped, you know, because obviously life would go on forever and ever, wouldn't it? And it's got to be kind of pulled into some kind of cohesive, digestible form for an audience, you know, and to have a you know a dramatic narrative as well. And all, you know, all those sort of elements. You know, real life isn't, isn't that without that shaping and so yeah, it's about doing that shaping, but knowing that at the end of the day these are real people and their lives are actually kind of paramount over the show, 'cause you are just making a show at the end of the day. So and I, and I know, you know, I know in my heart that if I'm kind of, kind of lying there in bed thinking, “oh, just not sure whether they'd be happy without that,” you know, and then I might just pick up the phone and say, “listen, this bit of the show isn't working. I'm wondering if I can just kind of maybe, can I just sort of do this with it, or…?” I'm not talking about necessarily changing the words, but maybe I've had to cut a character, but a certain character has said something that's kind of–this did happen in one case actually,

where I had to cut a character, because he hadn't really properly understood, I think, how he was going to be, you know, how he would be absolutely represented in in the show and then when it became clear that oh he didn't quite get it, and then he didn't really want to be represented. I was like, OK, I've got to cut him out of the show, however, he said some really important facts that I wanted to be in the piece. So without, uh, you know, giving away any of his identity or anything I could take these few— he didn't mind me using those few facts, he just didn't want his character to be, you know, performed. And then I phoned up another character in the piece, who emotionally sat within the same place that he did within the story and I said, “listen, I know you didn't say this, but you are the closest emotionally to this character, and I'd love these facts to be included. Is it OK if these couple of lines are said by your character” and she said, “oh yes, no, that's absolutely fine. That's how I felt anyway,” and blah blah, and it was all fine. But you know, I feel like that kind of thing, because of the kind of very kind of pure way that I, you know, do work, I have to kind of check in and go “OK. I'm going to do this. Are you OK with this” and you know 'cause the last thing you want is them coming and going “hang on a minute, I didn't say that.” You know she not have even realised, but still, you know you have responsibility and I think if you're going to say “this is the way I'm going to make— put your words on stage and they're going to be edited, but they will be exactly what you said.” You, suddenly then you're not doing that. You know I don't know how many more plays you're going to kind of be able to keep making and get away with. So for me it's just something that I know deep deep down if I've pushed it a bit much, so I'll kind of go back and check, and if they say no then you just gotta think of another way creatively to maybe, hit that same beat but in a different way. Yeah, it's your own ethical compass. Moral compass as well, isn't it? I think that comes into play really, and it's hard because you might have a director going “oh, but if we had this, then we'd have what would be just an amazing scene.” And you think, oh, that's the, you know, that's the battle and that's one of the drawbacks of verbatim, but you know, for all of its drawbacks, you know which are very real, there are things that people say that you know you could never make up, so that's just that. That's the beast that you're dealing with, really.

MOLLY

Yeah, I think there are some parallels actually between what you're describing and the kind of ethical concerns around academic research when it's research about living people and living artists. I guess I had a somewhat analogous experience recently around an article that I published that was about a Ukrainian Youth Theatre programme. It wasn't documentary theatre, it was a programme in which, it's actually an adaptation of a programme that started at the Traverse Theatre called Class Act in which teenagers write plays together and so in this Ukrainian version of

the project, they would each year bring ten teenagers from a town in western Ukraine and ten teenagers from a town in eastern Ukraine together for 10 days of playwriting workshops where the kids would be paired together and they would write these short plays and at the end of the 10 days their plays were staged in this huge gala event with like the most famous actors in Ukraine and incredible directors and design. And it was really this beautiful way to kind of give voice to these kids and help them learn how to write plays. And I wrote an article about this project, which I participated in for two of the three years and it was more or less finished before the full scale invasion, but of course needed to be rewritten at the end of February or in March in light of what was going on. And what is going on. And understandably, the editors of the journal had asked, you know, well, because half of the kids who participated in this programme were living in cities that were at that point, and some of them still, occupied by Russia. And understandably, the editors wanted to know, well, you know, where are the kids? Where are they now? What are they doing now? And I did kind of through a mutual friend reach out to one of the teenage playwrights whose work is kind of especially featured in the article to see if he would want to share that information. Which he did. I mean he did share it but not for publication and I think that's completely understandable, and that's part of I guess that's part of something that I'm learning to navigate now in a different way. Which is that it's more important to respect the needs and desires of the people that I'm writing about than it is to you know, make the most engaging narrative.

ALECKY

It is. It always is, isn't it? Yeah, it always is.

MOLLY

Absolutely, and I guess for me also, these more recent events have highlighted, how, how research and documentary theatre alike are often forms of advocacy. And we hold a certain responsibility for understanding our own political position within that process, knowing that we are not unbiased and we're not, you know, we're not objective observers of these people's lives. We're interpreting them, and we're interpreting them with a certain ideological set of values in mind, and it's important, I think to be aware of those, and to be clear about them with our readers and with our audiences.

ALECKY

Yeah, yeah, I think you're spot on there.

HELEN

Thank you so much for this. I'm just going to stop us with an eye to time because I really could I could listen to this all day.

ALECKY

Well thank you. It's been fascinating, it's been great to hear, you know, about your work, Molly as well.

MOLLY

Thank you, same—

ALECKY

I had no idea that's going on, and that's great, it is, and I hope that you know they can keep making, you know, workout out there in Ukraine, because you know, obviously we don't hear a lot about that side of it, do we? Of course, we just…

MOLLY

It's true, we don't hear a lot about that side of it. Well, it is happening, and it is pretty incredible, but it also I think it's also important to say that it's not something that we can take for granted, and that our support and the support of foreign governments and all of that really is crucial, yeah.

HELEN

On that note Molly, then perhaps really the true best note to end on would be: is there anything that you would guide people listening to this podcast to? Any action that they would take or any research that they could do for themselves that would be of benefit to the people of Ukraine?

MOLLY

Yeah, absolutely thank you for that question. Well, I think certainly anybody who feels like they're in a position financially to donate, that's absolutely a priority. Some of the charities that I would recommend, one is called Come Back Alive, if you search “come back alive Ukraine,” you can find a place there to donate. Also Razom for Ukraine that's RAZOM for Ukraine would be two excellent charities that are working really effectively on the ground. Aside from financial donations, I think, certainly you know, writing your MP, making sure that this is a topic that remains in people’s consciousness, in the news and doing as much reading as possible and trying to kind of understand that there is a real complexity to this history and it's a colonial history, and that one of the reasons I mean, this is actually no, that's too, too big a topic to get into at the end [laughs] But I will just say that, you know we in the Western English speaking world, we learn about Russian theatre, for example, and when we learn about, you know those of us who have studied theatre history, you know, we may have learned about Soviet theatre as well. A Soviet theatre history class is very common. I certainly had it as an undergrad, but often what we learn about when we

think about Soviet history is Russian history, and in fact, there were a lot of other countries in the Soviet Union, and those countries have their own histories and they have their own theatre traditions, and I think we as theatre makers and as theatre scholars do have a responsibility. Oh, that reminds me we didn't talk about your Georgia piece, Alecky!

ALECKY

I didn't think about Georgia when you mentioned. Yeah there were other countries, you know.

MOLLY

Yes, exactly exactly, I mean. I don't know, maybe we don't have time for that, but I would just say. Like that's another, that's really brilliant example of taking responsibility for hearing those stories from countries from people in countries that were not necessary, really seeing coverage of in mainstream media and making sure that and this is not only in the kind of essential European context, not only in the Russian context, not only in Central Asia but all over the world, right? That there are so many ways in which we provide access, and we gain access, to certain types of knowledge from certain types of places and those kinds of knowledge are often connected to privilege and it is our responsibility as theatre makers, and as theatre academics to make sure that we're looking at what else is going on, and telling those other stories as well. And that's something that. I think we all know to be true and we have always known to be true, but for me has become something I see with much greater clarity since February 2022. And seeing that you know people weren't seeing this war for the past eight years, and people weren't seeing Ukraine as you know, a pivotal part of contemporary European culture, which it is and that's partly our responsibility as you know as international artists and academics who are contributing to the body of knowledge that we have on a global scale. So yeah, in terms of actions to take forward, that's a lesson that I'm learning, and I think it's one that that we all have a responsibility to look at.

MADELEINE

Brilliant. Thank you so much, Molly. We will link to both of those places to donate as well, just so that it's easy for you all to find listening. And thank you so much to both of you, not only for this conversation, but for the work that you're doing and the work that you're continuing to do. It's been such a pleasure to talk to both of you and I look forward to seeing what you do next.

HELEN

This has been Practise Makes: the Oxford Reimagining Performance Podcasts with Helen Dallas and Madeleine Saidenberg. Thanks for listening.