

Hear Us Now:

Re-imagining the Future of Boston’s Catholic Community Through Storytelling and Theatre

Alyssa Osiecki [University of Glasgow]

Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of how the practices of oral storytelling and documentary theatre can help create space for more authentic trauma-informed narratives in drama and literature. How can storytelling contribute to the reintegration of our individual and communal identity after a collective trauma? What does it look like for writers and creators facilitate this space in an ethical way? Grounded in Participatory Action Research, which positions researchers and subjects as collaborators, the methodology of this project is inspired by Paolo Friere’s notion that, “Oppression is not a closed world you can exit, but a situation you can transform.” In this work, documentary theatre techniques serve as a lens to view the prismatic, ever shifting nature of memory. Hear Us Now brings powerful testimony to light from a breadth of intergenerational Catholic individuals who have historically been silenced, celebrating the newfound communities which so often emerge from the rubble of unspeakable memories. Interviews with women, mothers, queer and questioning youth, etc., reveal unexpected insights into the resilience of this community. How does a queer ex Catholic go from trying to pray away the gay to accepting David Bowie as her personal saviour? What would a Boomer mom say to Cardinal Law if she had the chance? What, if anything, would ex-Catholics bring with them from the church into their new lives? This paper traces the evolution of the project’s methodology; from interviews, to a multi-media digital theatre piece, to a novel that weaves first person testimony into the fibres of a fictional narrative. This research suggests a template for creators who wish to utilize groundbreaking theory in the role of the arts in trauma recovery, as pioneered by practitioners such as Bessel Van der Kol and Dominick la Capra.

Keywords: Oral history, creative writing, documentary theatre, trauma informed arts.

What does it mean to be Catholic in Boston in the twenty-first century? How do collective memories of growing up Catholic evolve across generations and what role can storytelling techniques have in

creating an intergenerational dialogue that makes space for the things left un-said and misremembered from one generation to the next? *Hear Us Now* began as a deeply personal quest to unpack the evolving identity of Boston's Catholic community in the wake of a decades-long clergy sex abuse scandal. The goal of this exploration was the development of an original piece of theatre which would also inform the narrative of a fictional novel.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the process of developing the piece of theatre through the collection and adaptation of qualitative data in the form of interviews with Boston area Catholics. The interviews conducted were primarily focused on memories in the form of stories and anecdotes from the participant's past lives, relating to their identity as Catholics. The participants' evolving thoughts and opinions on modern Catholic identity were also recorded. For the purpose of this project, memory is approached as a dynamic concept developing over the course of a participant's lifetime rather than a static recalled event.

As a creative writer and applied theatre practitioner working in a humanities space, my primary goals were to listen, hold space, and create a dynamic container to develop thoughtful work that approaches emotionally charged subjects with respect. Through interviews with primary subjects acting as storytellers, multiple iterations of scripts were developed. Each version of the script sought to capture an aspect of the complex and emotionally charged subject of modern Catholic identity in a very specific sub-section of individuals living in the greater Boston area.

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In this work, documentary and verbatim theatre techniques serve as a lens through which to view the prismatic, ever-shifting nature of memory and suggest paths to rewriting our narratives in a more empowering way. At its heart, this paper is an exploration of how the practices of storytelling and theatre devising can help create a space for the lived experiences that society prefers we forget and consign to the past. What does it look like for writers and creators to facilitate this space in an ethical way? This paper will explore the development of a bespoke methodology to address these questions, highlight the challenges encountered during the process, present a snapshot of the artistic results and community impact of this work, and suggest some possible applications of these methods for future work.

How Clergy Sex Abuse Shaped a Generation of Catholics

Although Boston's clergy sex abuse scandal may loom large in the memories of present day present-day American Catholics, it is still important to frame the scope and scale of this wide-reaching cultural event for a broader audience. In his ground-breaking book, *Sex, Lies and Power: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, researcher, psychologist, and former priest A.W Richard Sipe estimates that at any given time, 'six percent of Catholic priests in the United States were having sex with minors' (1995, p.27). Applying this estimate to the scale of the archdiocese of Boston, Massachusetts, with its population of just under two-million Catholics, this would work out to about 90 priest abusers in the community, a staggering number (Otterman, 2018).

In 2002, The Boston Globe's *Spotlight* reporting series tore the lid off of the clergy sex abuse scandal, exposing the extent of the problem to the public and leading to the conviction and defrocking of a number of priests. *Spotlight* was one of the first investigations that spoke directly to Clergy Perpetrated Sex Abuse (CPSA) survivors, highlighting in intimate detail the pain and suffering they experienced long after the initial trauma. For over twenty years, the public has had the irrefutable evidence that CPSA is a problem endemic in Catholic communities, and that something must be done about it. Pope Francis himself has condemned CPSA in the strongest possible terms and called for church reform, 'In order that these phenomena, in all their forms, never happen again, a continuous and profound conversion of hearts is needed, attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the Church' (Beste, 2021, p.30). Although the words of the Catholic Church were strong, the Church's actions tell a different story. According to Newsweek, between the 1980s and 2018, the Catholic Church spent over \$4 billion on settlements that silenced CPSA survivors (Zogbi, 2018). The message was clear: the crimes of CPSA must not live on in the collective memories of the Catholic community.

According to the 2015 census, 45% of Massachusetts residents consider themselves Catholic (GBH News, Herwick, 2015). With such huge numbers of Catholics in the Boston area, it is impossible to enumerate how many people were indirectly impacted by CPSA as witnesses, loved ones of survivors, or simply as bystanders who have had their trust in the church shattered. Regardless of this, the majority of Catholics remain publicly silent on the issue.

The engine of this work are the stories of Catholic individuals who grew up in the Boston area during a great seismic shift in the church's power and influence. I began this project because I believed that the values and opinions of the average Catholic were more nuanced than what we were seeing in public. It is the irrepressible spirits of these so-called, 'everyday Catholics' that I hope to capture in this project. *Hear Us Now*, is a journey to discovering another layer of the narrative, a facet of the multiple truths that exist when we listen and hold space for those who are unaccustomed to being asked for their side of the story. It is about the incredible ingenuity of survivors and their allies. It is about creating our own spaces where we can feel joyful, whole, and accepted for who we are.

Developing a Bespoke Methodology

When I first endeavoured to create a schematic container for this work, I ran into two major challenges: what theatre methodology would I use and how would I approach developing this work ethically? As a theatre educator and practitioner, I naturally gravitated toward verbatim theatre methods pioneered by dramatists such as Anne Deavere Smith in the USA and Alecky Blythe in the UK. Verbatim can encompass a breadth of techniques but what these techniques have in common is the use of real life events and interviews with the people who witnessed them as the catalyst for a piece of theatre. In this practice, the spoken words of interview subjects are heavily woven into the script.

Verbatim has historically been a useful technique for unpacking complex communal events. Anna Deavere Smith's verbatim piece 'Twilight: Los Angeles,' explores the civil unrest in Los Angeles in the wake of the 1992 verdict of the Rodney King Police brutality trial. Alecky Blythe and Nick Cork's 2011 verbatim musical, 'London Road,' unpacks the fallout when a quiet town in Ipswich, UK, is rocked by the discovery of the bodies of five murdered women. Verbatim appealed to me because it offered a way of engaging directly with stories and memories from people in my community. Due to the timing of the project as taking place in 2021, I needed a safe, reliable method of collecting interviews and developing the piece. In pre-pandemic conditions, interviews for verbatim projects were generally done in person, with the practitioner utilising audio and video recording equipment. I found that the need to have quality audio and video documentation of the process naturally lent itself to conducting interviews on Zoom. Once it became clear that the pandemic was likely to continue, the shape of the project took an unexpected turn. Instead of simply conducting interviews on Zoom to gather material for a live in-person theatre performance, I decided to develop, produce, and perform my verbatim piece completely online.

Although having a solid verbatim methodology was essential to this process, one key difference between my work and the work of other verbatim practitioners continued to prove challenging. Namely, what Smith and Blythe's methods had in common with my goals was that they were ways of drilling down into the previously unexpressed memories, opinions, and beliefs of a specific community. Where they differ from what I was about to endeavour has to do with the spark or catalyst that inspired the work. The Rodney King verdict and the London Road murders were both very specific events that can be pinpointed on an individual and communal level. These events are a clear moment in time, and in both works, the thread that connected interviews with people of diverse backgrounds was their memories and reactions to the specific event.

What I was attempting to do was very different. I was asking interview subjects to encapsulate their memories, thoughts, and opinions of what it meant to be Catholic in Boston, and how that had evolved over the course of their lives. As my subjects would range in age from late twenties to early seventies, these memories did not capture one specific, clearly identifiable moment in time. They took place over

the span of decades and were quite possibly warped by time and challenging to evoke without a specific story or headline to anchor them.

Another early roadblock with the design of the methodology for this project involved the mindful safeguarding of participants. Because of the large shadow of CPSA on the Boston Catholic community, the topic was likely to come up in some of the interviews and along with it, the possibility of evoking personal trauma in participants. Although for some people trauma and memory can be inexorably linked, for the purpose of this paper trauma is approached as a particularly painful memory with potential to provoke psychological distress in participants. Although exploiting people for sensational stories or exposing their trauma without offering support could not have been further from my intention, it also did not feel authentic to me to forbid interviewees from discussing painful subjects. The more I tried to impose a safeguarding structure around the interview process, the narrower it began to feel. How would I balance my deeply held ethical obligation to do no harm with the desire to allow people to express their unfiltered thoughts and opinions? There had to be a way to make room for the unexpected whilst still holding space for the tremendous vulnerability people were going to be offering the process.

The answer was in building a safe space for the dynamic interplay between interviewer and subject to evolve. Thus, I was introduced to the world of Participatory Action Research (PAR) a methodology which, ‘Involves participants and researchers in collaborative processes for generating knowledge’ (Kendon, Pain, Kesby, 2007). PAR opened me up to an endless world of possibilities for the trajectory of this project allowing me to imagine a space in which the interviewees and I would become co-authors of the project. Instead of supporting the interviewees with a rigid structure, I decided to create a flexible process in which my role became that of a facilitator instead of a traditional researcher. As I read through Kendon, Pain and Kesby’s guide, I was so relieved there was an ethical model to conduct my research while putting down the burden of having to be the expert.

With this philosophy on my side, I was ready to create a template that was collaborative in spirit and allowed for ongoing consent throughout, with the goal of an affirming end product that would arise from subject input. However, I was still in search of a verbatim technique that would allow for specific stories to emerge from a vast ocean of participant life experiences. Enter the *Hear Us Out* technique. *Hear Us Out* was pioneered by drama educator Dino Aristidou. What intrigued me about this method was the fact that Aristidou had used it to develop an international theatre festival online during the height of the pandemic. Students from dozens of schools all over the world came together to produce and share verbatim work based on their experiences of Covid-19. What made this method different and completely suited to my needs? In Aristidou’s own words:

I believe it's a powerful and transformative learning experience for young people. For young performers and theatre makers it engages them with questions of authenticity, responsibility and ethics regarding theatre making, truth and other people's stories (Aristidou, 2021).

One of the things that drew me to the *Hear Us Out* process is that the ethical sourcing of the material is baked into the process. Although other verbatim methods offer robust technique on faithfully collecting, developing, and performing from source material, they do not suggest a specific ethical template. Rather, practitioners must rely on their best judgement. *The Hear Us Out* manner of framing questions allowed me to conduct research in the collaborative spirit of Participatory Action Research, with the subjects exerting agency over the questions they were being asked. Using the *Hear Us Out* model as a template, I developed the questions for my research. Here is an excerpt from my original call for participants:

Subjects will be invited to participate in a Verbatim Theatre project exploring the identity of Boston's Catholic community in the past, present and future. What does it mean to be Catholic in Boston in the 21st Century?

Initial Question:

1. PAST: Share a photo, object/ piece of ephemera such as a small memento, book, toy album, piece of clothing, etc. that to you, captures a moment in growing up Catholic in Massachusetts. Tell me the story behind this photo in 5-10 minutes. Why is this significant to you/ why did you choose it?

2. PRESENT: Tell us about something that's changed since that picture was taken. You may find it useful to frame the story as: 'It used to be...now it is...'.... Or, 'I miss...now x is different.'

3. FUTURE: What do you imagine the future will be like for the community? If you could articulate a hope or fear what would it be? (Osiecki, 2022).

Once the project was approved by the ethics committee, it became time to connect with interview subjects. As it was essential to maintain a participatory, collaborative spirit throughout the project, it was important that subjects self-selected to speak with me, rather than being recruited. Respecting people's comfort levels in talking about personal and potentially sensitive topics was paramount. Due to my lack of training as a trauma counsellor, I purposely did not advertise to or seek out people who were directly involved with CPSA, nor did I seek out people who were beyond my social network. The participants volunteered to partake in this project, responding to an ad placed on social media. Therefore, many of the participants come from similar backgrounds to myself. This created an ease between the interviewer and the subject, which allowed for deeper listening and conversation. This

narrow snapshot of a very specific subset of Boston’s Catholic community allowed for a deeper level of exploration than a wider survey would have, yielding valuable insights into character for me as a writer, which I would then develop into a digital theatre piece with input from the original storyteller collaborators, as well as a cadre of Boston area theatre makers.

Transcript to Script: The Process of Creating Theatre

Interviews for Hear Us Now took place via Zoom between December 2021 and February 2022. A total of six Zoom interviews were conducted. All of the interviewees but one identified as female, and participants came from across generations, from Boomers to Gen X, Millennials to Gen Z. The call for participants was worded very carefully to invite open-ended responses. The original Instagram post was simply a photo of a ‘Bathtub Mary’ (the ubiquitous statue of the Virgin Mary on a half shell often seen on the front lawns of Catholics in Boston area neighbourhoods) with copy in the local vernacular, ‘Grow Up Catholic in Boston? Share Some Wicked Good Stories’ (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 The original call for storytelling participants, posted across social media.

And share they did. Another unexpected outcome of this process was the sheer volume of memories that came out of this small cross section of Boston Catholics. Although I set aside an hour for each interview, the original callout asked for people to share, ‘one story for 5-10 minutes.’ In most cases, the interview participants talked to me for hours. Instead of a few specific stories, rivers of interlocked memories came flowing out that ranged from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Time and again I heard the words, especially from older women, ‘nobody has ever asked me what I thought about this before.’ It is no secret that the voices of women are undervalued in patriarchal structures in general, and in the church specifically. Many of these female-identified participants chose to speak with me because it was their chance to finally be heard.

At the conclusion of the process, I had hours of videos and hundreds of pages of transcripts to sift through. As I anticipated, it was challenging to find a through line without a specific moment in time

anchoring the storytelling of the participants. After spending a significant amount of time examining the material, it became very clear to me that this was not a question of using participants' words to reconstruct specific events as in a standard piece of verbatim theatre. Instead, I decided to take a more fluid approach, looking for overarching themes, events, and archetypal characters I could then weave into a new story. As I went through the material, three clear archetypes emerged:

1. The Mother

The Mother is a Boomer generation woman, born sometime in the early 1950s. Features of the Mother's childhood would have involved living in a neighbourhood where the community was culturally and religiously homogenous. Women of this era received religious education by rote and were taught to revere priests. 'Everybody thought that priests were like God, they were godly. They were the representation of God in your life, in your neighbourhood, in your church. And people thought they could do no wrong' (Osiecki, 2022). Although the Mother archetype often wanted less constrictive roles for their daughters, they usually found themselves at a loss when their daughters chose to exercise that freedom.

2. The Daughter

The Daughter is a Gen X or elder millennial woman. This generation tended to also grow up in communities that were more diverse than the ones their mothers grew up in, having friends and classmates of different religious and cultural backgrounds. As she grew up, being LGBTQIA+ was more normalised as well, and this daughter may themselves identify as LGBTQIA+ or have friends who do. The Daughter came of age during the clergy sex abuse scandal and witnessed it unfolding in the media. This was the first generation to grow up with a mistrust of the church. When the Daughter exercised her right to make her own choices, she may have been met with confusion and resistance from The Mother, family and others.

I remember telling my mother, I don't go to Catholic church anymore, and she got really angry. And she said, 'Do you dislike your mother so much that you have abandoned this faith?' (Drexel, 2022).

The Daughter may have left the church and undergone a period of spiritual homelessness, in search of a community more in line with her values and ideals. Often, she retains this mistrust of all religion into

adulthood. The Daughters who participated in this project often regained a sense of community via participation in theatre and even via more transgressive art forms such as burlesque and drag.

3. The Next Gen

The Next Gen is a younger Millennial or Gen Z woman. Like the daughter, the Next Gen grew up in a more culturally and religiously diverse community than previous generations. For the Next Gen, the clergy sex abuse scandal might feel like ancient history. What makes the Next Gen unique is that they grew up feeling empowered to speak out about social injustice and to break with authority. They may have left the church from an earlier age and felt less guilt and conflicted emotions surrounding it. Like the daughter, the Next Gen often finds community in unexpected places such as theatre groups. But unlike the daughter, that mistrust of *all* religious communities doesn't always hold. One Next Gen woman I spoke with rediscovered her sense of spirituality by joining her local Unitarian Universalist church. The Next Gen may feel more comfortable with creating their own bespoke form of spirituality and community that clearly reflects their values and beliefs.

[Being a part of the Unitarian Universalist Church] is really liberating and freeing...first of all...the structure of a service... just so different from the strict structure of Catholic mass... also the progressive values or with the UU church...that's also a difference that I really like (Dion, 2022).

Once I established the three archetypes in the project, it became time to weave a narrative. I decided to drill into the manner in which identity has evolved across these three generations, both through sense of self, and identification with family and church. The ideal crucible for this evolution to come to a head would be the Catholic Church's coming of age ceremony, confirmation. In the first scene of the play, I place the mother (who I named Teresa) and daughter (who I named Katie) together on the eve of the daughter's confirmation. Teresa is putting the finishing touches on the white dress that young women traditionally wear to be confirmed. The dress serves as a powerful symbol of Teresa's hopes and dreams for Katie. Will Katie take on the traditional role passed down to her as symbolised through the white garment?

Although the dialogue springs directly from the words of the storyteller participants, the narrative is fictional, and the dialogue is word-smithed around clearly showing these developmental relationships. Let's take a look in some of this wordsmithing in action. In her interview, one Boomer mom described her childhood relationship with the church thus:

You know, like the nuns, like I said, it was total brainwashing. You had the Baltimore Catechism. And you read the Baltimore Catechism and you learned, you know, who made us God made us, you know, and all the questions, they would ask the questions, and you were rote supposed to answer those questions in a group. So it really was brainwashing (Osiecki, 2022).

In the dialogue of the theatre piece, this is the interaction that evolves between Teresa and Katie:

TERESA spins KATHERINE around and begins pinning lace on her bodice.

TERESA: Rules? You wanna talk about rules? You know when I was confirmed, first of all they did it much younger than they do now. Second of all, I didn't get a choice about anything. Not the dress, not the bible readings, none of it. The Mass was all in Latin. And the nuns! We were petrified of them! They basically taught us how to behave in church, and they had this little clicker, I used to call it the cricket. And they would click it when it was time to stand, when it was time to sit, when it was time to kneel, time to genuflect, all that kind of stuff. They'd be clicking away in there. They made us memorize the Baltimore Catechism, Katie. You probably don't even know what that is. "Who made us, God made us," It wasn't learning. It was like how you learn your math facts, repeating, repeating, repeating. And they were very, very, very strict, very strict.

KATHERINE: What's the purpose of all of this if I'm not even sure I believe in it? The dress? The readings? The whole confirmation?

TERESA: I just want you to know where you come from, Katie.

KATHERINE: I *know* where I come from, Ma.

TERESA: It's my job to give you a solid foundation. Pretty soon you'll be an adult in eyes of the church. Then you make your own choices about what rules you do and don't follow. It's my job as your mother to get you there in one piece, without looking like nobody owns you.

KATHERINE: So that's it then? Wear the dress. Go through the motions. Who cares what you really believe in? (Osiecki, 2022)

Now let's take a look at our daughter character, Katie. In the interviews, the daughter discusses looking for strong female role models in the church:

St. Catherine Drexel was a very rich woman, and was very she had deep faith, deep seated faith. And she is a saint because...she worked with Black people and got them education and got them medical attention when they needed it. And she gave up all of her wealth, gave it to the church and became a nun (Drexel, 2022).

This is the dialogue that evolves between Katie and Teresa in the theatre piece:

KATHERINE: St. Catherine Drexel. Wealthy philanthropist? Gave up all her money to help the poor and be a nun? We visited her tomb when we went to Philly last summer. Remember? The lady in the gift shop gave me a little laminated card with her face on one side and one of those prayer thingies on the back, what's it called?

TERESA: A novena—I'm raising such a good Catholic.

KATHERINE: And she told me if I held the card against her tomb and prayed real hard the card would become...what did she call it? A tertiary relic. *(laughing)* She was so serious about it. I don't know how people actually believe in that kind of stuff.

TERESA: *(gently)* Katie. I didn't raise you to be disrespectful of other people's faith.

KATHERINE: I'm not trying to be disrespectful. It's just. Cards? Relics? It's kind of silly. Who believes in this kind of stuff anymore? Do you believe in this kind of stuff?

TERESA: I believe God loves us, and he wants us to love each other.

KATHERINE: Yeah, but I chose St. Catherine because she like, gave it all up to give people medical care and education. That's so badass!

TERESA: Katie!

KATHERINE: Well it is! And then when I read her writings it's all about like, surrendering to the will of God and how women should be meek and submissive. I don't think I believe in all these rules *(Hear Us Now, 2022)*.

The voice of the Next Gen came to me via a totally different method. After I completed the first scene of the play, taking place between Katie and her mother shortly before her confirmation, I assembled a focus group of local theatre makers for a staged reading. When we finished the reading of the first scene, they flooded me with ideas. In the end, it was decided that the voice of the Next Gen would be a kind of a Greek chorus made up of goth, misfit, and freak archetypes, the very opposite of the embodiment of a, 'good, Catholic girl.' This chorus also could also represent the found family The Daughter discovers through theatre, drag and burlesque. Here is some dialogue between Katie and the chorus, whom she stumbles upon in church before her confirmation rehearsal, after an argument with her mother:

As KATHERINE prays softly the ENSEMBLE enters. They are two gender non-specific actors, a motley crew of renegade drama club types. ONE is dressed in alter server vestments, TWO has the robes of Virgin Mary on, with full gothy drama club regalia on underneath. As KATHERINE prays, they move around her as if they're setting up for a Mass, they're slowly moving in, light-heartedly mocking her, but she's so lost in thought she doesn't notice.

ONE: Look at her, so wholesome.

TWO: Coming to confirmation practice early just to pray!

KATHERINE: Hey, this is the only place I can hear myself think. My mother knows how to *talk*. I'm not the one who goes to mass for fun.

ONE: Hey, Christmas Eve Mass is *lit!*

TWO: The candles, the bells, the incense.

ONE: The singing!

KATHERINE: So you guys aren't like, super goddy?

TWO: If by God you mean my personal saviour, David Bowie.

(They all pause in reverent prayer for a moment.)

ONE: So tell us Miss...

KATHERINE: Katie.

TWO: Miss Katie what really is it that brings you here today?

KATHERINE: I'm supposed to give this reading, at my confirmation. And I know I'm supposed to like, *feel* something or understand something about what I'm reading but I just can't. All I can think about is how I want to get the hell out of this place.

ONE: What are you reading?

TWO: *(snatching the prayer book sitting next to Katie on the pew.)* "Reflections on the Life of St. Catherine Drexel." So what does St. Katie have to say for herself?

ONE: *(Reading aloud)* "Christ proved his love for his spotless bride, not only by his tireless labours in constant prayers, but by his sorrows into sufferings gladly lovingly endured for her sake, having loved his own he loved them unto the end."

(ONE and TWO act this out in dramatic pantomime.)

TWO: 'It was only with His blood that he purchased the church Let us then not be willing to unwilling to fall in the bloodstream footsteps of our King.'

ONE: Humph. If you're a bride you deserve a better husband.

TWO: Somebody, clearly somebody male, collected these writings and put them into this book because they're supposed to be for women to like focus, and be more pure and give oneself to god.

KATHERINE: This is word soup, it makes no sense! I can't stand in front of a church and say this.

ONE: Typical. The bible gives one set of rules to men and another, subservient one to women.

KATHERINE: But if we were made in his image, there's got to be a side that's the goddess too, because we wouldn't be made in his image if the female, the feminine wasn't possible and powerful too.

TWO: Now you're talking, sister.

KATHERINE: What about serving god, but not necessarily serving man at the same time?

ONE: Uh, oh, sounds like a dangerous idea.

TWO: What about gay people?

ONE: What about divorced people?

TWO: What about non-binary people?

ONE: What about people who don't want to have children at all?

KATHERINE: What if I don't believe any of this? What If I don't want to go to church anymore? (Hear Us Now, 2022)

In the final moments of the piece, Katie's mother arrives at the church, holding her freshly sewn white dress out to her, an offering. Katie takes hold of the hem, pondering whether or not to accept her mother's gift. The last moment we see before lights out is Katie letting go, and the dress slowly fluttering to the ground between her and her mother.

Outcomes

In May of 2022, Hear Us Now was filmed and recorded via Zoom. It was then shared as a workshop performance at the Glasgow Centre for Contemporary Art in Connect Fest, an interdisciplinary scratch night for emerging creators in Scotland, along with the work of six other artists.



Fig 2: Original advertisement for Connect Fest, an interdisciplinary scratch night for local creatives.

All of the storytelling participants received copies of the script before the play was recorded and got to approve details before the play was shot and released. Even seemingly small details, such as names and nicknames of minor characters were reviewed by the participants. This was to ensure a sense

of authenticity and respect for their memories. Participants reported that having agency over the project felt affirming. One participant said, ‘Your sample reads like the biopic I never wrote. (Drexel, 2022).

One of the things that the premiere of *Hear Us Now* reveals is the commonality of the themes explored in this piece. As the facilitator of a theatre piece about Boston which premiered in Glasgow, I was perhaps a bit concerned that some of the themes and humour wouldn’t translate cross-culturally. Time and again I heard from audiences that some of them saw their own family members reflected in the dialogue. As one of our Connect Fest panellists put it, ‘Loved the characters. They felt real as individuals. I also thought the shifts within the scene felt very natural...foremost it feels like an exciting and engaging piece of writing’ (Langley, 2022). An exciting outcome of this project for me as a researcher is witnessing the dynamic interplay between memories and devised narratives in a piece that spans the gap between documentary and fiction.

One of the essential takeaways from this project as a researcher is that working with memories, even with painful ones, does not have to be a heavy, laborious process for both the researcher and the subjects. For me, the key to an ethical exploration was to put my faith in the community I was engaging with, allowing them to guide the way. By letting go of a need to predict and shape the outcome and to control for all potential possibilities, I instead made space for the kind of, ‘deep listening’ Aristidou says is essential for the kind of understanding and empathy we seek in these types of artistic endeavours.

Applications: A Template for Future Work

The methodology and artistic products developed for this work will live on with several exciting applications. As outlined in the opening of this paper, the transcripts and dramatic text produced for this work are currently being applied to the development of a fictional novel. Set in the Boston area during the late 1990s, the novel explores the impact that witnessing the clergy sex abuse scandal had on youth attending an area Catholic school. While the characters and premise of the fictional novel differ greatly from those developed in the *Hear Us Now* play, the script and transcript have facilitated a deeper understanding of the interpersonal and family dynamics of the novel’s characters. The application of the dramatic text to the character development of the novel provided insight that I was unable to access through traditional resources such as print journalism, psychological case studies and critical and historic texts developed from research. The flexible and customizable approach developed to create *Hear Us Now* and its related projects will live on to inform future works including works of fiction and nonfiction.

In the end, this model of research suggests that verbatim theatre techniques are a powerful method of capturing a developmental snapshot of the thoughts and opinions of a diverse, intergenerational group of subjects. It also demonstrates that verbatim techniques are an effective way

of collecting and synthesizing personal anecdotes relating to a broad theme and taking place across a vast period of time. Within the context of this work, modified verbatim theatre techniques have proven to be an adaptable method of unifying intergenerational memories and weaving them together as a cohesive work of theatre with exciting implications for informing works of prose as well.

Perhaps most encouraging of all, is the development of *Hear Us Now* as a P A R informed ethical template for artists to employ when developing work about complex and potentially sensitive subjects. As a creator and researcher, I look forward to using this method to continue to expand my practice of developing artistic work that is grounded in truth whilst still leaving space for joy, creativity and most of all, participant agency.

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