

**THEATRE OF TESTIMONY:**  
**A PRACTICE-LED INVESTIGATION INTO THE ROLE OF**  
**STAGING TESTIMONY IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE**

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**Helena M. Enright**

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## ABSTRACT

The use of personal testimony in theatre is a central component to the practice of Verbatim Theatre. Verbatim Theatre is a form of documentary theatre and is enjoying an increased popularity on world stages in recent years. The last decade, in particular, has seen both established and emerging playwrights incorporating the testimony of others into their scripts. This has led to various concerns and questions pertaining to the practical and moral implications of the work particularly surrounding issues of authorship, authenticity, truth, aesthetics, theatricality and ethics. This study is a practice-led enquiry. A central component to the study is the writing and performance of three plays in order to arrive at a better understanding of these challenges. Three original plays, *Walking Away*, *Under Pressure* and *Aquéro* are presented in a series of case studies accompanied by a critical and reflexive analysis on the practice of writing and staging each play. This examination investigates both the creation of these plays – from interview to writing – and their performance – from the perspective of the playwright and to a lesser extent the actor, in addition to contextualising the ethical and moral ramifications involved in this type of practice.

The Introduction explores a few of the general problems and challenges around the practice of staging testimony, outlines the nature of the research project and is followed by a discussion on practice-as-research and my particular research methodology and ethic. The dissertation is then divided into three parts. Chapter One begins with an overview of the documentary form and considers developments in the form that have facilitated the staging of testimony. The chapter then considers the terms Verbatim Theatre and Theatre of Testimony, arguing for a distinction to be made between the two terms and why Theatre of Testimony is the term most suited to my practice. It contends with an examination of the epistemology of testimony that new knowledge can be generated by attending to and nurturing the narrative essence of testimony. This chapter also examines the significance of the site of production of

the testimonies and the extent to which this impacts on the dramaturgical choices made by the playwright. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the main questions, problems and challenges that have been identified by theatre practitioners, scholars and critics regarding the use of testimony in theatre.

Part Two comprises of Chapters Two, Three and Four, which discuss the case studies. Each chapter provides a context for the research project, a script of the play, a DVD of a performance of the play and critical and reflexive commentary on the practice of writing and staging the play. The final section, Part Three, presents concluding thoughts on the research outcomes and considers the value and potential efficacy of employing ‘reportage’ as a legitimate dramaturgical choice when staging personal testimonies.

Accompanying this thesis are three DVDs which include recordings of each script in performance.

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## ACCOMPANIMENTS

This dissertation is accompanied by three DVDs. Each DVD documents a performance of the play I wrote for each practical project.

DVD 1 – Performance of *Walking Away*, Saturday 28 June 2008, Belltable Arts Centre, O’Connell Street, Limerick, Ireland

DVD 2 – Performance of *Under Pressure*, March 2008, Ivybridge School, Devon, United Kingdom

DVD 3 – Performance of *Aquéro*, Saturday 6 December 2009, Roborough Studios, University of Exeter, Devon, United Kingdom.



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*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of*

*Marc Harris (26 April, 1983 – 1 April, 2007)*

*and*

*Niamh Coghlan (25 January, 1949 - 17 April, 2009)*

*Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.*

*...we ought to attend to the undemonstrated sayings and opinions  
of experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom  
not less than to demonstrations;  
for because experience has given them an eye they see aright.*  
Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics