

Putting Real People on Stage: Helgard Haug (Rimini Protokoll) in Conversation with Theatre Practitioners and Academics from Australia

As part of Rimini Protokoll's visit to Australia in 2012 to create and stage 100% Melbourne, a production featuring 100 inhabitants of the City of Melbourne cast according to demographic criteria, Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford organised and chaired a panel with Helgard Haug, one of the key players in this German performance collective. Four Sydney-based artists whose performance practices included collaborating with or representing non-professional theatre performers were also invited to join the discussion that took place on 4 April 2012 at the Goethe-Institut Australia, Sydney. These artists and their artistic roles or affiliations at that time were: Claudia Chidiac (Creative Producer of Performance, and Music and Theatre Producer at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre), Alicia Talbot (Artistic Director of Urban Theatre Projects), Alana Valentine (playwright), and David Williams (founder and CEO of version 1.0). During the discussion, the panel members presented and compared their approaches to representing and/or working with real people—people with a verifiable physical existence who usually have not received institutional theatre training or have little prior stage experience, and whose life skills, experiences, and/or narratives are brought in various ways to the public arena of the stage.

The following transcript extract, edited by Meg Mumford and John Severn, offers access to the discussion between the panellists. It is preceded by brief information about each panellist's relevant theatre practice over the last c. 15 years. It concludes with a series of short responses by each member of the panel to Mumford's invitation in June 2015 to address a final question about recent developments with regard to Reality Theatre / Theatre of Real People. This question had been on the agenda for the 4 April 2012 event, but on the night it was not possible to include it within the given time frame. In Helgard Haug's case, her German-language commentary has been translated by Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford.

Panellist Information

Helgard Haug studied at the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies at the University of Giessen, Germany. Since 1996 she has been involved in projects that are located on the borderline between theatre, documentary, radio play and the applied arts. In 2000 she co-founded Rimini Protokoll together with Daniel Wetzels and Stefan Kaegi. This company produces theatre work in the urban environment through a diverse variety of collaborative partnerships. The works are created using research, auditions and conceptual processes, allowing what the company calls 'experts' to find their unique voice. Since 2003 Rimini Protokoll have been based at Hebbel am

Ufer (HAU) in Berlin. Further information can be found at <http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/>.

Claudia Chidiac is a theatre maker and creative producer who has worked extensively with young people, migrant, and refugee communities. As artistic director of Powerhouse Youth Theatre (2005-2010), she was responsible for directing and producing the company's artistic program and for developing training opportunities for emerging artists in the Western Sydney region. In her producer roles at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre (2010–14) she created the award-winning Way Out West (WOW) Festival for Children (2011–13). Claudia is currently collaborating with Australian and New Zealand Arab theatre and performance artists on the project *Palestine Dreaming: Unoccupied Spaces*.

Alicia Talbot is a director, curator and ideas generator working in contemporary performance. She has developed a practice of creating site-based works together with a team of professional artists who collaborate through a dialogue-based process with 'experts' who have lived experience of the subject matter. For over a decade (2001–12) Alicia was Artistic Director of Urban Theatre Projects (UTP), a performing arts company based in the Western suburbs of Sydney. She is currently working as Senior Strategic Project Leader on the direction of new cultural facilities for Parramatta City Council, Sydney, and developing a series of new works, supported by a Fellowship award from the Australia Council for the Arts.

Alana Valentine's writing draws from Australian voices within our midst and from our past. Many of Alana's plays are based on community consultation including *Parramatta Girls* and *Run Rabbit Run*, works that have been listed on the NSW Higher School Certificate Drama Syllabus. Currently *Head Full of Love* is on a National Tour. First produced in 2010 at the Darwin Festival, the play is based at the Alice Springs Beanie Festival and draws on interviews with the Pitjantjatjara women of the Central Desert mob, the Beanie Festival community, kidney dialysis workers, nurses and others based in Alice Springs. So far the tour has raised over \$60,000 for the Purple House and their mobile dialysis unit. Alana's website is www.alanavalentine.com.

David Williams is a writer, director and performer. At the time of the panel discussion he was the founder and Chief Executive Officer of version 1.0, and had co-devised and produced all of this theatre company's work since 1998. version 1.0 disbanded in early 2014, and further information about the company's past work can be found at <http://www.versiononepointzero.com/>. David currently works with theatre companies across Australia as a dramaturg and researcher, and creates documentary theatre works under the banner of DW Projects, most recently *Quiet Faith* (2014). Further information about this project can be found online at www.davidwilliams.net.au.

Panel Discussion 4 April 2012, 6.30pm, Goethe-Institut Australia, Sydney

MEG MUMFORD My first question is: what sorts of real people and/or experts do you each frequently work with, and what artistic practices does this work open up?

HELGARD HAUG We don't call the participants of our projects non-actors, but they *are* non-actors—they don't have any professional performance skills, they are not trained, they can't dance, they can't speak in a nice or elegant or skilled way. We are interested in their profession, in their biographies. [In the case of *Call Cutta in a Box* (2008)] if you ask who the expert is here and who is the audience member you encounter problems, because it's similar to a phone conversation. The person in Kolkata in the call centre is more or less

following a script, but as it's interactive—he or she needs to improvise, combining the script with whatever comes back from the various offices where the audience is placed. As an audience member you buy a ticket, you get a little information—where to go, open a door, etc.—and then after a while the phone rings and then the play starts. But you are involved already in that you're not only sitting back in the dark and looking at something you can call a play or a performance, but participating.

We developed a piece that represents the type of work that deals with technology and communication—communication tools—because we visited Kolkata, and were invited by the Goethe-Institut and given *carte blanche* to develop a project that could have been on stage, or an exhibition, an installation. We decided to focus on the call centre as an important economic sector in India and as a link to Europe and to Australia too. For example, the people that are actually working in the call centre, some of them were working for the Australian shift, as they call it, perhaps selling mobile phones and credit cards to some of you. So your phone would ring and you would hang up, maybe—but if not, even if you tried to get to know those people you wouldn't have a chance because it's forbidden for them to say where they are, to mention their real names or to talk in a personal way.

We wanted to turn this inside out and say, 'Okay, let's use the lines, the established technology; let's place our experts in a call centre or even recruit in phone call centres and let them phone people and talk to people—not selling but actually starting a conversation'. So the people get involved in a kind of play—they get to know each other quite easily. We found out that people tend to reveal secrets more easily when they know that the person they're talking to is actually in Kolkata, maybe more than when that person is living next door. As you saw with the example of the kettle [in the video clip preceding the panel discussion], the call centre workers were able to control the whole office [in which the audience member was seated], so they could send pictures to the printer, they could open a computer, they could show files, they could activate a ventilator, or switch on the light through a little device and control your little office where you had the feeling you were safe, in a more or less spooky way.

We have done other projects that take place in a more established way, with a more conservative stage-audience set-up. You mentioned the example of *Radio Muezzin*, a work by Stefan [Kaegi], where he invited five muezzin from Cairo on stage to talk about their role in society—about losing their jobs, in fact. Because Cairo had decided—or the Ministry of Religion had decided—that all the calls from the muezzin should be centralised and not individual anymore. They were to play the same call to prayer, which should sound like one voice at the very same time from all the different mosques. Stefan started to research which muezzin would lose their jobs, which muezzin you could have found there before the government decided to cut the staff or to centralise. On stage they would speak about their role and their biographies.

Another aspect that is often important is to use a text as a frame. For example, Daniel [Wetzel] and I worked with Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, volume one, where we invited ten people on stage, with very different professions and different biographical stories they had to tell regarding their access to *Das Kapital*. As we found out, it's a book everybody tends to know but nobody has read from beginning to end. We ourselves didn't know what it was about, so we started by taking the book and going to various people and asking them, 'Could you read this book to us, could you explain how we should read it?'

There were some who said, 'Forget it, you have to study Hegel for at least 20 years before you can start *Das Kapital*', and there were others who could say clearly how they got their political ideas from it, or how this book actually shaped their life, because maybe they had to read it. For example, there was a person from Riga, Latvia who had to study it because of the system there. So we heard lots of different perspectives on how to read this book.

MEG MUMFORD Helgard, you've also started to introduce issues surrounding the concept of the expert, and possibly also the issue of the audience member as expert. Is that an issue that resonates with the other panellists?

DAVID WILLIAMS My name is David Williams and I run a company called version 1.0 that has an ensemble of artists who make work about political and social issues, often involving documentary materials—well, *always* involving documentary materials. Often those materials concern political or cultural scandals of some sort. Consequently we've worked with the proceedings of parliamentary enquiries, Royal Commissions, court cases, and many media interviews.

We've conducted interviews with people and recently we worked with the proceedings of the Independent Commission Against Corruption, which is a New South Wales statutory body that investigates governmental corruption within the state – that was for a production about a sex scandal involving property development in Wollongong. I'd suggest that the real people who version 1.0 is engaging with are actually the artists on the stage and the audience who's encountering the work.

I've often said of version 1.0's practice that I hope that it opens spaces for public conversation around important political and social issues. We create in-theatre works, they operate in a more or less traditional manner. There is an audience in some form of seating configuration with performers situated on stage. But we hope to capture some sense of discussion, dissension, a journey of discovery around political events or political subject matters that we are all part of – the people on stage and the people in the auditorium – and that we have to understand in a slightly different way.

Our artists have expertise in art-making. They develop a provisional expertise—I use the term 'provisional expertise' from a Welsh performance artist Mike Pearson. Provisional expertise means that we develop the capacity to have expert conversations with experts. That allows us to engage

—in a deep or shallow way as required by the dictates of the project—in conversation with people who know more about things than we do, and we hope to draw our process of discovering more about these things into the stage work to develop a hunger among the audience to also know more about these things.

MEG MUMFORD I recall at one point you saying that ‘we’—the ‘we’ who is David who stands on the stage as performer—is often there as someone who is saying, ‘I am not an expert in this’. In a way, the audience can’t fully trust that you will give them the truth, or that you even know it, and so you allow us to grow that hunger that you're talking about.

DAVID WILLIAMS I’d say we try to do that. There have been occasions where that has been very successful and other occasions where perhaps that hunger has been sated. I am thinking of one review of our show about the Australian Wheat Board in the wheat-for-weapons scandal, based on a Royal Commission. One of the reviews said, ‘They've read the Cole inquiry report, so you don't have to’. That was absolutely not the point of the show. The point was actually to encourage people to read it, to engage with it more fully. So I guess there's a question about whether the aesthetics get in the way sometimes of that kind of process. But the competing desires do make a good show, that provides a good experience, and encourage a kind of civic conversation around what kind of society we want to live in. I don't think that they necessarily need to be separate things, but I guess that’s the point of the discussion.

MEG MUMFORD I see. Thank you very much.

CLAUDIA CHIDIAC My name is Claudia Chidiac. I’m currently working at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre as a theatre producer. I've been practising as a theatre maker for about 10 years, specifically with diverse communities: young people, culturally specific communities, people who identify as living with and without disabilities, migrant and refugee communities.

The work I have made has been about telling real people's stories. I started relatively young in the sector, and from the start it was a really strong desire of mine to use theatre as a way to create some type of change on a local level. Actually, more so on a domestic level, the level involving the conversations people have with each other or the discussions that people have in their homes. My intention is that questions be raised and bigger conversations be triggered. I have long believed that essentially change has got to start on a domestic level before it can spill out on a national level.

The biggest project that I did that really informed my practice was a show I did 11 years ago, in 2001. It was performance project made with people who had come to Australia via the refugee experience. That was at a time when those stories were quite new to mainstream Australia. It was a site-specific project and my baptism by fire, in the sense that it raised questions like: how do you make work with people who have had lived experiences? who is that

type of work for? is it about the people that you're working with, or is it about the people who are coming to experience that show?

Over the years my focus moved towards working with young people, and young people in specific communities. They were the experts. I always believe that the people who you work with essentially are the ones that drive that project. The artists are the ones that facilitate those stories. It's been a big desire of mine to be able to tell real stories in an environment where the artistic outcome is of the highest value. I've wanted to take the telling of stories by communities from a grass roots show onto a larger platform. For those who saw *Radio Muezzin*, that's a classic example of communities telling stories, on the main stage, and with a really beautiful production value.

In terms of my own practice—having people tell stories on the stage, so they're the performers—I'm experimenting at the moment with a new process. I've been working on a piece for the last few years, about young women as perpetrators of violence, and it's called *Tough Beauty*. For the last 12 months I've been working with young women and men across southwest Sydney. They've become my dramaturgs and my consultants, telling me what they think about young women as perpetrators of violence. Usually in the past I have had those young women stand on stage telling those stories. Here I've reversed the process. Yes, they're telling their stories, they're the consultants, but they're now going to be the artists that actually make the production element of the work. So it's trying to challenge how you make work and who you make work with and why you do it.

MEG MUMFORD This point provides a lovely segue into some of the work that Alicia Talbot does with regard to the concept and practice of the 'consultant' that you have just raised.

ALICIA TALBOT I work for a company called Urban Theatre Projects which produced Claudia's *Asylum* in 2001. With regard to real people, I've worked in different ways, but over the last 10 years I've been investigating a particular process where it's not real people on stage, but a fictionalised reality. I would use the term 'expert' when discussing the process of making. Rather than use an existing script or an existing idea, it's a set of ideas about the contemporary world that I grapple with. I refer to my process as 'public dialogue'. What that means is that if all of you had particular experiences—or what I would call industry knowledge—of being sex workers on a highway, or growing up as stolen or forgotten Australian, or of being in or outside of unions, or being people without documents, I would invite you to come into the process from before I started the development process until the closing night. I would pay you for that and ask your dramaturgical and critical feedback about the work that you see in front of you. I would ask you not to tell your personal stories, because a lot of the work that I look at is around trauma and often around working in difficult contexts. When I first started grappling with these ideas I was working at a crisis service for people who walk in off the street, and I wanted to make a work in residence in that place. People had experiences of being assaulted or raped or had been in

prison the night before, and they didn't really want to come into an environment and talk about that.

So instead, I would think, 'These are the social issues that I believe are interesting, and this is the parallel story that I think has got something to it'. So all of you could go, 'This is my idea, what do you think?' And *you* might say, 'I think it's great', and *you* might go, 'I think it's absolute rubbish'. And after that conversation I'd say, 'This is what's going to happen, and I think this is the idea'. I'd make ten minutes of performance and put it on stage, and then in a mediated discussion you would tell me what you think. I would keep engaging with people who may never have been to the theatre, or who may have been to the theatre.

MEG MUMFORD This is a particular approach or process that you've come across, because as you state, you work often with difficult territory, trauma etc. Has your work dealt with less difficult territory and do you then proceed in the same way?

ALICIA TALBOT I would dearly love it to! I would say for the last 10 years of work, nearly all of the contexts I have worked with have been connected by poverty, mostly. Trauma occurs within poverty. I feel like there's a range of artists who make a range of work and I'm just drawn to catastrophes. Drawn to going, 'Oh, what's there and what do these people have to say about art-making?' rather than, 'This is the story I need to tell you because you need to know about this catastrophe'.

MEG MUMFORD Thank you. Alana?

ALANA VALENTINE May I first acknowledge the traditional owners of the country on which we meet, the Gadigal, and pay my respect for elders past and present. Can I especially acknowledge Uncle Jimmy Little who passed away so recently, and is much missed. Alana Valentine is my name; I'm a playwright, so I actually write plays to be performed on various kinds of stages. What I do is I transcribe the words of real people, sometimes I massage those transcriptions, and I conduct my interviews along the lines of a particular premise that *I* am investigating, that interests *me*, Alana.

I suppose, for me, the most important part of my practice is that the community of interest from which I draw the stories remain a part of the process of putting it on the stage, or at least are there when it's put on the stage. That's how I define verbatim playwrights as opposed to other storytellers: they seek to keep the community of interest whose story they're telling in the room. You said, 'Who are the real people you work with?' For reasons of time, I wrote a list of the people whom I have worked with in the past:

Rugby league fans, women incarcerated for being uncontrollable, young adults in Hay, young religiously diverse adults in Fairfield, Afghani Australian Muslim women, Junee Correctional Centre inmates, Goulburn Correctional Centre inmates and their children, children of inmates elsewhere, Newcastle marine pilots, young adults in Newcastle, radio astronomers, specifically

those working in pulsar science, New South Wales Fire Brigade chaplains and personnel, women in federal and state politics, children born from sperm-donor fathers, high school children being cyber-bullied, international students living in Australia, Maori indigenous and Papua New Guinean singer songwriters, Pitjantjatjara kidney dialysis patients and nurses, beanie makers, elderly and disabled housing commission residents in Waterloo, flood victims in Katherine, the Arab-Australian woman who invented the burqini, Jewish entrepreneurs, lesbian burlesque artists, chocolate, wine and tea connoisseurs, professional ethicists and people living with HIV-AIDS, relatives of World War I soldiers who have planted an avenue of memorial trees, adult survivors of child abuse, Haymarket purveyors of fruit, vegetable and flowers, sex workers at Lou's Place [a daytime women's refuge in inner Sydney] and Wagga Wagga glass artists.

[Applause from the audience]

ULRIKE GARDE I now want to give the panellists an opportunity to ask each other questions. Helgard, do you want to ask anything at this stage?

HELGARD HAUG Alicia, you described the process of inviting audiences to give feedback—what is the next step? Is that the step you take or does that get turned into another performance or another text? How do you cope with the reaction ...?

ALICIA TALBOT The feedback is a regular thing, so from beginning to end, every week or two weeks. The feedback that people give you radically alters the fabric of the work, the relationships, the image-making, the dramaturgical structure. Sometimes people say, 'Well, that's not right, and I don't understand why it's not right'. So all night as the artist I'll be awake going, 'What are people really saying, what is that really about?' It can be a tiny little dramaturgical or relational node but for me it really shifts the work and creates a set of offers.

I do it because I think it's inspiring and challenging. I don't always get it right. Sometimes I think people are trying to say things that you don't always hear in the moment because as the artist you have a set of eyes going, 'This is the path that I want to go down', and people are going, 'This is the path you want to go down', but the work itself has its own dramaturgical framework which will float almost between the two. So picking that path is hard.

HELGARD HAUG Yes, I find it quite risky, actually, to open it ...

ALICIA TALBOT It doesn't always work.

HELGARD HAUG Yes, it might, it's a nice idea. Sometimes we are forced to show try-outs to exclusive, invited people. We want to open it, but it's quite tough, and interesting.

ALICIA TALBOT It *is* tough. I try and set up clear parameters, and I usually say, 'It's really collaborative until the last two weeks'. Or just go, 'Well, I'm the captain and I'm still going to pick my way through this set of ideas and lead artistically,

but also be open to this very strong mediated discussion'. It's quite destabilising and risky.

ULRIKE GARDE

One question that also came up when you were all talking was work that could be called site-specific because it is tied in with a community. On the other hand, some of you have got work that travels. David, your work has travelled from Wollongong to various other places in Australia, and of course *Radio Muezzin* or the *100%* series pieces have been presented in different cities and different towns. So I would like to ask: 'What is the interplay between being site-specific or community-specific, and travelling? How do you approach the issue of the work being relevant for the new audience?'

HELGARD HAUG

First, it's really important to have a chance to show our projects in different countries for different audiences. I really enjoy seeing my own projects—one of us is always there with the project. You do something else while you're travelling with the project that's being staged. I think humour is such a big part of theatre—for me and my culture at least—and of course humour is very location-specific. If we try to make a joke in Berlin it's received in a different way to the way it would be here. You really need to find the level of humour where you can communicate with the audience. I enjoy seeing the work through different eyes, and getting to know a little bit of the city and then communicating the show in the evening and seeing, 'Is this something really strange? Is it communicating directly or is there an extension to it? How can you make your thoughts and the people on stage communicate with the audience?'

I personally think that our projects get better the longer they are performed. The premiere is often really terrible because there is this awkward feeling for the performers on stage, and it needs some routine to make it enjoyable for everybody. If you are not a trained actor you think, 'Am I wrong, am I right?' There are so many things you feel you can do in the wrong way. For example, we've been touring *Kapital* for four years now, and I really enjoy it because it's like a living room. They [the experts] are so relaxed, so smart, and they can really think; they even take the chance to improvise on stage because they don't have the feeling they can make any mistakes anymore.

DAVID WILLIAMS

I would agree that in my experience work does improve with age, with the ability to remount it. Certainly Australia has a history of developing many many new works, and then dropping them. I think one great strength in Australia is that we can make new work very quickly, but one of the great weaknesses is we don't allow work an opportunity to grow. We constantly put work that's had a four-week creative development up against work that's been touring internationally for the last 10 years, and wonder why the Australian work doesn't seem so rich. There's a very simple answer to that. But I think works have different resonances to different communities. That's certainly so with the two works that we premiered last year. The *Disappearances Project*, which was a commission from Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre, which is about three-and-a-half hours west of Sydney, was a project that was about the experience of people left behind in the event of long-term missing persons cases. That had a very particular

resonance for audiences in Bathurst because two of the cases that appear within that frame are local to that area. Even though the show does not identify any individuals or any individual cases—that was a very deliberate choice—there are a couple of references that local people pick up on very quickly. There's a reference to a car—one of the missing people was last seen getting into a car, and because she had no hesitation getting into the car it's widely believed in that community that it was someone from there that she knew who was responsible for her disappearance. So as soon as the car was mentioned the audience rippled with murmurs. That didn't happen anywhere else.

Equally the experience has been extremely resonant for audiences in Sydney, Perth, Adelaide. Different audiences have different specific resonances, but some experiences are universal to contemporary life in a place like Australia, which is a place like other western countries. The *Table of Knowledge* is about a scandal in Wollongong. It had a very deep intense relationship with the audience in Wollongong. It also had a very deep intense relationship with the audience in Sydney—they just laughed at different things. They didn't know the specific individuals involved in the scandal, so they would laugh at the ridiculousness of some things that were said, whereas the Wollongong audience wanted to laugh at the gaps in between language. So that's very different.

Another factor is time. We did a project about the selling of the war in Iraq and we premiered that in 2005. It was a very successful work, but some people I spoke to after that work said, 'Yeah, but we already know all these things. We know that there were no weapons of mass destruction, we know that we were lied to by politicians ...'. There was a kind of cynicism that had set in.

We toured that work around the country in 2006, presenting the same ideas, lies, evasions, avoidances of truth and the same spin. Somehow the fact that nothing had changed in 12 months made the work a very different emotional experience for many of the same people who saw that work the second time. Yes, we made small changes, but just the fact that nothing had changed in twelve months made the work more resonant.

CLAUDIA CHIDIAC Something I'd like to raise is the idea of time. Both of you have mentioned it in different capacities—Helgard, you were saying that a work will get stronger the more opportunity they [the experts] get to perform, the longer the season is. What are your thoughts around the time that you take to make the work? Alicia, you've got the infamous two-year process of making the work, from when you research it to ...

ALICIA TALBOT All together it's about three months.

CLAUDIA CHIDIAC I'm especially interested in your work, Helgard, because you work in an international context. My work hasn't left the suburb it gets made in—actually, it goes from the office to down the road. I guess that's the intention of the work—that it resonates for that specific community. I've made a piece

that's taken me five weeks to make, and that didn't really work – especially when you're working with young people who are deaf. Then I've worked on a project for over two years, and when I think about the outcome for the participants and the creative outcome, that seemed to sit really well. The intention was also that participants would develop existing skills, create new skills, and then maybe we could also change the world with the stories that they were telling.

HELGARD HAUG

I think putting a project on stage maybe takes four weeks, five weeks, but that's the tiny tip of the iceberg. What comes first is the idea, the research, meeting a lot of people, having them come back again and again, then a process of choosing the people who will finally be on stage. And all of the people have professions—we're talking about people who are mostly freelancers, who can take time off and then rehearse with us and then go back to their job again. But I don't think we can take them away from their regular job for longer than four weeks.

We recently had a project in Berlin that premiered at the end of March, where we invited business people from Lagos to Berlin. They stayed for six weeks and that was really a long time—probably too long. I like it that you have to work fast: you are prepared, you know how you want to tell the things you are telling, or how the set design looks or the technique or the video. Of course, there are always so many layers in theatre. So I think four weeks is perfect. It's good to open it then and get feedback, and still of course work on it. If somebody says, 'I liked it, but ...', or, 'I didn't like it because ...', it's always an inspiration to change things. There's also the opportunity of showing it again and again, perhaps to find the key to the project even after it's been premiered.

MEG MUMFORD

Can we ask the playwright? Alana, four weeks?

ALANA VALENTINE

Yes, you can write something in four weeks. *Parramatta Girls* took me four years. So it depends. The play I just did about cyber bullying, at PLC Croydon, was commissioned in June, and it was on stage in December. But they had already spent almost a year conducting interviews with students, teachers and parents and they made that material available to me. So it depends on the time and the size of the project.

There are two things I wanted to say about the discussion we've had. The first is really to do with audience: I've already said that for me the community of interest is an important part of the audience. I've realised lately that what I love as a theatre maker is the unvarnished response. What I unconsciously—or maybe now more consciously—seek out are audiences who'll give me that unvarnished response, who come up to you and say, 'That was bloody brilliant!', or, 'That was not so good'. What I love is these responses to the play, in the actual space, and that links to something that strongly motivates me as a writer. I believe that it is everyone's human right to sit in an audience and watch on stage a version of their life in an hour and half or two hours. A lot of people think that verbatim playwrights or theatre makers are proselytising for their community. Yet I think actually what really

great verbatim work does is to take the community to a point where they're questioning what are the good and bad things about that community. All artists take their audience to that kind of edge and say, 'Is this what you're really like?'

I feel that that's a very established idea in middle-class theatre, that idea of seeing your foibles and your strengths. For me, it is simply the desire to put on stage those voices and bring into a theatre those communities that don't get a chance to go, 'Ha! we're really like that! Ooh ... we're really like that ...'. That really motivates me, and I think I've heard that alluded to in the panel as well.

ULRIKE GARDE 'Community' really creates a link to you, Alicia. Is there anything you want to add?

ALICIA TALBOT I think what's interesting is partly connected to time and partly connected to the framework of this being 'real'. I started making work that draws on all sorts of performance and live art, but I started with that process 15 years ago—it's an older style of putting together what is ultimately a theatre work, even though it might be site-specific, even though it might not have a narrative set of structures. I think what's interesting about some of the ways that people make work now—like the 'frame around the real'—is that it's a new response to a different set of questions being asked of artists. I'm fascinated by these questions at the moment about how our work sits, who it's for and how it's made—as I think we always are. I think there's a real shift amongst the makers here about the frames that sit around and with that. I feel like my work sits in an older style of theatre because it's actually representation; it's not a performance frame that is about presenting the real.

DAVID WILLIAMS You were saying that there are some interesting questions being asked of artists, but I also think there are interesting questions being asked about what is actually real, given that so much of public discourse and media is actually about lies and fabrications. I think there are some very interesting responses to the task of foregrounding realness in work. One example is the work that Roslyn Oades has been doing with headphone-verbatim. Here there is almost a fetishisation of 'these are real words of non-present, or maybe present, others'.

ALANA VALENTINE. Don't you think it's all artificial? I would say it's all a construct because ...

DAVID WILLIAMS. Yes, absolutely. Things are being selected and not selected.

ALANA VALENTINE. Because it's an artist-led intervention. These communities don't get to articulate themselves and their real concerns unmediated. I think artists are *always* obsessed with the real. So maybe it is a fetishisation of the real or maybe it is the continuing artistic elucidation of what is 'real'. And that can be endlessly redefined, transposed onto bodies and children. Like, 'we'll put children on stage and *they* are more real ...'

DAVID WILLIAMS. And animals...

ALANA VALENTINE. The question of what is 'real' and who defines that is one of the most interesting things about this work.

Final Question

Over the past decade, how has Reality Theatre / Theatre of Real People in general, and your practice of it in particular, changed? Which developments with regard to both preparatory processes and performance events have particularly interested you?

Helgard Haug

Recently Rimini Protokoll have been developing new forms of participatory theatre for which the concept 'Reality Theatre / Theatre of Real People' perhaps falls short. *Call Cutta in a Box* or *Hauptversammlung* (Annual Shareholders Meeting) are older examples. *Situation Rooms* is a current example.¹ In the case of this piece there are no longer any live performers. At the beginning of the performance the spectators (20 per show) receive an iPad. They find themselves in front of a large building, similar to a filmset, which consists of 15 rooms spread across 2 levels. When a number appears on their screen, the spectators distribute themselves across the building, moving to a door with a number on it that is the same as the number on their screen. Then the camera in their film [which gives the perspective of one of the experts or protagonists described below] approaches the door, a hand appears that pushes down the door handle, the door opens and the camera enters the building. All of these filmed actions are almost simultaneously repeated by the spectator so that s/he is quasi remote controlled into becoming the actual performer in his/her individual *parcours*. How s/he behaves according to the tracks laid out by the film, produces a doubling of the self with protagonists that appear on the other visitors' screen displays. When in the film a person comes towards you, intending to greet you with a handshake, then that also happens live, but in this case it is the spectators who shake hands. For the film and the development of the *parcours* we worked with 20 experts whose biography had been shaped by weapons: a Congolese child-soldier, a German politician who had taken a position against the export of weapons, a Pakistani lawyer for civilian victims of American drone attacks, a manager of a Swiss defense system manufactory, a Mexican contract killer ... We worked with these people for over five weeks in the filmset—developing texts, interweaving actions, and calculating the *parcours* down to the second. Now, when we present the piece, the spectator takes on these roles, s/he is involved, slips into the skin of a doctor, a hacker, a weapon lobbyist ...

These are new forms that interest me. Another example is *Hausbesuch Europa* (Home Visit Europe), a piece that we premiered in May 2015. Here there is no longer even an official stage. The piece takes place in private apartments, each time at the apartment of a different host. Fourteen other people come to the apartment at an agreed time and sit at a large table. A game begins where a small machine, that prints out notes with questions and tasks at the push of a button, sets the pace. Mid-way into the evening a cake is placed in the oven and as events develop its distribution is turned into a game. As a point of comparison, we collect on a website the different data of the individual home visits that take place in diverse European countries.

However, we are still making more 'conventional' stage productions. The forms enliven and enrich rather than dissolving one another. Theatre is a field for experimentation!

Claudia Chidiac

Over the past decade I have been investigating new ways to best represent real people and their stories on stage. I have worked directly with individuals to ensure their voices are represented in a way that is not tokenistic, and to ensure they are not being commodified. The relationship with the community remains at the forefront of the process, the artistry working alongside it. I am interested in building relationships, where there is an exchange of some sort between the director / deviser and the communities. Often, this will result in the individual/s not performing directly on stage but being involved in the production component of the work. In my recent production *Tough Beauty*, a work that addresses teen female violence, I developed a community engagement program where young people were integral to the research and production component. They were invited to participate in writing and producing music workshops, to create songs that would feature in the final production. They also had the opportunity to learn basic film making techniques to produce content. As a theatre maker, I question what forms are most appropriate for real people to tell their stories and how are they best represented. Is theatre the most appropriate form? Who are these stories ultimately for? What responsibility do I have, if any, to ensure the stories continue to be told after the season ends? How do the relationships that are cultivated over time continue? Reality Theatre / Theatre of Real People continues to grow and diversify as a form, and it is one that I am keen to keep contributing to.

Alicia Talbot

Over the last 10 years I have had an artistic practice of creating predominantly site-based performance work that has tackled difficult emotional, social and artistic terrain. Throughout this time, themes of cultural silence, dislocation, and the uneasy awkwardness of personal, political and social relationships have been at the heart of my work, that has explored social justice and our capacity for change through the microcosm of interpersonal relationships. The works have been driven by the desire to explore complexities of change and disrupt the accepted status quo. They have led to personal and, in some cases, systemic change—substantiated by a documentation process. This suite of artistic works was realised through a broad range of partnerships and brought together unlikely stakeholders across government, welfare, business, community and private investment. Each work involved meticulous long-term relationship building and intensive development processes.

Over the last five years, the economic and political context for realising these works has altered. We appear to exist in a cultural climate, even within a well-resourced country like Australia, where there is a shift in mindset and priorities. As a consequence, there is limited capacity to support such projects and the risk that accompanies them. Resources and systems that have enabled this work now need to go further—each dollar is stretched to accommodate a far greater reach and bigger collateral impact. In response to this environment there is an invitation for artists to rethink notions of how we grapple with political and social change. This opens a space for artists driven by politics and cultural engagement to dig deeper and be drawn towards new cultural provocations and to rethink the territory of risk.

Alana Valentine

In the past decade I have continued to make work with and for diverse communities and my practice has continued to oscillate between entirely fictional constructs and entirely verbatim-based projects, with many works on the spectrum between them that may be based on research or verbatim-inspired, but also sprung substantively from my imagination. I have been humbled to

have been rewarded for that work in 2012 with the STAGE International Prize for my play *Ear to the Edge of Time*, given to a play about science or technology with judges who were Pulitzer prize-winning playwrights (Tony Kushner, David Lindsay-Abaire and Donald Margulies) and Nobel Laureates (Robert C. Richardson, Frank Wilczek and David J. Wineland). In 2013 I won, for *Grounded*, the Australian Writers Guild Award for Community / Youth Theatre, as well as the Major AWGIE and the inaugural David Williamson Award. In 2014 I again won the Community / Youth AWGIE, this time for *Comin' Home Soon*. Many of my new commissions are works based on archives (*Letters to Lindy* based on the 20,000 letters sent to Lindy Chamberlain and held in the National Library of Australia; *Crossing the King*, based on the Royal Archives of King George V and Prime Minister James Scullin) but also oral interview-based work (*Ladies Day*, based on interviews with homosexual men in Broome; *The Tree Widows*, based on interviews with the families of World War One soldiers in Tasmania), as well as more multi-media co-writing and co-directing (*One Billion Beats* with Romaine Moreton) and even adaptation of novels into a dramatic form (*Cold Light* from Frank Moorehouse's novel).

David Williams

My theatre work over the past decade has focused more or less exclusively on the words of real people, transforming various kinds of documents containing the speech of real people in performance texts. Whilst my work with my former company version 1.0 focused most particularly on transcripts of public inquiries, my independent theatre work under the banner DW Projects has focused on building theatre from conversations with real people. In my most recent work, *Quiet Faith*, the performance is constructed from recorded conversations with Christians about what they see as the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary Australia. Other people call this 'verbatim theatre', but in my view the word 'verbatim' implies a too-close association with 'truth', something that the theatre, no matter how firm its embrace of real-ness and real people, can never actually deliver. The term 'documentary' acknowledges that these materials are real—most are literally documents of one form or another—but also makes it clear that there is a frame around the presentation of these materials, that, despite their strong truth claims, they have been changed by their transformation into theatre. What I have observed with interest over the past decade has been a significant expansion of what Reality Theatre / Theatre of Real People might be, and I am fascinated to be part of the continuing development of this mode of practice over the decades to come.

Notes

1. An in-depth discussion in German of *Situation Rooms* is available in Johannes Birgfeld, Ulrike Garde, Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzels, "Eine Wechseldusche zwischen direkter Begegnung und vermittelt". Ein E-Mail-Interview mit Rimini Protokoll über *Situation Rooms*, in Johannes Birgfeld, Ulrike Garde, and Meg Mumford (eds), *Rimini Protokoll Close-Up: Lektüren* (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2015), 232–52.