

The Bridge: The Political Possibilities of Intergenerational Verbatim Theater

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Abstract

This article introduces the reader to the work of Australian verbatim theater artists Donna Jackson, Bindi Cole Chocka, and James Henry. It describes the artists' remount of Vicki Reynolds's verbatim play *The Bridge*, which tells the story of the collapse of the Melbourne West Gate Bridge in 1970. I discuss the remount of the play as an intergenerational verbatim theater project which not only tells an important story from Australian working-class history to new audiences who haven't heard it before, but also deepens the story through additional research and music. I also discuss the play as a project that uses political truths from the past to do new political work in the present.

Keywords

arts-based inquiry, methods of inquiry, performance ethnography, ethnographies, methodologies, critical pedagogy, pedagogy

Introduction

Every day, thousands of commuters travel safely across Melbourne's West Gate Bridge that connects the city to its Western suburbs. But in 1970, during its construction, a 120-m span of the bridge collapsed killing 35 workers. On the 20th anniversary of the collapse, Australian theater director Donna Jackson commissioned playwright Vicki Reynolds to write a verbatim play about the disaster. Reynolds's play, *The Bridge*, is based on interviews with workers who were working on the bridge the day it collapsed. The play has been called "a classic piece of workers' theatre" (Cathcart, Jirik, & Brown, 2018) and was recently expanded and remounted at the 2018 Art and Industry by Donna Jackson and Vicki Reynolds's daughter Bindi Cole Chocka, who is a well-known visual artist in Australia.

In this article, I discuss *The Bridge* as an intergenerational verbatim theater project which not only tells an important story from Australian working-class history to new audiences who haven't heard it before, but also deepens the story through additional research and music. Although verbatim theater has become very popular in the last few decades, very few verbatim plays are revisited after their first productions, a notable exception being *The Laramie Project*, which I discuss below. However, I've learned something important from watching several performances of 2018 production of *The Bridge* and listening to the artistic team talk about the remount: A political verbatim theater project from the past can be layered with additional historical research to create a theater project that does important political work in the present.

I begin this piece about the political possibilities of intergenerational verbatim theater by explaining what verbatim theater is and why researchers and artists (like myself) have been drawn to the approach. I then describe how the intergenerational collaboration between Donna Jackson, Vicki Reynolds, Vicki's daughter Bindi Cole Chocka, and musician James Henry came about. Finally, I talk about the ways the intergenerational remount of the play is able to offer a deeper, more inclusive history of the construction of the West Gate Bridge. I also discuss how the remount of *The Bridge* can be seen as a moment of reconciliation between a White settler community and an Indigenous community. The article concludes with a discussion about how intergenerational verbatim theater projects can be conceived to deepen political truths from the past to do new political work in the present.

The Draw of Verbatim Theater

Verbatim theater has been described as theater that is created by interviewing people about their everyday lives or about an event that has happened in their community (Brown & Wake, 2010). In verbatim plays, the words of real

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people are recorded and transcribed by a playwright during an interview or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of a court hearing. The words are then edited, arranged, and/or recontextualized to form a dramatic script that can be performed on stage by actors who take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used (Hammond & Stewart, 2008).

There are several reasons why both artists and researchers are drawn to verbatim theater. First, verbatim theater allows creators to share reliable information about current political events. For example, Richard Norton-Taylor and Kent's (2007) play *Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression Against Iraq—A Hearing* is one of several British verbatim plays that was produced in the aftermath of Britain's involvement in the invasion of Iraq. The goal of staging the play was to provide audiences with facts about the invasion they did not hear from the mainstream media (Brown & Wake, 2010).

Second, verbatim plays also assist artists, researchers, and audiences in understanding why a particular event has happened. To illustrate, in 1998, Matthew Shepard, a gay university student in Laramie, Wyoming, was brutally beaten by two young men he met in a bar, tied to a farm fence, and left to die. Very quickly Shepard's death became emblematic for the thousands of hate crimes committed against people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Four weeks after the murder, theater artist Moisés Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Group traveled from New York to the town of Laramie to interview people about how two young men could take another young man's life so viciously. The team conducted more than 200 interviews with people in Laramie, and their research was written up as a play called *The Laramie Project* (Kaufman & The Tectonic Theater Group, 2001). The play blends verbatim performances of many of these interviews with a reenactment of the trial of the two young men who killed Shepard. Since its first performance in 2000, *The Laramie Project* has become one of the most performed theater pieces in the United States. It has also been performed in many different countries around the world. For Judy Shepard, Matthew's mother, *The Laramie Project* has not only kept her son's story alive, but it also has taught audiences that bigotry lies within everyone (Blair, 2009). Politically, Shepard's murder and *The Laramie Project* have been used to push for hate crimes legislation in Wyoming and other states in America.

However, 6 years after the crime an American television news program called *20/20*, set out to challenge the idea Matthew Shepard was murdered because he was gay. The 1-hr news show included interviews with Shepard's friends, investigators assigned to the case, and the two young men who were serving life sentences in prison for murdering Matthew Shepard. *20/20* reported Shepard may have been

using methamphetamine. They also reported that the young men who killed him had been on a meth binge a few days before they met Shepard. The *20/20* journalists argued Shepard's murder was a murder driven by drugs, not hate.

For playwright Moisés Kaufman, this argument completely changed the political dialogue around Matthew Shepard's murder. So, 10 years after Shepard's murder, Kaufman and his team returned to Laramie to interview people once again. This time, one of their goals was to debunk the *20/20* news story and prove that Shepard's murder was indeed driven by hate, not drugs (Blair, 2009). *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later* includes the comments from Rob Debree from the Albany County Sheriff's Office in Laramie, who told Kaufman, "We've proven that there were no drugs on board with McKinney and Henderson—just none" (Blair, 2009).

For Moisés Kaufman, Matthew Shepard's murder was an event that needed to be reexamined again by a contemporary audience. This is a third reason researchers and artists are drawn to verbatim theater, and as explained below, this is one of the goals behind the creation of the 2018 production of *The Bridge*. However, before moving to a discussion of the latest production of *The Bridge*, I want to discuss the first staging of Vicki Reynolds's play.

The Bridge: 1990

The goal behind the original production of *The Bridge* in 1990 had to do with Donna Jackson's desire to share the stories of the workers who had died working on the West Gate Bridge. In an interview with Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio presenter Matthew Cathcart, Jackson explains,

... I was working at Footsgray Art Centre and I drove past the Bridge Memorial night and day on my way back and forth to work [the memorial was created by the surviving bridge workers in 1973], and I observed people at this memorial not just on the 15th of October, the anniversary of the collapse, but day and night, families, people alone, groups of people. And I stopped my car to see why they were at this spot. What's happening under here? So when I stopped and saw this memorial to the 35 people who died, I thought, ah, this was an important place. This is an important story. When I spoke to a number of people to see if it would be appropriate to tell the story of the West Gate Bridge and the collapse, some people said to me you can't tell that story because 35 workers died, and then most people said to me because 35 workers died you have to tell that story.

So then I was looking for a writer who could capture a verbatim story that really comes from working-class people and their vernacular, and I thought Vicki Reynolds would be the right writer for that. She was doing a number of plays for Melbourne Workers' Theatre and I really liked her style of being able to capture Australian language. (Cathcart et al., 2018)

To collect verbatim stories about the collapse of the bridge, Jackson and Reynolds needed to gain the trust of the bridge workers who had survived. They began by showing up at picket lines and demonstrations organized by the bridge builders' union and connected with the workers. When people were convinced that Jackson and Reynolds's interest in what happened was authentic, they agreed to share their stories with them (Fieldnotes from the How to Build Bridges: The Symposium, Art and Industry Festival, 2018, November 23, 2018). Reynolds's daughter Bindi Cole Chocka has vivid memories of joining her mother while she was conducting interviews for the play. She also has a vivid memory of going up into the West Gate Bridge with her mother. She tells radio presenter Michael Cathcart,

... [my mother] was invited by some of the bridge workers to go into one of the box girders in the span that collapsed and so on the day that she was booked to do that she allowed me to wag school and I came with her and we drove up to the top of the bridge, and we hopped out of the car with one of the bridge workers, put some witches' hats around the car and jumped over the small fence and went down a small manhole at the apex of the bridge into the steel girder under the bridge. You can walk almost the length of the bridge underneath the road. (Cathcart et al., 2018)

After Reynolds had collected a set of stories that could be told about the collapse of the bridge, she and Jackson began to create a structure for the verbatim play. To give the audience a way into the workers' stories, they created two fictional families who were still working through the trauma of losing a family member in the disaster. One of the families is Jack who survived the collapse of the bridge, his wife Irene and his son Danny. The other is Pat, Jack's sister, and Pat's daughter Michelle. Pat's husband, who was a good friend of Jack's, died in the collapse. Pat was left to raise their 3-year-old daughter Michelle alone. Michelle, who is now 23 years old, is the character who greets the audience and begins the play. She is the character the audience follows from the beginning of play to the end. As Michelle learns about what happened to her father on the day the bridge collapsed so does the audience (Fieldnotes from the How to Build Bridges: The Symposium, Art and Industry Festival, 2018, November 23, 2018).

While the families are fictional, the issues and experiences they talk about are documented in the workers' interviews, and the characters' words are often drawn verbatim from the interviews. For example, in the excerpt below, the conflict between Jack, a politically active unionist, and his son Danny, who is not, was a conflict discussed by several of the workers.

Jackson explains,

We talked to building workers and they were telling us that the industry was changing, that they'd taken a very hard line but

they felt that some of the younger guys coming in didn't treat health and safety with the same respect and didn't understand how hard they'd fought to get a lot of health and safety rules in Australia [after the collapse of the bridge]. So the character of Jack represents those characters that we met and the number of things he says in the play, they're all verbatim from the building workers. (Cathcart et al., 2018)

Excerpt from Scene 5

JACK: Did the blokes at your place get their height money?

DANNY: I think so.

JACK: Don't you know?

DANNY: It doesn't affect me, Dad, I'm not doing height work.

JACK: You'll want them to be interested when it's your pay packet that's the issue.

DANNY: Get off it, Dad.

JACK: Who's your shop steward down there?

DANNY: There's two or three of them around the place. I don't know which one of them is specifically mine.

JACK: You don't know.

DANNY: No, I don't. So what?

JACK: The first thing you find out when you go on a job is who your shoppy is. Twenty-five years I've been in this game and I've made it my business to know on every job I've done (Reynolds, 1990).

Reynolds's blend of fiction and verbatim excerpts from her interviews can be said to fall half-way on verbatim playwright Alana Valentine's (2016) "pure verbatim" and fiction continuum. Jack is a fictional, composite character whose words and politics belong to several of the workers Reynolds interviewed. I have included quotation marks around the words pure verbatim because even though these are the words Valentine uses to talk about her continuum, other theater writers have questioned whether or not pure verbatim work is actually possible. For example, theater scholar Janelle Reinelt (2009) believes a dramatization of reality may be "in touch with the real," but cannot be an "exact [pure] copy of it" (p. 8).

The Bridge: 2018

The idea to extend and remount the play 18 years after the play was first staged (38 years after the bridge collapsed) came about when Jackson asked Cole Chocka to become the artist in residence of the 2018 Art and Industry Festival (AIF18) she produces every 2 years in the City of Hobsons Bay. Hobsons Bay is located west of Melbourne, on the western side of the West Gate Bridge. The first people of Hobsons Bay are the Kulin Nation. Currently, there are about 92,000 people who live in the city which is made up of different 12 suburban communities. Hobsons Bay was

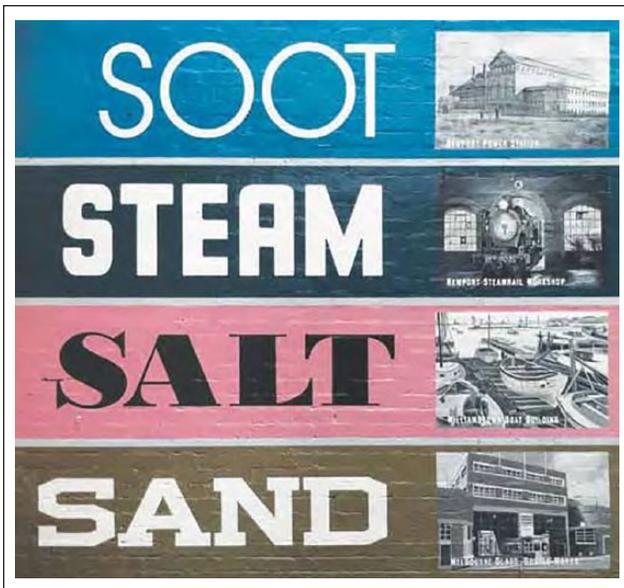


Figure 1. Tony Mead's hand-painted mural "Industria to Suburbia" featured on the Industrial Art Walk at AIF18.

one of the first sites of colonial settlement, Melbourne's first port, and the home of early rail infrastructure (Hubcap Productions, 2018). It is a city with a 100-year history of industrial development including a power station, a steam rail workshop, boat-building companies, and bottle factories. As depicted in a wall mural by Newport artisan sign writer Tony Mead, Hobsons Bay is a city of soot, steam, salt, and sand (Mead, 2017) (Figure 1).

The bi-annual Art and Industry Festival celebrates and investigates the industrial and manufacturing changes in the area. It uses industry as a lens through which participants can acknowledge the past and generate ideas on how to build and design the future (Hubcap Productions, 2018). Three of the festival's goals are to [TS: Please set the below extract as given in the MS.]

- (1) tell current and historical stories of the area through a combination of art and industry;
- (2) enable artists to develop artworks which engage and inspire the communities of the western suburbs of Melbourne;
- (3) present industry as a theme for artworks within a complex social and physical environment. (Hubcap Productions, 2018, p. 8)

When Jackson and Cole Chocka began brainstorming artistic work for the festival, Jackson talked about some of the research that hadn't been included in the 1990 production of *The Bridge*. Specifically, she talked about how in 1974 during the rebuilding of the West Gate Bridge a unionist organized for Aboriginal protest singer Bobby McLeod

and two other Aboriginal musicians to sing for the workers at lunchtime and receive payment. Chocka Cole, who identifies as having both Indigenous and White heritage, suggested she and Jackson remount her mother's play *The Bridge*, this time including the story of Bobby McLeod performing for the bridge workers at lunch. She also suggested she and Donna collaborate with artist James Henry, an Indigenous Melbourne-based photographer, composer, musician, and sound engineer. Henry became AIF18's second artist-in-residence. Jackson explains,

So . . . when we did the initial research and we did the play in 1990 and Vicki Reynolds and I were researching it with the community, we were told that Aboriginal performers were invited to come at lunchtime around 1974 to perform on the bridge at lunchtime and I thought well, that's interesting. So when we were going to bring the play back Bindi said to me can we incorporate that story from the research that wasn't in the original play and when I was researching did it happen, how did it happen, I contacted a friend of mine Paddy Garretty who's an old union communist and he said, "Comrade, that was me. I got those Aboriginal performers to perform on the West Gate Bridge. It was Bobby McLeod." And so Bindi, James and I went around and saw Paddy Garretty, and he told us how, how this happened. (Cathcart et al., 2018)

The Bridge 1990 and 2018: An Intergenerational Verbatim Theater Project

Intergenerational researcher Feliciano Villar (2007) has written that intergenerational research in the social sciences aims to examine the mutual influence two or more generations have on each other's ideas, beliefs, practices, and/or material circumstances. At AIF18, Donna Jackson, Bindi Cole Chocka, and James Henry gave Reynolds's play *The Bridge* a new story to tell, a political story of how one of the bridge workers' unions invited an Aboriginal protest singer and songwriter to perform for the workers on the bridge at lunchtime. It was a significant invitation. As Henry explains,

. . . Uncle Bobby McLeod was very well-known and loved Aboriginal musician. I guess he was one of our first protest singer songwriters and back in those days he was welcome to, you know, be part of the entertainment [on the bridge]. I guess I struggle to think of too many musicians who, you know, were playing back in the 70s for white audiences. (Cathcart et al., 2018)

In telling a new historical story, the 2018 remount of *The Bridge* play was able to offer a deeper, more inclusive history of the construction of the West Gate Bridge. As well, telling the story of Bobby McLeod singing on the bridge also performed a small moment of reconciliation both in the play itself and at a symposium that was part of AIF18.

The Bridge Symposium: How to Build Bridges

The 2018 remount of *The Bridge* opened on Wednesday, November 21, 2018, at The Substation in Newport. Two days after the opening of the play, Jackson and Cole Chocka hosted an all-day symposium inspired by the remount of *The Bridge*. The symposium was called “How to Build Bridges” and brought together former West Gate Bridge workers, artists, academics, and unions in a curated series of conversations, exchanges, and performances. The symposium was also held at The Substation which is a not-for-profit arts center located in a 100-year-old building that used to be a power plant. Reflecting the broader industrial history of Newport, one of the 12 communities in Hobsons Bay, The Substation encourages artists to engage with their “postindustrial space” to create a culture of interconnectedness, collaboration, and independence. It was an excellent place to hold a symposium called “How to Build Bridges.”

I was invited to the symposium as AIF18’s visiting scholar and did an opening talk on sharing research findings through verbatim theater. Later in the day, I also presented a short talk on my current verbatim theater project *Out at School*.¹ Other symposium sessions included a talk by Melbourne writer Enza Gandolfo who had written a novel featuring the collapse of the West Gate Bridge (Gandolfo, 2018) and a panel of former West Gate Bridge workers who talked about their experiences of collapse.

The last session of the symposium featured a collaborative performance by two Australian musicians: White musician Mark Seymour and Indigenous musician James Henry, who performed the role of protest singer Bobby McLeod in *The Bridge*. The collaboration involved Seymour and Henry singing the Australian song “Throw Your Arms Around Me” in both English and Yuwaalaraay, the language of Henry’s family. The song was composed by the White Australian rock band Hunters & Collectors and was first performed in 1984. Mark Seymour was a vocalist and lead guitarist in the band. Participants in the symposium told me the song “Throw Your Arms Around Me” is one of Australian’s most popular songs, a song that is recognized all over the country.

Jackson introduced the performance by asking Henry to talk about the arts fellowship project he was currently working on. The project was about exploring how to respectfully incorporate Aboriginal traditional music into contemporary musical contexts. Jackson was particularly interested in hearing why Henry chose to study his grandmother’s language Yuwaalaraay as part of his fellowship work. Here’s what Henry said:

I was lucky enough to have been able to spend about 17 or 18 years knowing my great-mother who knew a decent amount of language considering the fact she was, uh, yeah, had to work on

a [English-speaking] cattle-station when she was thirteen and not allowed to speak the language. Uh, so there was a little bit of language in our family that was just, um, just considered normal to have these words to paddy up the English language that we knew. And I didn’t really learn that much beyond that but there were people who were, um, working a bit harder to continue language and then document it and record it. And . . . I’m very thankful to have . . . such things because now . . . I have the opportunity and the interest to explore that part of my heritage. (Digital recording from the How to Build Bridges: The Symposium, Art and Industry Festival, 2018, November 23, 2018)

Jackson then asked Henry and Seymour to talk about their collaboration and their bilingual English–Yuwaalaraay performance of “Throw Your Arms Around Me.” Henry explained he worked with a linguist who was respected by his family’s community. The linguist helped Henry translate the lyrics of the song into Yuwaalaraay and helped him learn how to pronounce the lyrics properly. Henry then shared the lyrics with Seymour who learned the language by listening to Henry speak it. Finally, Henry and Seymour shared the Yuwaalaraay translation of the song with members of the Newport community choir so they could all perform the chorus in Yuwaalaraay at the symposium. For Henry, translating “Throw Your Arms Around Me” into Yuwaalaraay was a way to help people all over Australia learn a bit of the language. It was the Yuwaalaraay translation of “Throw Your Arms Around Me” that Henry sang as Bobby McLeod in the remount of *The Bridge*.

Henry and Seymour’s bilingual project was not without its political complexities. Henry explains,

I’ve been talking with, with some people about, um, yeah, when it is inappropriate for non-Aboriginal people to engage and practice Aboriginal culture. Ah, you get a lot of different feelings about it, but you especially have some people that are quite touchy about, um, people speaking Aboriginal language before them . . . Mark [Seymour] just knowing the chorus to, ah, “Throw Your Arms Around Me” in Yuwaalaraay would be speaking more Yuwaalaraay words than a lot of people who might identify as being Yuwaalaraay . . . Then you can also look at the way, which I personally do. I think it’s fantastic, you know, the more the merrier . . . but then I can also understand there are people that might be, you know, a little bit uncomfortable with the idea, and so, yeah, there’s so much about, you know, cultural protocol and just bearing on the side of caution with [sharing] Aboriginal culture.

. . . We’ve got a lot of choir people here and, yeah, and I welcome you guys to sing this song and sing it proud but, um, yeah, I think it does come with that little, yeah, disclaimer . . . we did this and then James Henry was there on the microphone and he told the whole room of people it’s okay to, you know, sing this in language and sing it proud, as opposed to saying “I’m getting it from a book.” Yeah, there’s context behind it. There’s that,

there's that sharing of a song which is also a traditional Aboriginal way of keeping things alive. Songs can be shared across different parts of the country by songwriters. (Digital recording from the How to Build Bridges: The Symposium, Art and Industry Festival, 2018, November 23, 2018)

I was in the audience when Henry, Seymour, and the choir performed the song "Throw Your Arms Around Me" in both English and Yuwaalaraay. It was a very moving performance, and as I listened to the chorus in Yuwaalaraay, I felt I was witnessing a small moment of reconciliation. James Henry spent a lot of time working with a linguist to translate "Throw Your Arms Around Me" into Yuwaalaraay. He also spent a lot of time learning to sing the lyrics properly so he could sing it respectfully on stage. Henry then shared the song with Seymour and the choir. Together they spent time learning the lyrics so they could sing it respectfully at the symposium. The performance was very powerful, and it brought to life the wish that settlers from all over Australia might start singing a language of the first people of the land and begin to engage with them differently.

Conclusion

The original production *The Bridge* was performed at the Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC). The Centre was founded in 1974 by a group of artists and activists with strong links to the Union movement. The mandate of the Centre was to address an identified need to work with marginalized and disadvantaged communities (Harford, 2014). Twenty-eight years later, the production of the play at The Substation in Newport not only retold an important story of working-class history that is not often heard in public spaces, but it also included a piece of history that had not been told before: the story of Indigenous musician Bobby McLeod playing for the bridge workers at lunchtime. The expansion of the play opened up the possibility of a unique collaboration between Indigenous musician James Henry and White musician Mark Seymour—a collaboration that can be seen as a small moment of reconciliation. The intergenerational remount of the play, then, both staged story that had been erased from the history of the building of the West Gate Bridge and engaged in the political work of reconciliation.

The story of the remount of *The Bridge* points to the political possibilities of intergenerational verbatim theater. When a new generation of artists restages a verbatim play from the past, they have an opportunity to do additional research, add new research to the original story, and place the original story into a new historical, political moment. It is an exciting approach for verbatim theater and other forms of arts-based research to consider. The remount of *The Bridge* reminds us that nothing is ever finished. As my colleague Elizabeth Humphries said in her symposium talk

(Digital recording from the How to Build Bridges: The Symposium, Art and Industry Festival, 2018, November 23, 2018), "the present is always re-interpreting the past."

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Note

1. *Out at School* is a verbatim theater script of monologues that have been created from a set of video interviews my research team and I have collected as part of our Experiences of LGBTQ Families in Ontario Schools study (2014-2020) (www.lgbtqfamiliespeakout.ca). *Out at School* currently consists of 11 verbatim monologs based on interviews with 10 different families, a set of visual images that accompany each monolog drawn by Benjamin Lee Hicks (2017), and two songs, "Pushing the Envelope" (2017) and "Let Love be the Way" (2018), both composed and performed by Kate Reid. The songs draw on a number of themes in the monologues.

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