

# Verbatim style in parramatta girls



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Verbatim theatre can be best defined as “ true people’s stories... something that’s at the heart of the community... a piece of theatre out of that by interviewing people that are touched the most”, as Eliza Logan describes it, and Alana Valentine’s Parramatta Girls distinctly reflects this. Drawn from a dark period in Australia’s history, the careful construction of the verbatim, assisted through choice of dialogue as well as inclusion of dramatic action, the play manages to present the authentic, if painful legacy, of this particular period.

Due to the verbatim nature of Parramatta Girls, dialogue must be chosen extremely carefully. It is for this reason that Valentine constructed the play through her unique form, massaging the dialogue, and I found that doing this with my own Verbatim script that I had to write for school was of significant help. Within my script, I included a narrator, with whom I could be creative and who could tie the dialogue together, as well as the storyline and action. This difficulty for Valentine extended to the problem in exhibiting the reality of the horrors that the incarcerated women faced without desensitising her audience, stating of her major creative challenge, “ I think just not making it a litany of miserable suffering...Perversely, also not lightening it too much; not making it too palatable; not... looking away from the horror and the utter shattering of lives.” The inclusion of Charlotte the Harlot Lay Dying within the play, a popular rhyme prevalent in the 1960’s in Australia, exposes the inappropriate things that the young girls were introduced to in the home. While the vulgar lyrics expose the gratuitous sexual acts, a young Melanie innocently sings the tune in a cheerful tone, which softens the initial impact upon the audience, but leaves them pondering its disturbing nature. When

the play jumps to the present-day reunion, dialogue continues to reflect the hardship that these women faced, evident in Act Two Scene Twelve, when Gayle states, “ I’m harder than the inside of a nun’s mattress.” Having watched this scene performed in front of me by my fellow classmates, I can admit that the use of an Australian idiom provides comedic relief for the audience, especially when the line explores a difficult topic- the long-lasting effect of a woman’s incarceration into a home. The audience’s personal social context, that of the 2000’s, increases the impression of the atrocities that the women faced, as it is difficult to imagine in modern society such horror occurring to young and innocent children.

One of the most moving aspects of Parramatta Girls is Alana Valentine’s characterization, as the audience can discover the characteristics of the women as children, and then chart their progress and development into adulthood. Judi’s characterization perfectly explores the long-lasting effects of the trauma faced in the institution, as she eventually changes her name and struggles to remember the difficulties that she endured throughout her incarceration. Through the flashbacks, the audience recognize Judi as a character with considerable strength, most identifiable in Act Two Scene Two, as she tells Lynette and Maree of her sexual manipulation of the guard to gain a packet of cigarettes. Her use of 1960’s slang against Lynette’s naivety further proves her toughness, “ Wake up, slag. Wake up. You’re in here. They can do whatever they want to you. Whatever they want.”

Although the audience understand this harder side to Judi, they also are given glimpse of her true fragility, evident in her damaged character years after the traumatic experience of living in the Parramatta Girls Home. For a

class workshop, I performed Act Two Scene Four as the character of Lynette. Just as Judi dominated the scene with Lynette in the flashback, she dominated this one as well, and as the character of Lynette I had to ensure that my role was to support Judi in her expression of emotional development to the audience. This scene presents the physical suffering of Judi due to her time incarcerated, “ Eighteen and a half to twenty-four. That’s when I worked in the brothels. And five. That’s how many terminations I’ve had.” Judi’s enduring emotional pain is even more disconcerting for the audience to be confronted with, as her lack of self-worth has influenced her character, “ I carried one baby full term, but it was stillborn. Which was a shame because I was going to keep her. Probably just as well for her that I didn’t.” Alana Valentine was aware of the vulnerability of the women her play would comprise of, and the delicacy with which she had to handle their authentic experiences, “...they are still very damaged. When I was talking to them, they would become a twelve year old child. So I had to be very careful.” From my own personal experience in creating a verbatim script upon the premise, “ Healing on the Inside”, the content was very sensitive to the individuals who offered their story, and so just like Valentine, I had to be extremely careful with the questions I asked and the way I handled their responses when constructing the play.

In conclusion, Parramatta Girls is an extremely moving text, and one that is made even more powerful through its authentic verbatim style.